

## Introduction

Since its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has employed military force in pursuit of its national interests in security and territorial integrity. In many such instances, Beijing has deployed a calculus of threat and retaliation signals, first to deter an adversary from taking actions contrary to Beijing's interests by threatening use of Chinese military force, and then, once deterrence has failed, to explain and justify Beijing's resort to military force. Beijing has carefully sustained this calibrated hierarchy of official protests, authoritative press comment, and leadership statements despite the sweeping changes in the PRC's place in the international order, the proliferation of foreign policy instruments at its disposal, and the dramatic evolution in the Chinese media over the decades.

This study assesses the context and motivations of the PRC's use of military force since 1949. It then extracts Beijing's use of its calculus of warning statements in detail from several instances in which it has threatened and, in some cases, actually followed through with the use of military force to resolve a dispute. It offers several points to take into account in watching for and analyzing Beijing's use of this warnings calculus in contemporary contexts, and it offers a hypothetical scenario in which this calculus might appear in the context of China's claims in the South China Sea.

## The Record: Beijing's Use of Military Force

Across the decades of the Cold War, Beijing faced dire threats to its security, first from the United States, then from the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) together, and finally from the Soviet Union alone. In addition, the People's Republic inherited boundaries from the Republic of China regime that it defeated on the Chinese mainland in 1949. Those boundaries derived from the creation of national boundaries out of what before 1911 had been the frontiers of an empire—the Manchu Qing empire, which established hegemony over a vast stretch of East and Central Asia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that included China itself. As such, the PRC inherited a roster of maritime territorial disputes with many of its neighbors. In that respect, Beijing shares similar security concerns with other nation-states that have emerged out of the international relations of empires in modern times, such as India and Indonesia.

Where China differs from most other states is a consequence of the yet-to-be-resolved civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Kuomintang (KMT), which established a government on Taiwan in 1949 following military defeat on the mainland. Beijing views Taiwan, together with any territory the government in Taipei administers, as properly

the sovereign domain of the PRC. The Taipei government is viewed simply as “the Taiwan authorities.” Preventing the permanent separation of Taiwan from China is one of Beijing’s “core interests” together with retaining Tibet and Xinjiang as inalienable parts of China. Taiwan, however, differs from these two regions in four critical ways. First is the reality that while those two regions are integral components of the PRC, Taiwan has functioned as a *de facto* independent state since the KMT’s retreat to the island. Moreover, beginning in the late 1980s Taiwan’s political system transitioned into a flourishing democracy providing a Chinese model of democratic political process contrasting sharply with the CCP’s political monopoly in the People’s Republic. Second, Taiwan has its own defense establishment and armed forces defending an island separated from the mainland by some 100 miles of water that even today provide a protective moat difficult for China’s armed forces to overcome with an amphibious assault. Third, from Beijing’s perspective, Taiwan is a potential security threat should the island ever ally with a hostile power. Fourth, and perhaps most significant for Beijing, is the relationship Taiwan has with the United States. Beijing views the American commitment to Taipei stemming from the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, which was legislated following the U.S. shift of diplomatic recognition to the PRC, as totally unacceptable to China. It was this connection to the United States that provided the focus for China’s mid-1990s defense modernization programs that continue to this day.

Taiwan’s unique status in Beijing’s perception of threats to its security and national interests leads us to assess China’s employment of military force from two perspectives. The first perspective assesses China’s use of military force in circumstances not involving Taiwan as that of any state seeking to defend itself and its security, sovereign territories, and political interests from predatory adversaries. These security and national interest issues have varied in their degree of perceived threat, with the United States and the Soviet Union providing the most severe confrontations. Challenges to China’s territorial claims in the East and South China seas, on the other hand, have become important concerns for Beijing, but these sovereignty clashes are not major security threats requiring the allocation of significant military resources. The second perspective takes into account Beijing’s absolute commitment to preventing the permanent separation of Taiwan from the mainland. Any indication that Taipei may be moving toward *de jure* independence or that U.S. policy toward Taiwan is changing is always perceived by Beijing as an extremely serious risk requiring the threat or application of extensive military force. Consequently, although the deterrence signaling pattern will likely not change, the intensity of Beijing’s dedication to preventing any potential move toward the *de jure* independence of Taiwan and the reasons for this commitment are distinct enough to divide China’s use of military force into two categories, with Taiwan occupying a significantly different category from other cases.

The summaries and analyses below provide the contextual background and demonstrate the primary motivations for Beijing's employment of military coercion since 1949. They are not intended to provide detailed assessments of each event. In addition to treating Taiwan as a distinct case, we divide China's use of its military power into assessments of when Beijing has employed significant military force and when lesser military coercion has been employed. As one would anticipate, the forces employed reflect the immediacy of the perceived threat, the importance of the interest being threatened, and the capabilities of the opposing military forces. Deterrence signaling has been more systematically and directly applied when Beijing has perceived a major military threat or strategic trend placing a high-value interest in jeopardy.

### **China's Non-Taiwan-related Use of Military Force**

Deterrence has provided the primary driver for China's application of significant military force since 1949. Beijing has overtly deployed major elements of its armed forces four times as a component of a deterrent strategy.<sup>1</sup> In each case, the intent of openly deploying and threatening the use of military force was to deter the adversary from continuing a course of action Beijing believed threatened high-value Chinese security and political interests. Three of these deterrent strategies failed and China went to war. China's October 1950 entrance into the Korean War followed Beijing's failure to deter U.S. forces from crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and entering the territory of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Beijing's objective was to preserve a bordering communist ally and thereby prevent the United States, commanding the United Nations coalition resisting the DPRK's invasion of the Republic of Korea (ROK), from unifying the peninsula and subsequently having forces poised directly on a Chinese border.

