

ON FUTURE WAR

OCTOBER 2022

What If . . .

Alternatives to a Chinese Military Invasion of Taiwan

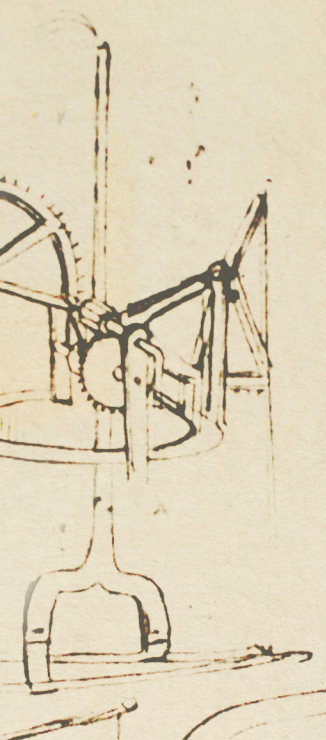
By Benjamin Jensen, Adrian Bogart, and Riley McCabe

In the future . . .

- **There will be a new escalation ladder more oriented to air, maritime, cyber, and space dynamics than the Cold War confrontations.** Beijing will seek alternatives to full-scale invasion to compel Taiwan that involve a calibrated mix of threats and limited military operations to pressure the island and deter foreign involvement.
- **An isolated China will not necessarily be a more peaceful China.** Even if Taiwan and its international partners can avoid a major war, the result will likely be major economic dislocation as well as new escalation risks and policy dilemmas associated with supporting Taipei without triggering a regional conflict. Businesses and governments will hedge against losses, creating sustained price pressures and a decoupling of Western firms from the Chinese market. Understanding these risks requires an entirely new type of crisis simulation integrated with multitrack diplomacy.
- **Military pressure absent dialogue could prove to be a recipe for disaster.** The United States can help the world avoid a major war in Taiwan by highlighting different escalation risks and working with a broad coalition of actors—including the private sector and Chinese government—to explore different scenarios and create a new escalation management framework.

Introduction

The threat of war in East Asia has reached a fever pitch. The August 2022 visit by U.S. speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and two separate congressional delegations in May and August 2022 capped a year that has seen an increase in large, complex Chinese military exercises.¹ These exercises continue to demonstrate China's ability to isolate Taiwan and set the conditions for



larger military operations. The use of military force to signal adversaries is consistent with Chinese writings on war control, strategic deterrence, and creating a war atmosphere as part of crisis bargaining.²

Large-scale exercises are not a precursor to war but an effort to coerce while setting conditions for future response options. In fact, Chinese writing on strategic deterrence states that “through exercises, we can demonstrate our military’s combat capabilities to the opponent, but also cause the opponent to doubt our intentions, cause psychological panic and produce a deterrent effect.”³ At a higher escalation level, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) calls for “restrictive military operations” that use “forcible control measures in a certain area to squeeze the opponent’s operating space and restrict opponents’ movement” through the use of exclusion areas and exercises.⁴

This edition of the *On Future War* series uses historical case studies of militarized crises to extrapolate alternative future scenarios concerning Taiwan. The scenarios illustrate a menu of coercive options short of a major war that China could employ over the next 10 years. Each possible future in turn maps the escalation dynamics and dilemmas national security leaders in Beijing, Taipei, Washington, and corporate boardrooms may confront.

Because no one can see the future, we invite readers to a broader dialogue about the prospects for future crises in the Taiwan Strait. *Each scenario allows readers to anonymously respond via a short survey.* Tell us about the inherent escalation risks, the probability of the crisis scenario, or alternatives you see on the horizon. Based on the results, the *On Future War* team at CSIS will develop a wargame and invite respondents to participate.

Seen in this light, China is not planning an immediate invasion of Taiwan. Rather, the PLA is refining its ability to coerce and compel Taipei’s political leadership while testing international resolve, a strategy consistent with what Thomas Schelling called the diplomacy of violence.⁵ Chinese strategy writing even calls for “leading a crisis” and “taking advantage of seizing the opportunities and conditions created by the crisis situation, making the best of the situation, taking advantage of the situation, and solving problems that are difficult to solve and break through under normal circumstances.”⁶ U.S., allied, and partner strategy in East Asia should therefore expand from a narrow focus on war planning to developing flexible response options to counter the wider menu of coercive options Beijing could opt for after the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, scheduled for October 2022.

The focus on the worst-case scenario (i.e., the most dangerous course of action) is both an organizational reflex built into planning processes and a mechanism to analyze force modernization. The U.S. national security community has increasingly opted to use a Taiwan scenario to test new concepts and prioritize capability investments. These scenarios tend to assume a large-scale conventional invasion, usually short of nuclear use.⁷ For example, in October 2021, the Joint Staff tested the new joint warfighting concept against a Taiwan scenario, finding that the United States struggled to establish information dominance and that traditional approaches to receipt, staging, and onward integration made air and naval forces deploying into theater vulnerable to attack.⁸ In 2020 and 2021, U.S. Air Force capability integration games showed that autonomous drone swarms and fielding a distributed targeting system, similar to how Uber uses GPS technology to locate and assign drivers to customers, were key to denying PLA objectives.⁹ These findings are consistent with the mosaic warfare concept and show a national



security community actively experimenting and using wargames not just to educate but to explore competing hypotheses about the future of warfare.¹⁰

While most games focus on large-scale military operations associated with an amphibious assault of Taiwan, there is a growing effort to look at alternatives. In a 2021 wargame, the Center for a New American Security explored response options in the event China conducted a *fait accompli* and seized outlying Taiwanese islands (e.g., Pratas and Dongsha) in the South China Sea.¹¹ Separately, through a series of tabletop exercises focused on Taiwan in early 2022, CSIS explored gray zone options and how they created new escalation risks.¹² Contrary to large-scale invasion games, these efforts explore what Schelling referred to as “salami tactics.”¹³ In other studies on gray zone campaigns, this approach is referred to as a gradualist campaign that sacrifices a decisive outcome and escalation risks for a series of interrelated, smaller activities designed to compel the target state.¹⁴

This installment of *On Future War* continues this exploration of alternatives to a large-scale invasion and considers the rungs of the escalation ladder China could ascend to compel Taiwan into submission short of a major, protracted war and occupying the island. The study *looks back to look ahead* and uses historical cases to imagine alternative futures.¹⁵ No single scenario is predictive, but examining many scenarios illustrates tendency and potential. Seeing a range of futures supports strategy, military planning, and operational design as defense officials refine concepts, capabilities, and budgets in an increasingly uncertain and risk-prone security environment.¹⁶

The sections below offer six historical cases that illustrate a coercive option short of full-scale invasion. Each case is consistent with a demonstration scenario design pioneered by Herman Kahn.¹⁷ In each alternative future, the authors extrapolate and describe what a future crisis would look like if Beijing adopted an approach similar to the historical episode. From this vantage point, the research team considers how likely the alternative future is as well as the consequences, key indicators, and critical decisions almost certain to confront leaders.

