

Letter

Letter: Deterrence tactics drive tensions in Taiwan Strait

From Michael Swaine, East Asia Senior Research Fellow, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Olney, Maryland, US



The USS Chung-Hoon observes a Chinese navy ship conduct what the US Navy called an 'unsafe' Chinese maneuver in the Taiwan Strait on June 3 2023 © AP

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Dealing effectively with the Chinese military's escalation in the use of "grey zone" tactics requires a clear understanding of the dynamics driving it and the essential elements involved in countering it. Unfortunately, Kathrin Hille's and Demetri Sevastopulo's analysis falls short on both counts ([The Big Read](#), July 24).

The US, China and, to some extent, Taiwan are locked in an interactive, escalating dynamic marked by a myopic focus on military deterrence over credible levels of reassurance. China's escalating military threats against Taiwan are — to a great extent — a reaction to what Beijing regards as various US and Taiwanese efforts to establish the permanent separation of the island from China. They are deterrence actions, which prompt further destabilising military and diplomatic deterrence behaviour by Washington and Taipei, in an endless escalatory spiral. This dynamic is the key to understanding increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, not a possible factor to be mentioned in passing.

The authors make only a passing reference to such possible motives. The bulk of their article is spent defining the features of China's growing grey zone threats and the calls for greater levels of military deterrence by (primarily Taiwan) observers. They should have framed China's behaviour in this fundamentally interactive context from the start, not merely allude to it as a possibility.

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The authors fail to grasp that effective deterrence requires not only well-defined military capabilities and a convincing willingness to use them, but also credible signals of an intention to avoid using those capabilities to threaten the most vital interests of your adversary, in this case Taiwan's future unification with China. The authors do mention that some analysts cite the need for (undefined) assurances as a critical part of any strategy to counter China. But this is done at the very end of the piece, again only in passing.

No level of military deterrence, by either side, will reverse the current downward spiral over Taiwan absent credible assurances that Washington remains committed to its "one China" policy, and Beijing remains committed to the search for a peaceful resolution of the issue.

The gradual erosion of this original understanding underlies the kinds of dangerous behaviour we now see in the Taiwan Strait. Reporters on the Taiwan situation need to recognise this reality more clearly and put it at the centre of their writing.

Michael Swaine

East Asia Senior Research Fellow,

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Olney, Maryland, US

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