The brief 1962 border war with India was fought for more than preserving China's territorial claims along the Sino-Indian boundaries. A central issue for China was preservation of Tibet as an integral part of China. Tibet had become a target of U.S. subversion in the early 1950s. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operations supported insurgents and contributed to the Tibetan revolt of 1959, which together with the Dalai Lama's flight to India, Beijing saw as threatening China's control of the region. To improve access to Tibet, China had completed a road in 1957 from Xinjiang through the Aksai Chin border area claimed by India but designated Chinese on China's maps. This road provided the only military transport route to Tibet. Ultimately, beginning in 1958, negotiations over several years failed to resolve territorial disagreements that extended along major sectors of the Sino-Indian border. Failed negotiations together with minor border clashes led to a Chinese deterrent strategy that also failed to convince New Delhi to retreat from its military pressures to assert claims along the border. People's Liberation Army

(PLA) attacks began on October 20, 1962. Following Beijing's unilateral ceasefire in November, Chinese troops withdrew from whatever Indian territory they had entered during combat operations and returned to the positions they held prior to the war. Beijing was demonstrating that it sought no Indian territory but was defending Chinese territory. For Beijing, however, the core issue was ensuring China's continued control of Tibet.

The context of China's 1965–1973 deployment of military forces into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was similar to Korea in 1950. The core objective was to preserve a bordering communist ally against a common enemy. Beijing feared that with the buildup of its forces to 500,000 troops the United States would invade the DRV. The intent of China's overt deployment of PLA units into the DRV was to demonstrate China's willingness to go to war with the United States to preserve North Vietnam. This deterrent commitment was reinforced by the antiaircraft artillery units deployed into the DRV suffering casualties while engaging attacking U.S. aircraft, by PLA construction units keeping communication routes open under repeated U.S. air attack, and by Chinese fighters engaging U.S. aircraft that strayed into China's air space. Because the United States did not send ground forces across the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel into the DRV, Beijing could view this aspect of its deterrent strategy as successful.

The last major commitment of non-Taiwan-related military force was China's February 1979 attack on Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> The core issue driving this attack was Beijing's sense of growing geopolitical vulnerability. The newly unified Vietnam was viewed as functioning as a Soviet ally seeking to dominate Indochina even as the USSR was poised threateningly along the PRC's extensive northern border. To this sense of strategic vulnerability must be added Beijing's intense anger that North Vietnam—a communist ally that China had supported for more than two decades in its wars for independence and the unification of Vietnam—had turned against its most loyal benefactor. Vietnam's invasion of China's ally Cambodia in December 1978, after more than a year of escalating Sino-Vietnamese tensions, including armed provocations along their border, triggered what Beijing announced as a limited punitive cross-border assault, but the drivers were far more important than the trigger itself. If China did nothing to assist the Khmer Rouge, then Beijing would be viewed as rendered impotent by the emerging Vietnam-Soviet alliance. But China had no land border with Cambodia and thus chose to “punish” Vietnam. It is unlikely that Beijing expected Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia, and Hanoi did not do so until September 1989. The decision to “teach Vietnam a lesson,” however, was directed as much to Moscow as it was to Hanoi.

China has employed lesser military resources for what (with one exception) were less demanding political and military objectives. That exception was the two firefights between Soviet

and Chinese forces in March 1969 on a contested island known as Zhenbao to Chinese and Damansky to Russians in the Ussuri River, which forms the local Sino-Russian border.<sup>3</sup> Mounting military tension along their mutual border over the previous year, including minor border confrontations, led to Moscow's January 1969 warning that continued provocations would lead to the employment of military force. The first major firefight occurred on March 2 and was initiated by China. Although Beijing had made clear to Moscow its willingness to defend China against any Soviet military attack, the March 2 action was deliberately generated by China as some 300 Chinese troops purposely ambushed a Soviet patrol on Zhenbao Island. The second clash came on March 15, evidently initiated by Moscow in response to the Chinese ambush. This second firefight was much larger than the first, perhaps inflicting as many as 1,000 casualties on both sides. Minor military confrontations then continued along the extensive Sino-Soviet border throughout the year, apparently generated by Soviet forces. Moreover, Moscow redeployed a bomber squadron from Eastern Europe to a Central Asian base where it conducted exercises seemingly designed to prepare for an attack on China's Lanzhou nuclear facility.<sup>4</sup> Tensions continued to build until a September 1969 meeting in the Beijing airport where Premiers Kosygin and Zhou Enlai agreed to reopen the border talks cancelled in 1964. The driver for the Chinese ambush remains unclear. There are two potential explanations. First, increasing Sino-Soviet tensions joined with the build-up of Soviet forces along the border, the Soviet Union's 1966 defense arrangement with Mongolia, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the announcement of the Brezhnev doctrine, which led Mao Zedong to initiate a small military skirmish as a demonstration that China was not intimidated by the USSR's military power—a deterrence strategy. Second, this open resistance to the USSR was designed to lay the groundwork for a Sino-American rapprochement. No matter which explanation is valid (and they are not mutually contradictory), Beijing could not have anticipated the Soviets extending the military clashes throughout the year until the two premiers met in September.

### **Confrontations over Maritime Claims**

Other Chinese employments of non-Taiwan-related, small-scale military force have primarily occurred in the South China Sea where two sets of issues are involved: sovereignty and resources. China claims sovereignty over all South China Sea land features including the two major island groups contained in those waters—the Paracel and Spratly Islands—a claim paralleled by Taiwan as the Republic of China. China's claim to the Paracels is contested only by Vietnam. Beijing's Spratly claim is contested by other Southeast Asian maritime states. Vietnam claims the entire island group, the Philippines claims 53 of its land features, and Malaysia claims

12. Brunei does not claim any of the islands, but does claim part of the South China Sea nearest to it as part of its continental shelf and exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In 1984, Brunei declared an EEZ that includes Louisa Reef. Resource issues revolve around fisheries and energy deposits in equally contested EEZs. China has vigorously objected whenever foreign oil companies have acquired exploration rights to blocks in contested areas of the South China Sea, to include threats against these companies.