Using historical cases to create a range of alternative future scenarios complements ongoing CSIS efforts to reimagine strategic analysis by combining gaming, foresight, red teaming, and best practices from social science, including empirical and experimental approaches. The security problems on the horizon in the twenty-first century cannot be solved by the thinking that produced them nor outdated methods that focus more on admiring problems than exploring and testing alternatives.

Alternative Scenario One: Political Warfare

Aligned with China’s “Three Warfares” concept, Beijing could conduct a political warfare campaign against Taiwan optimized for the Information Age similar to U.S. covert action during the 1948 Italian election. The purpose would be to disrupt Taiwan’s democratic system of governance and shape Taiwan public opinion to support the gradual reintegration of Taiwan

- Alternative Future Scenarios
(Historical Cases)**
- Political Warfare
(Italy 1948)**
- Nuclear Blackmail
(Note Crisis 1961)**
- Quarantine
(Berlin Airlift 1948–49)**
- Exclusion Zones
(Tanker War 1984–88)**
- Air and Missile Campaign
(Kosovo 1999)**
- Decapitation Raid
(Blue House 1968)**

into China.¹⁸ The principal method would be the use of psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare to weaken public confidence in Taiwan's government as well as key international partners (i.e., the United States and Japan) and coerce Taiwan into adopting a pro-Beijing political stance.¹⁹ The desired condition would be to persuade the Taiwanese public to either support Beijing or diminish their confidence in their democracy, allowing China to use other forms of national power to reintegrate Taiwan.²⁰

U.S. Political Warfare in Italian Elections (1948)

In the mid-1940s, the United States used overt and covert psychological warfare, economic measures, and political alliances to influence the 1948 Italian parliamentary general election. The technique, defined by George Kennan as "political warfare," saw the United States leverage a combination of economic, political, and informational initiatives to influence the Italian public to prevent a communist party victory.²¹

First, U.S. operatives sponsored anti-communist movements and political parties to ensure they gained influence over Italian society and won a majority of votes during the 1948 election. The U.S. government supported the political victory of anti-communist politicians by covertly funding the campaign costs of two non-communist parties—the Christian Democracy Party and the Italian Socialist Workers Party.²² In addition, the United States also covertly financed non-communist labor movements to weaken pro-communist ones.²³

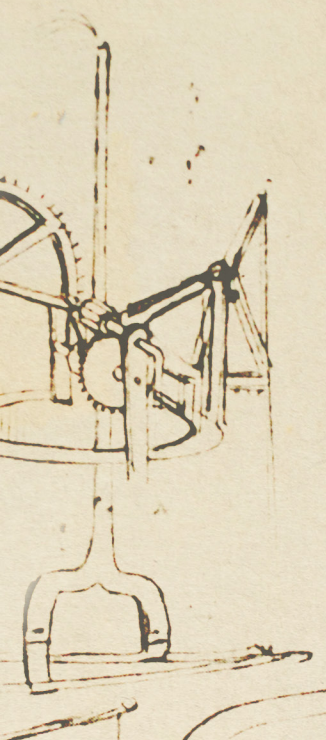
Second, U.S. operatives delegitimized the Italian Communist Party (PCI) by influencing the Italian public through "white" and "black" propaganda campaigns. White propaganda, or overt psychological warfare efforts, included positive messaging of U.S. aid programs to the Italian public, the use of American media to promote anti-communist messaging (e.g., Voice of America and radio broadcasts involving celebrities), and diplomatic messaging from the U.S. embassy.²⁴ Black propaganda, or covert psychological warfare efforts, aimed to secretly discredit the PCI and involved the United States enabling local actors, such as Luigi Gedda's Civic Committees, to create and spread anti-communist messaging.²⁵ Later codified in a 1951 psychological warfare campaign plan, these efforts focused on destroying the respectability of the PCI, compromising communists in public office, discrediting communist resistance efforts in World War II, and publicizing scandals of communist party leaders.²⁶

These combined lines of effort helped the Christian Democracy Party gain 48.5 percent of the vote in the election and led to a worse than expected showing by the PCI.²⁷ To capitalize on this success, the United States expanded its psychological warfare operations and funded anti-communist organizations.²⁸ It also worked through the Italian government to implement a campaign of legislative and administrative harassment (i.e., legal warfare) designed to discriminate against communist individuals and groups and promote divisions within the PCI.²⁹



Figure 1: White Propaganda Poster Distributed in Italy during 1948 Promoting American Aid Programs
Source: Apic / Getty Images

What Would a Chinese “Political Warfare” Campaign Look Like?



It is 20XX. Following the rise of tensions after the fourth Taiwan Strait crisis, senior Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials covertly sanction a campaign to undermine the upcoming Taiwan presidential and legislative elections and influence the Taiwanese people to support reintegration by 2049. This consists of two strategic initiatives: black propaganda and public opinion warfare. With only months before the election, political divisions within Taiwan over the issue of statehood have reached a boiling point, with protests turning into violent confrontations in Taipei. Following the latest protest, involving over 100,000 people, a U.S. cybersecurity company releases a report stating that it has identified over 300,000 inauthentic Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok posts that specifically targeted Taiwan.³⁰ The company concludes that PLA Unit 61716 had engaged in a multiyear black propaganda campaign to discredit political parties and politicians who support Taiwan’s statehood.³¹ This campaign is seen as the origin of political tensions prior to the election. Following this report, international media outlets are reporting on a massive leak of classified U.S. documents following a cyberattack against the U.S. Department of Defense. Among the largely falsified documents appear to be classified briefings between bipartisan members of the executive and legislative branches stating that the United States has no intention of supporting Taiwan in armed conflict with China and will use Taiwan as a “bargaining chip” to prevent a regional war.³² Although only a small fraction of the documents are deemed to be authentic, the claim that the United States would abandon Taiwan is immediately disputed by the U.S. government.

Two months prior to the election, the U.S. intelligence community declassifies an intelligence finding outlining how the CCP has covertly sent campaign donations through third-party donors to political parties who support unification.³³ This includes nonprofit organizations and think tanks to recruit respected regional and Taiwanese political and military leaders to publicly promote or privately lobby for Taiwan’s reintegration with China under the “one country, two systems” approach.³⁴ The finding also states that Beijing secretly used bribery and compromising information to influence key business leaders, politicians, and academics to promote a pro-Beijing agenda during the campaign season.³⁵ Multiple high-profile, pro-independence members of Taiwan’s political elite are caught up in scandals, many of which include the use of deepfakes and overt blackmail.