Seizure of the southern Paracel (Xisha) Islands from South Vietnam in 1974 was triggered by Saigon's September 1973 all-encompassing claim to the Spratly Islands, which it underscored by sending troops to occupy two of the Spratlys' largest islands. Beijing responded in January 1974 by reasserting China's claim to all South China Sea islands and threatening the use of military force if Saigon did not withdraw its occupying troops from the Spratlys. Although both governments claimed all the Paracels, China occupied the northeastern group of islands known as the Amphitrites while South Vietnam occupied the southwestern or Crescent Group. To affirm its January claim to all South China Sea islands, Chinese troops placed flags on several lightly defended Crescent islands in January 1974. Tensions accelerated from that point on.<sup>5</sup> Chinese troops had occupied Duncan (Chenhang) Islet in the Crescents. Vietnamese forces attempting to recover the island on January 19 were thrown back, so supporting naval vessels began a shore bombardment. These ships were engaged by a PLA Navy (PLAN) flotilla of small ships that forced the Vietnamese away. On January 20, China landed some 500 troops to take control of remaining Crescent group islets held by the Vietnamese, thereby occupying all the Paracels. MiG fighters based on Hainan provided air support for the Chinese assaults. Following the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, Hanoi dispatched three small gunboats to observe the Paracels. Chinese naval vessels interdicted and captured them. The year 1988 saw another small Sino-Vietnamese military engagement, this time over a contested islet in the Spratly (Nansha) Islands. A PLAN flotilla of three frigates was patrolling the Spratlys with the intent of chasing off any Vietnamese ships landing forces on the islets. On March 13, while pursuing a Vietnamese transport ship near Johnson (Chigua) Reef where China was building an ocean surveillance facility, a PLAN frigate spotted Vietnamese vessels in the area. On March 14, both Chinese and Vietnamese troops attempted to land on Johnson Reef. A Vietnamese transport ship providing fire support for the Vietnamese troops bombarded the Chinese forces. The PLAN frigates then sank the transport ship and an accompanying landing craft while damaging another transport vessel. The engagement lasted perhaps 90 minutes with some 70 Vietnamese casualties.

Beginning sometime in 1994, China started building structures on Mischief Reef in the Spratlys, which were also claimed by the Philippines. This was the first time China had occupied

a reef claimed by one of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states. These construction activities, perhaps under the direction of China's navy, were discovered by the Philippines in January 1995. Other than a possible PLAN connection with the construction, there was no direct use of military force by China. Despite the friction created by China's occupation and construction on Mischief Reef, Beijing and Manila agreed to a diplomatic resolution, no matter how tentative, when on August 10, 1995, they signed "A Joint Statement on PRC-RP [Republic of the Philippines] Consultations on the South China Sea and other Areas of Cooperation." Nonetheless, territorial and maritime disagreements with occasional confrontations have continued (including the 2012 confrontation over Scarborough Shoal).

Even as Chinese naval exercises in the South China Sea have increased over time with improving PLAN capabilities, Beijing has sought to avoid excessively provocative naval presence by handing responsibility for regular patrolling of politically sensitive waters and land features to vessels and aircraft from civilian agencies such as the State Oceanic Administration, its subordinate Marine Surveillance Force, and the Bureau of Fisheries Administration.<sup>6</sup> It is these civilian vessels that have been employed to challenge and detain fishing boats from other states operating in Chinese-claimed waters, to identify oil rigs Beijing claims are exploring in Chinese waters, and to harass non-Chinese seismic vessels searching for energy-rich locations. Charges of illegal energy exploration are also raised through diplomatic channels. China has employed similar methods in the waters surrounding uninhabited islands in the East China Sea known as the Diaoyus to China and the Senkakus to Japan, which administers the islands and contests Beijing's claim.

China's assertion of its territorial and resource claims led to ASEAN's effort to establish a "code of conduct" to discourage aggressive behavior and minimize the probability of armed clashes among the South China Sea claimants. Established in 2002 as a political declaration, this nonbinding commitment has made little progress in transforming into a legally binding document, which is ASEAN's intent. It should not be assumed, however, that all South China Sea armed clashes have been generated by China's behavior. Vietnamese soldiers have fired on a Philippine fishing boat, Chinese fishing boats have been rammed and sunk by Philippine naval vessels, and Vietnamese have fired on a Philippine reconnaissance aircraft. Although undoubtedly primarily focused on constraining China's behavior, the code of conduct sought would encompass all ASEAN members.

### **Harassment of U.S. Sea and Air Intelligence Missions**

Beijing has frequently expressed objections to U.S. aerial reconnaissance missions off China's coast and intelligence-collection ships operating in China's EEZ, and also to U.S. Navy exercises