Ultimately, the CCP’s campaign is successful. Pro-independence officials fail to increase their hold on the government, and the entire rhetoric about independence appears to be shifting. In a show of support for a “new harmonious path,” the newly elected Taiwanese president flies to Beijing in an unprecedented meeting with President Xi Jinping to discuss formally extending the “one country, two systems” governance model to Taiwan over the next 10 years.

Due to the success of Chinese propaganda and coercive efforts in the past and existence of formal organizations to conduct political warfare, the “Three Warfares” campaign is very likely and need not be executed as a standalone effort. If this scenario were to occur, key indicators would include increases in white or black propaganda in cyberspace, licit or illicit Chinese funding of political parties, coercion of key Taiwan and regional leaders, and China-sponsored lobbying organizations. The consequences would be long-term political divisions within Taiwan, erosion of Taiwan’s democratic system, and strained relations with the United States and regional allies.

U.S. and allied policymakers will face a decision about whether they should employ a political warfare campaign to counter malign CCP influence or use more overt, defensive efforts designed to counter misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM). The open question would



be whether or not Taiwan and its network of democratic partners could sufficiently counter MDM before it starts to affect public opinion. In addition to the efficacy of MDM programs, there is a larger question about generational change and attitudes toward social media. Even if Beijing's political warfare campaign successfully captures the airwaves and cyberspace, the Taiwanese public still might opt to reject all official media as well as trolls disseminating MDM. Rather than winning hearts and minds or creating space for a political solution favorable to Beijing, a political warfare campaign could also produce widespread apathy and distrust of all official parties and institutions.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Tell us about the future. Take a moment to respond to this [anonymous survey](#) on the likelihood of and escalation risks associated with a political warfare campaign targeting Taiwan.

Alternative Scenario Two: Nuclear Blackmail

In a dramatic shift of its nuclear policy, China could conduct a nuclear weapons test during a fabricated crisis, just as the Soviet Union did during the 1961 Note Crisis.³⁶ The purpose would be to signal the risks of external intervention while communicating the potential costs to Taiwan of non-compliance with China's demands. The principal method would be nuclear blackmail combined with political warfare. China's information warfare and cyber operations would disrupt network traffic while circulating themes and messages suggesting the West was pulling Taiwan into a dangerous crisis and risking war.³⁷ In addition, China would use a nuclear weapons test to create a war atmosphere without committing large-scale military force. The desired outcome for Beijing would be an alteration of the political calculus of Taiwan's political parties, pushing both the Democratic Progressive Party and Kuomintang away from openly discussing diplomatic and military engagement with foreign states.³⁸ In other words, the coercive campaign would seek to stifle Taiwan's democratic progress.

The Note Crisis (1961)

The historical parallel for this scenario is the 1961 Note Crisis, when the Soviet Union combined diplomatic threats with a large-scale nuclear test to coerce Finnish political leaders to ensure the country remained diplomatically isolated and neutral.³⁹ On October 30, 1961, the Soviets broke a moratorium on atmospheric nuclear testing and demonstrated the capabilities of the Tsar Bomb in the most powerful nuclear test in history.⁴⁰ Moscow simultaneously sent a note to Finland requesting that it consult with the Soviet Union on the defense of both countries given the threat from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as provided for in the Finno-Soviet Treaty of 1948.⁴¹ Finland feared the Soviet Union would use the crisis to justify its annexation.⁴² However, cooperating



Figure 2: Atmospheric Nuclear Weapons Test at Bikini Atoll (1954)
Source: U.S. Department of Energy via Wikimedia Commons

with the Soviet Union would fracture Finland's policy of neutrality and severely damage its relationship with the West.⁴³

The coercive campaign changed the political calculus for Finland domestically and internationally. In the weeks following the arrival of the note, Finnish president Urho Kekkonen attempted to appease both sides. On November 20, Kekkonen received a letter from President John F. Kennedy that reinforced the United States' desire for Finland to remain neutral.⁴⁴ In response, Kekkonen reassured the United States that he did not want to discuss military cooperation with the Soviets.⁴⁵ Four days later, Kekkonen traveled to Serbia for a day-long discussion with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, who decided to "postpone" the military discussions.⁴⁶ With tensions diffused, Kekkonen returned home to Helsinki a hero, and his success in defusing the Note Crisis won him re-election in 1962 over an anti-Soviet opponent.⁴⁷ Although Kekkonen preserved Finland's interests, his victory, attributed to his role in the Note Crisis, ultimately served Soviet interests.⁴⁸

What Would Nuclear Blackmail Look Like?

It is 20XX. Approaches to cross-strait relations continue to divide Taiwanese political parties, with both sides proposing a different approach to managing Beijing and integrating with the West.⁴⁹ Prior to Taiwan's presidential election, Beijing sends Taipei a secret note outlining a "one country, two systems" compromise (similar to Hong Kong and Macau) as the only option preventing Taiwan from destruction in a larger regional war with the United States.⁵⁰ In the note, Beijing argues that a close relationship between the United States and Taiwan would pose a tremendous threat to mainland China, making their joint security paramount.⁵¹

At the same time that Taiwan receives the secret note, news headlines around the world show unprecedented pictures of a Chinese atmospheric nuclear weapons test.⁵² Hours later, Xi Jinping announces that the nuclear test conducted was a necessary response to pro-independence talks in Taiwan as well as corruption of the region by the West and the "unhinged" U.S. administration.⁵³ Xi states that he will take further action to protect the region from the control of "dangerous Western forces, from both inside and out."⁵⁴

Watching from across the Pacific, the U.S. response is swift. The U.S. Armed Forces are put on DEFCON 3, and the president gives a nationally televised speech condemning the escalation and promising intervention should China act unilaterally against Taiwan or any of its neighbors. Leaders in Japan, Australia, and across Europe echo this sentiment.

Taiwan's political leaders face a Hobson's choice. Rejecting China's request outright risks validating Beijing's claims of Western influence on the island and spurring unilateral action, perhaps even invasion.⁵⁵ Accepting the note risks eroding decades of democratic progress. To complicate matters further, rumors of the note are amplified by campaign rhetoric injected into the presidential election by bots likely linked to Chinese cyber operations. Taiwan's public grows increasingly concerned about becoming a victim of a larger war and, for the first time in years, wants a compromise. Reports leak of a Taiwanese delegation meeting with Chinese leaders in Singapore to defuse the crisis.