in China's EEZ. Meetings of the U.S.-China Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) have often been used to raise objections to American surveillance operations. With equal frequency the United States has stated that U.S. reconnaissance aircraft are operating legally in international airspace and the ocean surveillance ships are equally free of legal restraint when operating in China's EEZ, as are U.S. naval exercises. Although Beijing has selected interpretation of international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as China's tool to challenge the U.S. position, the tension is more based on Beijing's quest to establish greater control over what it perceives as threatening military operations close to China. From Beijing's point of view, U.S. aircraft and ships conducting these missions are collecting military intelligence that threatens China's security and are doing so in sea and air space critical to China's defense. Indeed, the Yellow, East, and South China Seas are referred to by Beijing as China's "near seas." These two conflicting perspectives show no sign of being resolved and suggest that incidents such as the 2001 PLAN F-8 collision with a USN EP-3 aircraft and harassment of United States Naval Ship (USNS) ocean surveillance ships by aircraft and vessels of China's civilian maritime agencies and fishing boats will continue.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, there have been no reported incidents of confrontations between U.S. air- and sea-based intelligence collectors and Chinese aircraft or ships since the 2009 incident with the USNS *Impeccable* in the South China Sea. Moreover, Beijing has evidently decided that, as with its patrolling of politically sensitive waters created by competing territorial claims in the South China Sea, it will not protest USNS intelligence-collection missions with Chinese naval vessels as it did in 2001 and 2002 when challenging the USNS *Bowditch* in the Yellow Sea. Since those two incidents, ships and aircraft of civilian law enforcement agencies from the State Oceanic Administration's China Marine Surveillance Force and the Ministry of Agriculture's Fisheries Law Enforcement Command have performed this task, suggesting Beijing seeks to limit the possibility of escalation even as China demonstrates its objection to U.S. intelligence collection. It is unclear whether Chinese commercial fishing vessels involved in harassment actions are under the direct command of these agencies when they interfere with USNS ships, but it is reasonable to assume that some form of direction and communication is involved. Lack of data does not allow any assessment of the degree of "shadowing" of U.S. aerial intelligence that is currently undertaken by the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) or PLAN aviation.

### **China's Taiwan-related Use of Force<sup>8</sup>**

Following their 1949 defeat on the mainland and the transfer of the seat of the Republic of China's (ROC) government to Taiwan, KMT forces continued to occupy islands close to



the PRC coastline. These islands were used as bases for harassing actions against the mainland, including coastal raids, attacks on coastal shipping, seizing fishing craft, and firing on and sometimes seizing foreign shipping headed for mainland ports—essentially a blockade strategy. Beijing's ultimate objective was to conclude the civil war by eliminating the KMT's control of Taiwan. But before an assault on Taiwan could be undertaken, the PRC had to gain control of the offshore islands. As the operations to seize control of the offshore islands and preparations for the assault on Taiwan got underway, the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 put both into suspension. In 1953, even as the armistice that ended the fighting in July was being negotiated in Panmunjom, PLA operations to eject KMT forces from the offshore islands began once again.

As the second sustained effort to gain control of the offshore islands began,<sup>9</sup> Beijing's concern was that the United States was committed to the permanent separation of Taiwan from China. President Truman's deployment of U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet warships into the Taiwan Strait at the opening of the Korean War and their basing in Taiwan was but one indicator. Beijing saw further evidence in Truman's 1950 statement that the occupation of Taiwan by "Communist forces" was a direct threat to the United States and the Pacific, and in 1951 that the future status of Taiwan had yet to be determined. The PLA's August–November 1954 artillery bombardment of Jinmen and Matzu islands off Fujian Province was in part designed to deter Taiwan and the United States from concluding a mutual security treaty by demonstrating Beijing's commitment to the "liberation" of Taiwan in the face of American military power. It had the opposite result. In September the United States dispatched major elements of the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet close to Jinmen and Matzu in response.

Although neither President Eisenhower nor Secretary of State John Foster Dulles initially favored such a treaty, in December 1954 China's military pressure on Jinmen and Matzu, followed by successful assaults on the Dachen Islands and Yijiangshan Island, led to just the mutual security treaty Beijing was trying to avoid. Later in 1955, the United States included in its commitment the threat to use nuclear weapons in the defense of Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> The single plausible successful political outcome for Beijing was that the treaty did not commit the United States to defense of the offshore islands. KMT forces continued to use the islands it did occupy as bases to harass the nearby coast of Fujian Province, so in 1958 Beijing resumed the artillery bombardment of Jinmen. In essence, the PLA was attempting an artillery blockade of the island. Despite the deliberate limitation included in their mutual security treaty, the United States assisted Taiwan by escorting its resupply ships to Jinmen harbor. Chinese artillery fired on the Taiwan ships but not U.S. vessels or aircraft. Nor did U.S. ships and aircraft fire on Chinese targets. U.S. forces, like those of the PLA, followed

strictly enforced rules of engagement (ROE) designed to prevent clashes. Ultimately, the artillery blockade of Jinmen became too burdensome for China. Beijing, however, continued a bizarre artillery shelling campaign of Jinmen on odd days of the month until the January 1, 1979, normalization of Sino-American relations, but with explosive ordnance usually replaced by propaganda leaflets. Beijing's perspective was that the future liberation of Taiwan was far more important than risking war with the United States to gain control of what few offshore islands remained in KMT hands. Nonetheless, for the four decades and more following the Jinmen-Matzu confrontation, whenever China employed military force to coerce Taiwan it resulted in American military and political responses detrimental to Beijing.

The most dramatic Chinese demonstration of military force to influence Taiwan and the United States since 1958 took place in 1995 and 1996 through a series of military exercises that included the test firing of unarmed ballistic missiles into waters off Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> The July–August and November 1995 displays of military capabilities were in response to the United States granting a visa to Taiwan's President, Lee Teng-hui, for a private visit in June to speak at his alma mater, Cornell University, where his speech repeatedly praised the virtues of the “Republic of China on Taiwan.” Beijing had understood the visa would not be granted, but congressional pressure resulted in its issue.

The March 1996 display of military strength was evidently intended to warn President Lee, who was expected to retain the presidency in the coming election (he did), to cease what Beijing perceived as political moves toward Taiwan's independence. Both sets of exercises were also deterrence messages intended to warn Washington and Taipei that China was ready and willing to employ military force to prevent Taiwan independence with or without U.S. military intervention. To ensure its military exercises were not misunderstood and seen as preparations to invade Taiwan, on March 5 Beijing announced both the impact areas of its missile tests and the times and locations of the military exercises. As added insurance against such misperception of the second series of military demonstrations, Vice Foreign Minister Liu Huaqiu used his scheduled visit to Washington in March at the invitation of the United States to assure his hosts that missile tests were routine exercises. Unfortunately for Vice Foreign Minister Liu, the first missile shots were fired the day before he arrived in Washington on March 8. As a consequence, he confronted a somewhat hostile audience and a particularly angry Secretary of Defense in William Perry.

Washington had issued only a somewhat muted response to the 1995 exercises. The USS *Nimitz* aircraft carrier battlegroup had transited the Taiwan Strait in December, but no U.S. statement accompanied the transit. Despite the assurances given by a high-ranking Chinese

official, the U.S. response to the March 1996 exercises was distinctly different. The U.S. Department of State described the missile firings as “reckless and potentially dangerous,” and two aircraft carrier battlegroups were dispatched to the Taiwan area. Beijing had anticipated one battlegroup, but two were seen as an overreaction to what were declared normal exercises.

### **Assessment**

Over the past 62 years, certain patterns have emerged in China's periodic employment of military force to achieve security and political objectives. Beijing has exhibited a consistent approach to threats viewed as high level and of immediate strategic importance to China's security. China's responses to lower level and less immediate threats have shown a different and not necessarily consistent pattern. Whenever Beijing has perceived immediate major threats to security issues of high-level importance to China, it has sought to deter the adversary by warning of its commitment to go to war to protect these interests. Overt deployment of military forces has been an integral component of this deterrent strategy. Korea 1950, India 1962, Vietnam 1965–1973, and Vietnam 1979 are the principal examples. At no time, with the possible exception of the 1969 border clashes with the Soviet Union, has China risked major war without warning the adversary of this consequence should it not cease the course of action identified as threatening in Beijing's deterrence signals. Having the most militarily powerful state in the world poised as an adversary on China's border, which was the situation Beijing confronted in 1950, was a major threat to China's security. Neither was Beijing's concern over Tibet's future a minor security issue in the 1962 border war with India. Nor was a potential U.S. invasion of the DRV in 1965–1968 a marginal issue, for it was seen in much the same perspective as U.S. forces crossing Korea's 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. A Vietnam-Soviet alliance dominating Indochina was threatening to China's security in 1979.

Lesser threats to Chinese security and political interests have shown a systematic if not necessarily consistent pattern of responses. From Beijing's perspective, China's maritime interests and sovereignty claims have been clearly stated for many decades. What Beijing has perceived are challenges to these territorial claims and to associated interests in fishing and energy resources. In this sense, given the effort China has made to publicly assert these claims, such challenges are deterrence failures which require a response. Beijing has responded to each challenge individually and with only limited and rare military coercion. Because the challengers have been relatively weak militarily and the use of force was not expected to draw in the major powers, Beijing could tailor its military response to what was judged as necessary for the immediate challenge. Although in January 1974 Beijing did warn Saigon to withdraw its

troops who had recently occupied the Spratly Islands or confront China's use of military force, Beijing's immediate action in seizing the Paracels can best be described as a response to a weak Saigon's claim to the Spratlys. The Republic of Vietnam was facing the DRV's military power alone following the withdrawal of U.S. forces 10 months earlier. Beijing probably judged the United States as unlikely to come to the DRV's assistance in part because of the withdrawal and in part because of the Sino-American rapprochement underway since 1972. The use of military coercion in China's occupation of the Spratly's Johnson Reef in 1988 was a function of Chinese and Vietnamese forces clashing over control of the reef. Both were prepared to fight but neither had planned the confrontation. China's 1994 occupation and construction on Mischief Reef did not involve the application of military force. When the construction activity was discovered in January 1995 by a Filipino fisherman, Manila raised strong objections but chose a diplomatic agreement rather than trying to eject China with military force.

China's occupation of Johnson and Mischief reefs had definite political costs, but Beijing was evidently willing to accept them. Nonetheless, Beijing was sensitive to the political costs of being perceived as aggressive in asserting its territorial and resource claims; this sensitivity can be seen in the passing of responsibility to vessels and aircraft from civilian agencies for regular patrolling of politically sensitive waters and enforcement of Chinese jurisdiction over waters it claims. At times, but particularly during the years 2009–2011, these civilian agencies have aggressively asserted Chinese claims. They have detained Vietnamese fishing boats and harassed Vietnamese and Philippine seismic ships conducting hydrocarbon surveys in their claimed EEZs. However, for the past 24 years Beijing has not used its armed forces to enforce China's territorial claims or eject other states from islets and other South China Sea land features they occupy. But even as Beijing has delegated to civilian agencies the responsibility for policing and upholding China's claims, it does so under the protective shadow of China's navy. PLAN exercises in the East and South China Seas, including naval aviation, are no doubt designed in part as a clear demonstration of China's military capabilities and readiness. It is thus plausible to assess these responses to what Beijing perceives as infringements on China's sovereignty as tactical reactions to an immediate incident with the possibility of military coercion present but not actually threatened. China's support for ASEAN's "code of conduct" for all parties with territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea suggests there is a diplomatic path Beijing is willing to pursue. Beijing's support, however, appears dependent on perceiving the United States as neutral in these disputes. At this time, Beijing publicly states it doubts U.S. neutrality.