While more likely than a full-scale conventional invasion, nuclear blackmail is unlikely in the near future. Although China has increased its nuclear arsenal in recent years, conducting an atmospheric nuclear test would represent a serious escalation toward nuclear war unseen in the world since the peak of the Cold War.⁵⁶ The more likely outcome from this scenario is the manufacturing of a crisis by Beijing to provide the pretense for escalating its military pressure on Taiwan.⁵⁷ Just as the Soviet Union did with Finland during the Note Crisis, it is possible to

imagine a scenario in which China argues that an exaggerated threat from the West is disrupting the status quo and corrupting Taiwan with pro-independence sentiment, as well as that the broader protection of the region is in the strategic interest of China. Overall, Taiwan's relationship with China today is far more contentious and mistrusting than Finland's was with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s.⁵⁸ As such, the ruse that China would be acting in the interest of Taiwan would be far more transparent. Accordingly, the net outcome from such a scenario may in fact be greater frustration among the leadership and public of Taiwan toward China, and therefore a pro-independence shift.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?



Tell us about the future. Take a moment to respond to this anonymous survey on the likelihood of and escalation risks associated with nuclear blackmail aimed at coercing Taiwan.

Alternative Scenario Three: Quarantine

Rather than incurring the risk of a large-scale invasion, Beijing could opt for a pressure campaign similar to the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948.⁵⁹ The purpose of the operation would be to test Western resolve to defend Taiwan and alter Taiwan's domestic political calculus. This method would involve a modern blockade, combining a mix of traditional naval measures but also expanded air defense identification areas, electronic interference, fiber-optic cable severing, cyber intrusions, and threats in space. These measures would also include "Three Warfares" activities that would focus on framing the blockade as a quarantine for legal reasons, complicating external intervention. The campaign would include MDM to create domestic divisions inside the external states most likely to support Taipei.⁶⁰ The desired condition would be a politically and economically isolated Taiwan that China can absorb over time while setting conditions for future military operations, to include invasion. A blockade is a positional strategy that gives China options to either off-ramp or escalate a crisis while gaining a key position of military advantage.

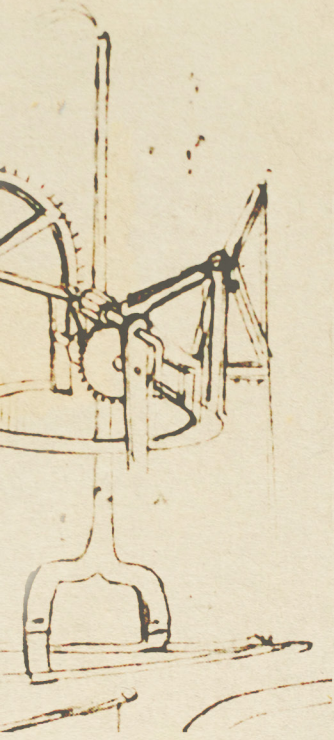
Berlin Airlift (1948–1949)

By 1948, coordination between the Soviet, British, French, and U.S. occupying forces was breaking down. The Soviet Union maintained large, mechanized formations as part of its occupation of the eastern zone in Germany, while Allied forces had drawn down large numbers of forces. In June



Figure 3: Maps of Occupation Zones and Air Corridors during the 1948 Berlin Airlift

Source: U.S. Department of Defense



1948, Britain, France, and the United States engaged in a series of political and economic moves the Soviets viewed as subverting their ability to control the future of Germany. In response, the Soviets stopped routine meetings with the Western powers after they discovered a secret plan to create a new German state out of the western occupied zones. They then began high-level preparations to exert military pressure in support of a blockade at a level sufficient to reduce the risk of a counterattack against Moscow.⁶¹ These measures included internal propaganda designed to bolster political and ideological cohesion among Soviet forces against former allies, which subsequent interviews found to be ineffective.⁶² The efforts set the conditions for the Soviets to sever all land and water connections between non-Soviet-occupied Germany and Berlin, leaving only airspace open.

The United States responded with Operation Vittles and opened an air corridor into Berlin.⁶³ In addition to flying supplies in, the United States repositioned nuclear-capable B-29 bombers to the United Kingdom. The military balance was complex. The Soviets maintained an overwhelming superiority in conventional forces in and around Berlin, while the United States had a nuclear monopoly. The combination of these different military balances is what many historians see as a key reason why World War III did not begin in 1948.⁶⁴ Historians still debate how effective the blockade was in terms of its immediate tactical and operational objectives.⁶⁵ At the strategic level, it served to mobilize Western support for confronting the Soviets. It also illustrated that the United States could sustain a counterblockade operation for almost a year, eventually wearing down the Soviets, and find indirect ways of using military force under the Truman Doctrine.

What Would a Quarantine Look Like?

It is 20XX. As part of an escalating political and economic dispute between Beijing and Taipei, China announces that all air and naval traffic to Taiwan must first be routed through mainland ports and airfields in China. They also demand that all digital traffic to the island flow through servers on the mainland. To support the blockade, the PLA, through the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), deploys a mix of aircraft and naval ships to demonstrate its ability to isolate Taiwan and test international resolve. Simultaneously, the PLA begins to conduct large-scale maritime and air exercises near Taiwan. China also launches operations in the information, space, and cyber domains to achieve information dominance surrounding the island and complicate the operating picture for both Taiwan and international observers.⁶⁶

Taiwan refrains from attacking China's military despite growing food and fuel shortages and massive disruptions to global supply chains. The United States and Japan respond, alongside a coalition of democratic nations, by challenging the de facto blockade with an air bridge while repositioning multiple carrier strike groups and partially executing time-phased force deployments linked to contingency plans.

While the graduated blockade scenario is more likely than a major war, it is unlikely in the short term. China can use military exercises and shows of force short of causing significant economic disruption to, in the words of the *Science of Military Strategy*, "lead" a future crisis and develop opportunities for coercing Taipei. If Beijing opted to pursue a blockade, the economic consequences would be immediate and global, hitting everything from shipping insurance premiums to semiconductor prices, something China would struggle to absorb during its current economic downturn. As a result, Beijing would need to take steps to prepare for economic warfare and survive a counter-blockade and the severe economic downturn likely to emerge as a result of isolating Taiwan. At the same time, a quarantine is appealing to China's leadership as





a low-cost, low-risk means of coercing Taiwan into political concessions in comparison to a full-scale invasion.⁶⁷

The key decisions in a blockade scenario would be linked to the rules of engagement on each side and if and how each side opted to delegate decisions to use military force. A single spark would likely start a fire and lead to a rapid escalation spiral. Key indicators associated with a graduated blockade scenario would be evident in training and exercise of the PLAAF and PLAN as well as efforts by the CCP to create mechanisms to avoid the economic pain almost certain to accompany a blockade.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?



Tell us about the future. Take a moment to respond to this anonymous survey on the likelihood of and escalation risks associated with a “quarantine” blockading Taiwan.