A similar assessment can be made of Beijing's responses to U.S. oceanic and aerial intelligence-collection missions. Although Beijing views these missions as security threats, they

are not deemed sufficiently dangerous to warrant a military confrontation with a military as powerful as the capabilities deployed in the Western Pacific by the United States. Consequently, because the United States conducts them despite China's protests, Beijing's reactions are tactical responses to individual intelligence-collection missions asserting China's continuing objections. With the possible exception of China's reaction to aerial sorties (because we have no real data on them), these reactions have minimized military involvement, leaving the task primarily to civilian agency law enforcement vessels and aircraft joined with fishing boats, which we assume are in some way directed by the agency vessels.

Beijing's opposition to the permanent separation of Taiwan from China is based on both nationalist and security grounds, with nationalism being the strongest driver. Beijing's willingness to risk major war to prevent such a separation has been made eminently clear since the PRC was founded in 1949. The 1954 mutual security pact between Taiwan and United States did not give Beijing reason to retreat from this stance. Nor did the 1955 U.S. threat to use nuclear weapons in the defense of Taiwan give pause to Beijing's commitment.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the United States post-normalization 1979 Taiwan Relations Act is viewed as an extension of the original security treaty and has had little if any effect on Beijing's resolve. Beijing's commitment to risking major war with the United States to prevent separation cannot be doubted, as the military exercises of 1995 and 1996 were intended to remind Taipei and Washington. Beijing is now most concerned with preventing or reversing any perceived trend by Taipei to seek *de jure* independence.

### **Prospects**

China's military capabilities have increased significantly over the past 30 years to the point where it is now militarily the most powerful Asian state. With its strategic nuclear deterrent undergoing modernization together with the PLA's conventional general purpose forces, and a defense industrial base becoming increasingly technologically proficient, there can be no doubt that China will remain Asia's leading military power. The most difficult question is whether this will lead necessarily to a more aggressive use of military force than China has demonstrated over the past 62 years. There are, nonetheless, indicators suggesting that changes in China's security environment have reduced rather than increased the possibilities for military confrontation with the United States. Moreover, within PLA doctrinal development, increasing capabilities are as much related to deterrence as they are to offensive operations.

China's growing military power over these years has been accompanied by a radical change in its security environment—a change that has potential for considerable effect on Beijing's use

of military coercion. Far from the revolutionary state it was in 1949, China is now part of, even if not fully integrated into, the global and regional institutions of trade, commerce, and security. Much of China's dramatic economic growth can be attributed to its extensive involvement in the global economy. China's continued economic expansion and industrial sophistication depend on its continued participation in the globalized economy and the multilateral institutions that guide it, such as the World Trade Organization. As a permanent, veto-wielding member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China has considerable influence on that institution's decisions. China is also equally present in Asia's multilateral regional security institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, thereby exercising influence on their decisions. The consequence of these changes is that China's economic future and security depend extensively on a continued effective working relationship with global and regional institutions.

China's growing dependence on the globalized economy joined with its active membership in Asia's multilateral security organizations mean that any employment of military coercion will be assessed by the members of these institutions as an indicator of Beijing's strategic intentions. Applying military coercion in the Asian region would confirm the views of those who see China's growing military capabilities as leading to a more aggressive use of military force in the future. Such a perception would not serve China well. Should China be perceived as a major threat to regional security and stability, then the accommodating international environment Beijing needs to achieve its economic objectives could well fade.

With these changes in its security environment and dependence on a globalized economy and its institutions, Beijing is also well aware that its growing military capabilities are viewed with some concern across much of the Asian region. In particular, Beijing is fully aware of apprehension in Washington that its strategic intent is to displace the United States as the leading military power in the Western Pacific. Moreover, it is aware that U.S. regional alliances have been strengthened partly as a consequence of regional concern over China's increasing military power. Adding to these sources of tension, Beijing confronts the reality that the United States, no matter how restrained the actual transfers are, continues to serve as the primary source of Taiwan's advanced military acquisitions and that the AirSea Battle (ASB) concept recently incorporated into U.S. military planning was originally devised as an operational concept to offset China's military capabilities in a Sino-American confrontation over Taiwan.

These developments are taking place even as Beijing's relations with Taipei in recent years have improved to the best they have been since 1949. Trade and commerce are expanding; Taiwan citizens operate businesses and live on the mainland; communications and travel are now easier; cross-strait tourism is growing; academic contacts are increasing; and in all ways except

political and military Taipei and Beijing are more accommodating to each other than at any time since the KMT's defeat in the civil war. Certainly China continues to assert its right to employ military coercion against Taiwan should Beijing perceive such action necessary and China's defense modernization programs continue to enhance the PLA's capabilities to do so even in the event of U.S. military intervention. Nonetheless, the chances of a cross-strait military confrontation are now among the lowest they have been since 1949.

Across the Asia region, China's continental borders are basically quiet with territorial issues either resolved or subject to mutual management, as is the case of Beijing's territorial disputes with New Delhi.<sup>13</sup> There can be no doubt that India views China as a very dangerous potential adversary, but New Delhi and Beijing have mutually accepted that diplomacy rather than military coercion is the most effective way of responding to their longstanding territorial claims. This conflict management approach is sustained even as India upgrades the capabilities of its conventional general purpose forces and strategic nuclear deterrent, and establishes a working relationship with the United States. Beijing must view these developments with interest if not concern, particularly given the attention India now receives from the United States. Nevertheless, Beijing evidently and cautiously accepts that diplomacy is the most effective approach to manage what otherwise could become a disruptive security relationship.

The most problematic security and sovereignty issues for Beijing other than Taiwan are the far-from-resolved maritime territorial and resource disputes China has with its neighbors. While insisting that its sovereignty claims cannot be negotiated away, Beijing's strategy over the past couple of years has been to lessen military coercion even as its civilian agencies have become aggressive in their monitoring and enforcement of China's maritime claims. PLAN exercises in the South and East China Seas and in the Yellow Sea and Western Pacific are designed at least in part as a deterrent strategy complementing the enforcement roles of civilian agency ships and aircraft, but they are also intended to minimize active military participation in conflicting maritime claims.