Alternative Scenario Four: Exclusion Zones

In an escalation beyond the quarantine scenario, China could impose a series of exclusion zones and periodically interdict air and maritime traffic to enforce the isolation of Taiwan, similar to the 1980 Tanker War. By declaring a series of exclusion zones and using a combination of irregular and military forces, such as the PLAAF and PLAN, as well as the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PLAMM), China may attempt to assert control rapidly over maritime and air access to the island without a large-scale maritime battle.⁶⁸ In this scenario, China’s goal is not to immediately limit cargo or supplies from reaching the island but to demonstrate its coercive leverage over Taiwan. The desired outcome for China is to apply sufficient pressure to Taiwan’s leadership such that they capitulate to political demands, but also to avoid violent confrontation that invites the United States and other international parties into the conflict.

The Tanker War (1984–1988)

During the Iran-Iraq War, hundreds of ships owned or associated with either side were attacked in a series of anti-shipping operations collectively known as the Tanker War. Unlike the outbreak of fighting on land, the conflict at sea escalated in incremental steps. At the outset of the war, both sides declared maritime exclusion zones.⁶⁹ Iran closed the Shatt al-Arab—a key inland river whose southern end constitutes the Iran-Iraq border and feeds directly into the Persian Gulf—to all maritime craft and warned that all coastal waters were battle areas. In response, Iraq declared the Gulf north of 29 degrees 30 minutes north latitude a prohibited war zone. As a bloody stalemate on land began to unfold between 1981 and 1984, the Iranian navy and air force targeted key military ports along Iraq’s small coastline.⁷⁰ In retaliation, Iraq attacked Iranian shipping in the northern Gulf using hit-and-run tactics.⁷¹ International



Figure 4: Greek-Registered Tanker Adriande Attacked by Iran in 1987 during the Tanker War
Source: Norbert Schiller / AFP via Getty Images

Handwritten notes in Arabic script, including a circular diagram with lines and dots, possibly representing a globe or a specific geographical area.

vessels occasionally found themselves entangled in the conflict, with the Turkish oil tanker *Atlas 1* damaged by an Iraqi strike while loading Iranian oil at Kharg Island in May 1982.⁷²

In 1984, Iraq began intensifying its anti-shipping attacks and strikes against Iranian oil export infrastructure.⁷³ In response, Iran finally retaliated by attacking ships linked to Iraq, including those belonging to Gulf states and other internationally flagged vessels.⁷⁴

Iraq's decision to escalate its anti-shipping operations in 1984 coincided with fading hopes in Baghdad of a swift victory in the broader war.⁷⁵ In addition to limiting Iran's oil exports and applying economic pressure on Tehran, escalating the anti-shipping component of the conflict was an effort to increase the likelihood of international intervention. If Iraq could provoke Iran to retaliate with extreme measures, such as attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz (through which approximately 30 percent of the world's oil passed at the time), international parties would have almost no choice but to get involved.⁷⁶ Wary of such intervention, Iran limited its response to attacking ships attempting to transport supplies, war matériel, and Iraqi oil.⁷⁷

Nonetheless, amid growing fears that Iran might still lash out by closing the Strait of Hormuz and concerned of the very real possibility that Iraq may lose the broader war, direct international intervention finally came in 1987. During U.S. Operation Earnest Will, Kuwaiti tankers reflagged as American vessels and were provided escort up and down the Gulf by the U.S. Navy.⁷⁸ U.S. intervention did not go unopposed by Tehran, and a series of confrontations occurred over the following 14 months. For example, a Silkworm antiship missile struck one of the reflagged tankers in October 1987. The U.S. Navy responded by shelling two Iranian bases in the Rostam oil field.⁷⁹ Ultimately, American intervention in the Tanker War successfully suppressed Iranian anti-shipping activities, protected international shipping in the Gulf, and increased pressure on Iran to seek an end to the war in August 1988.⁸⁰ In total, between 1981 and 1988, Iran conducted 282 anti-shipping attacks and Iraq conducted 208.⁸¹

What Would an Exclusion Zone Look Like?

It is 20XX. After years of unsuccessful military pressure campaigns short of war and multiples crises, President Xi Jinping announces that China has declared an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around the island of Taiwan. During the same speech, he outlines the risk of "rogue political elements" in Taiwan that must be contained. Immediately after the speech, China releases details of new plans to periodically stop and inspect cargo traffic heading to Taiwan suspected of carrying material aid for these unspecified rogue elements. Behind the scenes, China assures major international firms such as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Limited that their facilities will not be affected.

China deploys PLAMM and CCG to clutter sea lines of communication around Taiwan while patrolling the skies with mixed-combat air patrols equipped with antiship cruise missiles, air-to-air weapons, and electronic attack capabilities. Electronic and cyber interference disrupt commercial ship navigation systems. The net effect is a series of escalating interdiction opportunities. Any ship China deems to be carrying material support for the unspecified rogue elements is first swarmed by maritime militia ships that ram and obstruct the vessel.⁸² If the ship proceeds, the CCG officially declares its intention to board and inspect. If the ship still continues or is declared hostile, aircraft fire antiship cruise missiles.

Beijing fires two antiship cruise missiles against a commercial cargo ship it claims refuses inspection, sinking a Turkish-flagged vessel and causing a spike in insurance premiums globally. While the ship owner claims there were no weapons or material military support, Chinese social

media circulates falsified images of missiles on the ship. As a result, Beijing promises to increase the number of ships it is boarding and to directly attack any ship deemed at risk of carrying military support.

Following the incident, Taiwan requests the United States, Japan, and Australia escort commercial ships to the island. Although food and other supplies have been largely allowed to enter the island after inspection, there is growing concern about Taiwan's dependence on imported natural gas and its limited strategic reserves of energy resources.⁸³ Wary of China's ability to suffocate the island should it decide to cut off the import of energy supplies, food, or other crucial resources, the United States is compelled to act.⁸⁴ The U.S. president orders the 7th Fleet to escort commercial oil and liquified natural gas (LNG) tankers to the island.

China tests international resolve by firing on an LNG cargo ship escorted by two U.S. guided-missile destroyers (DDGs). The destroyers successfully interdict four cruise missiles fired at the ship, but two Taiwanese F-16 fighters in the vicinity are shot down by long-range air-to-air missiles (e.g., PL-15s). The DDGs report significant electronic attacks on their systems and even laser dazzling interfering with navigation and key systems. Over the next three months, the world is on edge as the pattern repeats itself. Taiwan's imports and exports are affected but not shut off, as different commercial firms assess the risk of trade. Of 2,000 ships that enter the exclusion zone over the 90-day period, only 100 are harassed and inspected and another 50 are attacked. Of the 50, 5 are sunk, and the U.S. Navy launches countermeasures to defend its DDGs three times, despite China's claims that U.S. ships were not targeted. Taiwan loses another 10 aircraft and 4 surface combatants, mostly smaller attack platforms, as China avoids targeting larger frigates and destroyers. There is no major war, but a peace in the region seems beyond repair. The global economy is also in a recession, while each side blames the other for the escalation.