The question emerging from this set of circumstances is whether they increase or decrease the probability of a military confrontation between China and the United States. Given the relationship between Taipei and Beijing that has developed over the past 4 years, and the potential economic, political, and security costs to China of an attack on Taiwan, the probability of a Sino-American military confrontation over Taiwan appears slim at best. Taipei clearly has no intent of declaring Taiwan's *de jure* independence and has every intent of sustaining the status quo. The employment of military coercion by Beijing under these circumstances, particularly an attempt to suppress Taipei's defenses with a massive missile and

air attack before the United States could bring sufficient forces to bear, would confirm the views of those who see China's long-term strategic objective as replacing the United States as the Western Pacific's leading military power. Such a perception would significantly undermine Beijing's longstanding effort to be perceived as a constructive, responsible member of the international community. This in turn would certainly have undesirable consequences for China's global economic and commercial links. The potential costs of being perceived as an active threat to regional security and stability when compared with working within the current Beijing-Taipei relationship reduce to a minimum the probability of a Sino-American military clash over Taiwan.

A Sino-American military confrontation emerging from China's territorial and resource claims in the South and East China Seas appears equally improbable. Although sovereignty is at stake and the resources involved in the competing claims are important, they do not reach the same level of significance for China as Taiwan. It is improbable that Beijing would reverse a strategy that has minimized the employment of military coercion for 24 years unless its claims are challenged with military force by another claimant. That seems extremely unlikely. Nor is an effort by Beijing to control the Malacca Strait in order to protect China's ship-borne commerce at all probable. All of Southeast, East, and Northeast Asia are dependent on secure sea lines of communication (SLOCs) through the South China Sea. Apart from piracy problems, such security exists. What incentive would China have to raise regional apprehension and what would be an immediate U.S. response to a freedom of navigation challenge to a critical international SLOC?

A military confrontation over U.S. military exercises and surveillance in China's EEZ and aerial reconnaissance missions in international air space off China's coast also seems improbable. Beijing's objections to these activities have been strongly and repeatedly stated. Thus far, however, harassment of USNS ships conducting ocean surveillance has been conducted by Chinese fishing trawlers and civilian agency patrol vessels and maritime surveillance aircraft. Chinese fighters have shadowed U.S. reconnaissance aircraft, which led to the accidental collision between a USN EP-3 and PLAN F-8 and the death of the Chinese pilot. This collision, however, was attributable to an aggressive PLAN pilot rather than a deliberate ramming. Similarly, the collision of a Chinese submarine with the towed array of a U.S. Navy destroyer was certainly inadvertent. No submarine commander would risk the danger to his boat and crew by conducting a deliberate submerged collision.<sup>14</sup> For the past decade Beijing has not backed up its objections to what are essentially U.S. military intelligence missions with a systematic program of military harassment. Doing so would raise Sino-American tensions to a level that would not serve either



China or the United States well. What is most noticeable is the absence since 2009 of any confrontations between USNS ships operating in China's EEZ and either PLA navy or civilian law enforcement ships and aircraft.

Whether it is possible to come to an arrangement whereby both U.S. and Chinese interests can be accommodated is uncertain. What is clear is that China has not risked a military confrontation with the United States over the issues of aerial reconnaissance, ocean surveillance, and naval exercises. China's strategy, if there is a systematic strategy behind what have thus far been tactical responses to specific U.S. actions, takes the following pattern:

- Sustain the legal campaign challenging the U.S. position that international law and UNCLOS allow military-related freedom of navigation (FON) in a state's EEZ.
- Sustain a diplomatic component where Beijing raises U.S. military-related activities in its EEZ as a constant source of friction in Sino-American relations, particularly the relationship between the two defense establishments.
- Maintain the threat of a tactical campaign tracking and harassing U.S. military activities in China's EEZ and the international airspace off China's coast.

Assuming such a strategy is in place, the chances of a military confrontation stemming from a Chinese action are minimal. Other than the 2001 and 2002 incidents with the USNS *Bowditch*, harassment of USNS ocean surveillance ships has been undertaken by Chinese fishing trawlers and civil agency patrol vessels, not by PLAN ships. Certainly accidents such as the 2001 USN EP-3 collision with a PLAN F-8 and the June 2009 submerged Chinese submarine collision with the towed sonar array of a U.S. destroyer can occur, but accidents do not necessarily lend themselves to shooting wars, particularly when both sides are aware that accidents can occur. Nonetheless, such incidents do contain the possibility of escalating into political crises neither government desires, and the 1998 MMCA has not proven to be effective in this realm. It would be prudent therefore to seek an arrangement with China similar to the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA) that the United States arranged with the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> A major purpose of such an arrangement would be to prevent collisions and other incidents from escalating into unwanted political crises.

Whereas the circumstances surrounding Beijing's security environment and the policies China has pursued argue against the possibility of a military confrontation, there is an underlying Sino-American mutual strategic distrust that is potentially dangerous. That danger is

the transformation of what is now a strategic rivalry to a relationship of mutual hostility. The United States has been the principal figure in the Asia-Pacific security environment since the close of World War II with an established structure of regional alliances and security agreements throughout the region. Despite Beijing's declarations to the contrary, Washington is apprehensive that China's strategic intent is to replace the United States as the leading power in the Asia-Pacific region. Beijing fears Washington's intent is to prevent China from assuming the role of the region's principal power as its military capabilities increase. These apprehensions exist even as Beijing and Washington recognize the need for cooperation if Asia is to remain stable—a need recognized across the region. What both Washington and Beijing have yet to achieve is a mutual understanding and acceptance of what military capabilities each needs to protect its legitimate regional defense requirements. Thus whereas the current and near-term circumstances forming their respective security environments suggest only a minimal chance for China and the United States to become involved in a military confrontation, the future remains at best uncertain.