China would be more likely to opt for a series of escalating exclusion zones than incur the immediate global fallout from a large blockade. The use of exclusion zones preserves the ability to escalate or de-escalate the crisis depending on how the international community reacts. Similar to the Tanker War, the pivotal decision is whether external powers, such as the United States, will escort commercial traffic. Unlike the Tanker War, however, the threshold for what will provoke U.S. engagement is vastly different. By the time the United States came to Kuwait's aid in 1987, Iran and Iraq had been engaged in a brutal war for nearly seven years. By comparison, the threshold for what may provoke U.S. assistance to Taiwan in a future Indo-Pacific scenario is expected to be much lower, with the United States repeatedly signaling in recent years a growing intent to assist Taiwan should China take any military action against the island.⁸⁵ Accordingly, the extent to which China resorts to violence, either intentionally or accidentally, will likely have significant impact on the severity and speed of any U.S. response. Moreover, as during the Tanker War, it may not take China wholly cutting off access to resources for the United States to respond. The fear alone that Beijing could order the interception of food or fuel at any time may be enough to push the United States into testing Beijing's resolve using similar strategies that proved successful decades ago.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?



Tell us about the future. Take a moment to respond to this anonymous survey on the likelihood and escalation risks associated with an exclusion zone blockading Taiwan.

Alternative Scenario Five: Air and Missile Campaign

At the next level of escalation, Beijing could opt to test the resolve of Taiwan's population and political leadership through a series of air and missile strikes similar to NATO's strikes in Kosovo and Serbia in 1999. The purpose of the operation would be to alter Taiwan's domestic political calculus, but through a more direct application of military force alongside high-stakes diplomacy. The campaign would also test the resolve of the West while achieving intermediate military objectives linked to destroying Taiwan's air force, major command and control facilities, and surface-to-surface and antiship cruise missile capability. Unlike Kosovo, the operation would take advantage of Chinese concepts and capabilities to wage a firepower strike campaign in lieu of a traditional air campaign.⁸⁶ The campaign would also involve a firepower blitz and efforts to integrate electronic attack, cyber, and conventional fires to destroy key targets and paralyze Taiwan.⁸⁷ The desired condition would be graduated military pressure on Taiwanese leaders sufficient to force them to accept Beijing's political demands. The strategic approach would rely on shock and surprise to gain a position of advantage, narrowing the off-ramp options available in a blockade or exclusion scenario.

Operation Allied Force (1999)

In March 1999, NATO launched a campaign to degrade Serbia's ability to prosecute its war in Kosovo.⁸⁸ The campaign would last only 78 days and see extensive use of precision-strike capabilities alongside diplomatic pressure to force concessions by the Serbs. According to General Wesley Clark, the NATO supreme allied commander during the effort, the campaign was designed to "coerce, not to seize."⁸⁹ In addition to striking strategic targets, including infrastructure, and degrading military capacity, the campaign's coercive effects were amplified by the looming threat of a ground invasion, risk of further political fracturing inside Serbia, and Belgrade's inability to hold NATO aircraft at risk.⁹⁰ In other words, Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic was on the horns of a dilemma. He had no way of changing the military balance and reducing strikes. The longer the war lasted, the larger the risk of domestic unrest. Commentators both in the West and in China saw the air power campaign as an ideal type for effects-based operations, elements of which survive in PLA planning.⁹¹

What Would an Air and Missile Raid Look Like?

It is 20XX. After years of unsuccessful efforts to undermine Taiwan's independence and sovereignty, Beijing opts for a limited air and missile campaign designed to shock leaders in Taipei and abroad while demonstrating its ability to execute a firepower strike system. The campaign begins with a fire blitz in which a mix of ballistic and cruise missiles hit Taiwanese military targets and political institutions while electronic attack and cyber operations paralyze command and control systems. Beijing moves to broadcast its own images and narratives in the immediate aftermath, effectively hijacking the airwaves and social media. China also continues to strike high-value targets including airfields, ammunition depots, and air defenses from distances that limit Taiwan's options to



Figure 5: F-16 Returning to Aviano Air Base, Italy, during Operation Allied Force in 1999
Source: U.S. Department of Defense



counterattack by fire. There is no physical blockade of Taiwan, and there has only been a partial mobilization of key ground armies in China's Eastern Theater Command since the campaign seeks to "coerce and destroy, not seize" ground in Taiwan. Beijing warns Washington and other nations through diplomatic channels that they risk being targeted if they enter a newly declared exclusion zone around Taipei, which China says is meant to protect commercial entities from being targeted. China openly pushes for commerce to continue, even going as far as offering additional insurance guarantees to firms to continue trading while they conclude their limited campaign.

While an air and missile campaign is more likely than a major war, it is less likely than a political warfare campaign, escalating exclusion zones, or a blockade. Despite its bellicose rhetoric and continued double-digit increases in its defense budget, Beijing has limited its use of military force to date to military exercises and restrictive military operations similar to the crisis in August 2022 and the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. These operations are designed to isolate the island and signal capability and resolve. Moving up the escalation ladder to a limited air and missile raid would be a significant departure from the status quo and risk a Ukraine-like situation in which democratic nations flood Taiwan with military, economic, and humanitarian assistance. For this reason, an air and missile raid would likely be preceded by escalating exclusion zones or a quarantine to deter foreign military intervention, even if indirect and limited to supplying weapons.

The key decisions in this campaign for Beijing will be timing and target selection, finding the optimal window of opportunity, and balancing target-selection criteria with weapons inventory in the event Taiwan holds out for over 60 days. For Taipei, the key decision will be whether to risk a larger military confrontation by counterattacking launch platforms on mainland China. For the United States and its allies, the key decision is not if, but how to intervene in a manner that balances providing Taiwan the means to defend itself with an almost certain risk of Beijing responding with a warning strike against the U.S. military or even bases in Japan. Given Beijing's current inventories of ballistic and cruise missiles, there would be limited warning of an air and missile strike.

 **WHAT DO YOU THINK?** 

Tell us about the future. Take a moment to respond to this anonymous survey on the likelihood of and escalation risks associated with an air and missile raid targeting Taiwan

Alternative Scenario Six: Decapitation Raid

As an alternative to its strategy of system destruction warfare, China could launch a special operations raid on Taiwan akin to the 1968 Blue House Raid in South Korea.⁹² The purpose would be to destabilize the Taiwan government by assassinating Taiwan's political and military leaders. The principal method would be an infiltration of special operations forces (SOF) by air or sea to raid political and military targets. SOF teams would work alongside the PLA Strategic Support Forces to sabotage Taiwan communications and military defenses to disrupt crisis response by the Taiwan government.⁹³ The desired condition would be to paralyze Taiwan's political and military decisionmaking so that it loses the will and ability to resist a larger military operation or accept a political offramp to the crisis.⁹⁴ In effect, these strikes and raids would disrupt the flow of information within Taiwan's military, destroy critical functions within Taiwan's government, and frustrate efforts to mount an effective defense while signaling the costs of resisting Beijing.⁹⁵

Blue House Raid (1968)

In the mid-1960s, Kim Il-sung and the Korean Workers' Party's leadership feared that an increase in South Korean domestic political stability, increasing partnerships with the United States and its allies, and a U.S. military shift to South Korea would make reunification impossible.⁹⁶ Due to the strong economic policies of President Park Chung-hee and his Democratic Republican Party, support for domestic opposition parties decreased, and North Korea believed its ability to exploit internal divisions to destabilize

South Korea's government was shrinking.⁹⁷ Increasing political, economic, and military ties with the United States and its allies also presented an inflection point where a conventional war to reunify the Korean Peninsula would result in a regional, rather than a local war.⁹⁸ Lastly, concerns that North Vietnam would seek a negotiated settlement with the United States prompted fears that the United States would shift military forces to South Korea and take military actions against North Korea.⁹⁹ Ultimately, South Korea's strong domestic and international relations, as well as fears of the United States implementing an aggressive military strategy in the Korean Peninsula, prompted Kim Il-sung to order the assassination of President Park. With President Park's death, South Korea would be destabilized, presenting future opportunities for reunification.¹⁰⁰

On January 17, 1968, 31 members of North Korean SOF infiltrated South Korea en route to the South Korean presidential residence, the Blue House.¹⁰¹ The group took 48 hours to successfully penetrate the defense sector of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division and move into position around Seoul.¹⁰² Radio intercepts of South Korean army patrols enabled these soldiers to prevent capture.¹⁰³ On January 20, 1968, the SOF platoon moved within a few hundred meters of the Blue House, with the objective of assassinating President Park and a follow-on mission of destroying the U.S. Embassy. However, the SOF unit was discovered, failed to reach the Blue House to complete the assassination, and was pursued for several days until the soldiers were killed or captured. Their capture was in large part due to their discovery by two South Korean citizens, who reported the incursion to local police and mobilized counterinsurgency operations that resulted in their discovery. Although this raid narrowly failed, it signaled a serious weakness in South Korean defenses against irregular warfare.

What Would a Decapitation Raid Look Like?

It is 20XX. The relationship between the United States and Taiwan continues to strengthen, resulting in more official and frequent U.S.-Taiwan military exercises and routine visits by bipartisan congressional delegations to Taipei. Senior CCP officials close to Xi Jinping insist that peaceful reunification is no longer feasible.¹⁰⁴ They believe that Congress will ease the United States' "One China Policy" in new legislation and transform Taiwan into a military outpost to counter China, which will result in strong political support in Taiwan for declaring independence.¹⁰⁵ These fears prompt calls for destabilizing Taiwan's government to prevent these domestic and international barriers to reunification. The CCP decides that conflict with Taiwan is inevitable and launches a special operations *fait accompli* to shock Taipei elites and set conditions should they need to launch a broader military invasion.



Figure 6: The Presidential Blue House in Seoul, North Korea
Source: Ed Jones / AFP via Getty Images

The PLA mobilizes one SOF brigade in the Southern Theater Command and the PLAN Marine Corps' Sea Dragons Brigade to conduct the decapitation strike.¹⁰⁶ The PLA begins by conducting electronic warfare and deception operations days prior to the deployment of SOF forces to create uncertainty for the Taiwan military over PLA intentions and disable radar systems to create air corridors for SOF infiltration.¹⁰⁷ In addition, a PLA SOF company deploys to Taiwan 48 hours prior to the infiltration to conduct reconnaissance and advance targeting of key political, military, and command and control targets.¹⁰⁸ On the day of the infiltration, PLA SOF units conduct air and sea insertions to seize airfields and seaports, raid key government and military buildings in Taipei, and sabotage command and control nodes around Formosa.¹⁰⁹ PLA SOF units also employ cyber and information warfare capabilities to disrupt Taiwan communications on official government websites, social media, and in the news.¹¹⁰ These initial hours result in the successful assassination of key Taiwan government and military officials. Taiwan's government is effectively paralyzed.

Although an intimidating scenario, a special operations *fait accompli* is very unlikely, owing to the difficulty of inserting and exfiltrating forces in a highly urbanized island.¹¹¹ It is tempting to view recent statements from the Chinese government as indicative of a willingness to use force to reunify with Taiwan. However, it is more likely that China will continue to remain at a stalemate with Taiwan or use gray zone aggression to slowly encroach and reintegrate Taiwan into China.¹¹² If this scenario did occur, key indicators would be capture or infiltration of Chinese SOF units, indicators of compromise within Taiwan's cyber networks, increasing intensity of deception operations, and electronic warfare operations to degrade radar capabilities. The consequences would include prolonged land and naval conflict between China and Taiwan, international condemnation and strong sanctions against Beijing, and mobilization of the United States and its allies. It is hard to imagine Taiwan not responding with force if its political leaders are assassinated by uniformed Chinese combatants. A key decision to be made by Western leadership in this crisis would be whether to employ military force or use other instruments of national power to assist Taiwan in responding to the decapitation raid. This consideration is essentially a balance seen today with the war in Ukraine—how can the West adequately support an invaded nation while limiting the risks of horizontal and vertical escalation?



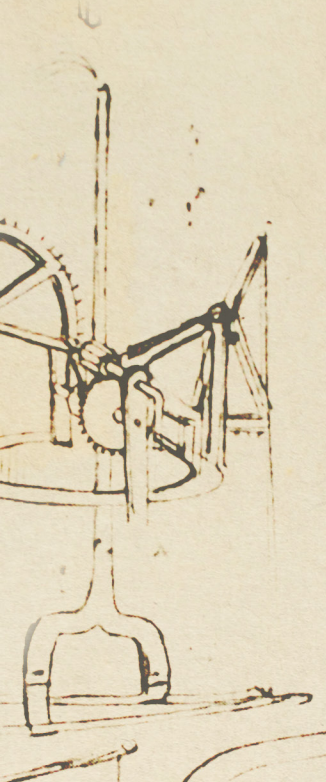
WHAT DO YOU THINK?



Tell us about the future. Take a moment to respond to this anonymous survey on the likelihood of and escalation risks associated with a Chinese special operations raid against Taiwan.