### **The Surprise Attack Option**

Although this assessment has discussed the global and regional political and economic dynamics that lessen the probability of Beijing moving toward a more aggressive use of military force as its capabilities increase, one further query must be addressed: will China's expanding military capabilities lead Beijing to move from a political-military signaling strategy designed to deter an adversary from a course of action prior to the use of force to a strategy seeking to exploit the military advantages of surprise attack without such prior warning? Before briefly exploring this question it is necessary to provide a working definition of surprise attack. In this assessment, *surprise attack* is defined as an attack the adversary does not anticipate or, if anticipated, that occurs at an unanticipated place or time. Operational surprise is a longstanding core component of the PLA's "active defense" doctrine extending back to the 1930s. The military objective of a surprise attack is to seize the initiative in the opening phase of a military operation. To cite but two examples, Beijing's October 1950 entrance into the Korean War following its deterrence failure was not anticipated by the United States. Chinese forces implemented a planned operational surprise by crossing the Yalu River at night to cover their movement. In 1979, Beijing's signaling had made clear to Vietnam that an attack was imminent but not where and when it would take place. The PLA's February multiple axis attack across the Sino-Vietnam border was designed and implemented as an operational surprise.

Surprise attack is not only a central component of PLA military doctrine, but the mobilization of military forces frequently used as an element of Beijing's signaling strategy also serves this military purpose. Should Beijing conclude that its deterrence signaling is failing and military coercion will be necessary, the forces mobilized as a component of the deterrence signaling can provide the PLA the capability to conduct a surprise attack. The forces that crossed the Yalu River in October 1950 and those conducting the multiple axis assaults into Vietnam in 1979 were overtly mobilized prior to their employment in a surprise attack. The question emerging from this longstanding practice is what conditions would cause Beijing to conclude that the military advantages provided by surprise attack exceed those sought by deterrence signaling?

This is an inherently difficult query to assess because for the 63 years since the People's Republic of China was established Beijing has employed a deterrence signaling strategy whenever it perceived a major military threat to China's security or sovereignty. Similarly, in Beijing's maritime territorial disputes with its neighbors where China's security does not confront a major threat but rather a dispute over sovereignty, Beijing has chosen to police its sovereignty claims with ships from civilian law enforcement agencies. Certainly the shadow of China's navy is omnipresent, but the PLAN is not responsible for policing or enforcing China's claims. Even the future of Taiwan, the PRC's most sacrosanct sovereignty issue, is dealt with through a process of deterrence signaling that integrates political, diplomatic, and military actions. Beijing has consistently sought to convince Taipei and Washington that military coercion will be employed should Taiwan move toward *de jure* independence, but this threat provides the underpinning for the far more prominent political, diplomatic, and economic strategy designed to bind Taiwan closer to the mainland.

The single condition where Beijing could conceivably conclude that the military advantages of a surprise attack exceed those sought by deterrence signaling appears to be where military success can be swiftly achieved and the adversary politically and militarily neutralized. The only potential example of this choice is China's seizure of the Crescent Group in the Paracel Islands from the Republic of Vietnam in January 1974. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in March 1973, joined with Washington's commitment to the 1972 Sino-American rapprochement, left Saigon with no viable ally as it fought Hanoi's invading forces. Beijing could properly conclude from these conditions that South Vietnam was on its way to isolation as the January clashes took place. Even in this example, however, it must be recalled that Beijing threatened military coercion in early January if Saigon did not remove its forces from the Spratly Islands it had occupied following the RVN's September 1973 sovereignty claim.

Whereas operational and tactical surprise will remain a core component of PLA doctrine, it is unlikely Beijing will conclude as the PLA's military capabilities increase that, in responding to threats to high-value security or sovereignty interests, the advantages of surprise attack exceed those sought by deterrence signaling that includes the mobilization of military forces. It is possible, for example, to develop a scenario where Beijing chooses to launch a massive surprise missile and air attack on Taiwan to crush the island's defenses before the United States can intervene with forces sufficient to offset China's military advantages. Such a scenario, however, has to ignore past Chinese responses to anything Beijing perceives as a move toward independence or a change in the U.S. policy of not supporting Taiwan independence. In each case, China has quickly if not immediately threatened military coercion. In each case, the United States has made clear to China that its policy has not changed and Taipei has ultimately backed down from the statements or actions that led to Beijing's forceful response. Moreover, neither China nor the United States seeks a military confrontation over Taiwan. Both seek to avoid such a confrontation because the consequences, although not known, are potentially so severe for the security interests of both.

The threat of surprise attack seems limited to those situations where Beijing can realistically expect a quick military success followed by the neutralization of the adversary. Any such attack on U.S. forces, even if it achieves initial military success, is unlikely to be followed by the political and military neutralization of the United States. The more probable result, as Beijing no doubt appreciates, is the creation of a state of war between China and the United States. That probable consequence is enough to convince Beijing that in an emerging potential military confrontation with the United States, the deterrence signaling it has practiced for decades has far better promise of an acceptable outcome than surprise attack.

## **China's Crisis Decisionmaking Process and Crisis Management**

Although defining a political-military "crisis" can become extremely complicated, this analysis will employ a simple definition. A *crisis* is defined as an unanticipated event perceived as threatening high-level interests of at least one set of decisionmakers while providing only a limited time for response.<sup>16</sup>

### **Dynamics Influencing Crisis Behavior**

- elite perceptions and beliefs
  
- perceptions of the international environment