Looking Back to Look Ahead

While no single scenario is predictive, looking across the historical cases helps policymakers visualize and describe the dilemmas likely to confront key stakeholders in Taiwan over the next 10 years. History offers a set of plausible examples of crisis dynamics. China has coercive alternatives it can exhaust before incurring the costs and risks of a large-scale amphibious invasion and prolonged occupation of Taiwan. Unlike earlier crises, these alternatives will almost certainly involve unexplored domain dynamics, and private sector firms will be forced to create means for coordination across different actors as the world seeks to avoid war without conceding to threats



from Beijing. In this multistakeholder, competitive environment, the United States can best deter war by creating focal points for coordination and using international standards to signal all parties. This new escalation management framework provides a blueprint for realizing the promises of integrated deterrence. This logic produces five key recommendations:

1. Launch a series of interagency, multistakeholder crisis simulations to develop a new escalation management framework.

At the strategic level, the U.S. government, likely through the National Security Council, needs to launch a series of interagency, multistakeholder crisis simulations to develop a new escalation management framework. The historical cases reviewed here show that confrontation and conflict can take place short of war and involve a diverse set of actors. Understanding how private sector firms, partner nations, and even different agencies in the U.S. government respond to complex threats is therefore a key information gap. At the same time, integrated deterrence calls for better synchronizing different instruments of power and international partners while increasing joint all-domain interoperability. The theory is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. While likely true, there is a maze of bureaucratic obstacles and policies that make interagency, much less multilateral, coordination difficult. Without a better understanding of these obstacles, legacy bureaucratic structures could limit the potential of integrated deterrence.

These information gaps create a need for an entirely new approach to wargaming and crisis simulation. Traditionally, these activities have been closed, classified events that favor secrecy over transparency and hypothesis testing. They also tend to take place in sponsor stovepipes, with individual services or narrow elements of the defense establishment running games and holding on to the results to gain an information advantage in the budgeting process or in advancing their preferred plans. The opposite is true when trying to address coordination challenges, which require a broader set of players to identify where and how cooperation and coordination can break down. Imagine a blockade game in which representatives from the private sector—whether chambers of commerce or corporate representatives from individual firms—sit alongside non-official delegations from the United States, Japan, and Taiwan. Even more radical, but no less important, imagine a multitrack diplomatic exchange in which U.S., Chinese, and private sector officials discuss how economic and military instruments of power collide in an escalating crisis alongside challenges associated with limiting escalation in space and cyberspace. States can share an understanding of risk without compromising privileged information about their intentions and plans. In doing so, the resulting transparency helps calibrate cost, benefit, and restraint calculations at the heart of deterrence.

This logic means that the United States should explore multitrack diplomacy with China that involves crisis simulations that help each side—from Washington and Beijing to business leaders—understand how all parties might react in a future crisis. The transparency serves a purpose. It helps businesses better assess risk while reminding Beijing of the economic costs of a significant escalation.

2. Develop a new escalation management framework.

The net result of these multistakeholder crisis games should be a new escalation management framework. Policymakers need a clear list of flexible response and deterrent options they can use in an unfolding crisis that has been stress-tested and analyzed through a mix of red teaming and gaming. The list of options should be validated annually

and subject to congressional scrutiny. While there certainly will be classified annexes, an unclassified list will help encourage broader crosstalk with the private sector and partners as well as in executive-level communication with Beijing critical to managing a crisis.

3. Sponsor a series of counter-blockade games.

At the operational level, the U.S. military should sponsor a series of counter-blockade games that include counterspace vignettes alongside complex misinformation campaigns and the employment of limited air and missile engagements. These games will help Taiwan determine how best to posture their forces to make it more costly for Beijing to blockade the island for a prolonged period. The 1948 Italian election, Berlin Airlift, and Tanker War show the enduring importance of the information environment alongside the air and maritime domains. Taiwan is a globally connected island, amplifying the likelihood that China will use space, cyber, air, and naval means to isolate the island. The open question is how likely cross-domain escalation is to occur and the extent to which Beijing can achieve its objectives through other domains short of occupying Taiwan.¹¹³ The first step toward tailoring a deterrent strategy to a Taiwan contingency is therefore to map these domain-specific dynamics across a diverse set of stakeholders. The findings from these analytical games could be used by the Biden administration to inform foreign military sales as well as defense planning.

4. Dispatch interagency teams to help Taiwan refine continuity of the presidency and government planning.

Furthermore, the United States and its partners should dispatch interagency teams to help Taiwan refine continuity of the presidency and government planning. The Blue House case shows the importance of preparing for the possibility a hostile foreign state targets political leaders to create a crisis it can exploit. Unlike the Blue House case, the information environment would play a key role, with MDM activities exploiting the chaos to shape public opinion. As a result, it is not just Secret Service, FBI, or select military teams that are required to help key partners such as Taiwan develop the force protection and continuity of government protocols. Partners such as Taiwan—including civil society organizations—also need support from Western nonprofits and government agencies to combat MDM campaigns as well as complex cyberattacks.

In all likelihood, a Kosovo-type scenario in Taiwan would also include steps to neutralize Taiwan's political leaders. As a result, continuity of the presidency and government planning needs to include helping Taiwan figure out how best to alert and protect leaders without disrupting their ability to command and control military operations. This planning must include variable timelines that help Taiwan and the international community better assess how long Taiwan could hold out against a sustained series of air and missile strikes, especially if they occurred alongside a blockade. That type of planning works best when private sector logistical expertise is brought in to help discuss topics ranging from port operations to warehouse management. There is precedent for involving a diverse set of stakeholders to analyze continuity planning, such as the Continuity of Government Commission, funded by the private sector and nonprofits, following the September 11 attacks.¹¹⁴

5. Initiate a major new nuclear arms control regime.

Lastly, nuclear weapons played a significant role in two of the six explored historical cases. In the Berlin Airlift, the movement of nuclear-capable bombers to bases in the United

Kingdom limited the Soviet response options. In the Note Crisis, nuclear tests played a key role in a larger coercive diplomatic campaign. While China has not signaled it will change its nuclear policy, it is increasing its capabilities and could decide to alter its policies in the future. Therefore, the United States needs to initiate a major new nuclear arms control regime involving Beijing and other nuclear states. The world cannot afford a multipolar nuclear competition, which would almost certainly involve more risk than the bipolar Cold War. It should be a top priority to use formal treaties and regimes to mitigate proliferation risk and to limit incentives to use nuclear blackmail.

What these recommendations share is an emphasis on using transparency and international standards to reduce uncertainty and adding credible communication channels to international crises. Creating, testing, and communicating clear international standards around maritime law and boarding ships, as well as working with the private sector to create playbooks for identifying and countering misinformation campaigns, denies China, as well as other actors, the ability to support coercive campaigns. If China decides to take military action against Taiwan, it can. Beijing has a favorable correlation of forces, and the status of Taiwan is a salient issue for the CCP. While no one can stop Beijing from making the decision to use force, they can be sure that China's leaders do so with a clear understanding of the real costs associated with taking a military path to victory. The clearer these costs and the more uncertain operational objectives and timelines become, the more likely Beijing is to avoid crossing the line. ■

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Leonardo da Vinci Sketches: wowinside/AdobeStock

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