The Nuclear Dimension of a Taiwan Crisis: Misperception, Miscalculation, and Instability

On January 26, 2005, the Carnegie China Program held a luncheon seminar during which Dr. Brad Roberts of the Institute for Defense Analyses explored the different approaches of China and the United States to the nuclear dimensions of a possible Taiwan crisis and their implications for crisis stability. Dr. Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment provided further commentary, and Dr. Michael Swaine moderated the discussion. The following is a summary of their presentation remarks. (Note: Dr. Roberts’ views are strictly his own and should not be attributed to his employer or any of its sponsors).

Dr. Roberts began his presentation by noting that a discussion over the possible use of nuclear weapons over a Taiwan crisis remains a tentative endeavor. Indeed, the current focus of policy research and analysis is largely on the potential for such a crisis to happen, not on what could follow. Moreover, few specialists of China in the United States have examined potential Chinese nuclear behavior in crisis situations, and few U.S. analysts of nuclear behavior have expertise on China, which is often treated as an afterthought. As a result, little attention has been devoted to the question of whether nuclear weapons would be used in a Taiwan crisis and, if so, how. There remains a dearth of debate both between and within China and the United States on this subject.

An initial, but crucial difference in Sino-American perceptions emerges readily, however, in conversations with Chinese analysts. Indeed, while there is the widespread notion in the United States that the Chinese nuclear arsenal is minimal in comparison to that of the U.S. and thus potentially negligible, Chinese military and strategic thinkers largely believe that Beijing has a sufficient arsenal for its purposes. The key question, then, is – what is the Chinese picture of a nuclear confrontation? How do they envision a confrontation for which their force posture is adequate?

In the assessment of Dr. Roberts, there are at least five elements in this picture. While there is no official Chinese description of a possible nuclear confrontation, these elements seem to inform the thinking of Chinese experts both inside and outside their government. The first is the assumption that the burden of crisis escalation would fall on the U.S. The Chinese believe that they would largely hold the initiative in a crisis and would be able to choose the time and manner of engagement. In other words, it would be left to the United States to react to a losing situation by choosing whether or not to escalate. The second element is a belief that because of the asymmetry of interests, it is unlikely that the United States would be willing to use nuclear weapons in a Taiwan crisis. Whereas Taiwan is vital to Beijing’s sense of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as its regime survival, the U.S. interest in
Taiwan is seen as less than vital. Thus, they believe that the United States would be unwilling to “trade Los Angeles for Taipei.”

Third, the Chinese believe that the threshold for U.S. nuclear retaliation is high. As a consequence, they debate the possibility that there might be ways that China could use nuclear weapons without facing U.S. retaliation. Fourth, Chinese analysts tend to believe that any unwanted escalation would be manageable on their part. This has something to do with Chinese strategic culture and their belief in China’s skill in creating, exploiting, and if necessary prolonging crisis. Moreover, some Chinese analysts cite the experience of 1968 when China confronted the Soviet Union as proof of China’s nuclear crisis management ability. In particular, Beijing could seek to counter U.S. nuclear deterrence by demonstrating its resolve through its own nuclear attacks. The essence of such a tactic would be to exert escalation control by instilling escalation uncertainty. Fifth, and finally, Chinese analysts seem to believe that the final outcome of a worst case scenario in a nuclear Taiwan crisis would be the reversion to the status quo ante. Beijing, thus, would be no worse off than what it started with.

Altogether, these notions seem to inform Chinese confidence in the viability of their nuclear deterrent and their ability to escape or even win a nuclear confrontation with the United States, despite the huge disparity in force size and capability. How does, however, the problem look from the U.S. side? The difference in Chinese and American views is striking. Indeed, a diametrically opposite set of assumptions seems to underpin U.S. thinking. Dr. Roberts noted that these assumptions are to be found in the thinking and commentary of analysts and are harder to trace in official statements, which seem not to have come directly to this topic.

First, American analysts tend to believe that because of America’s military superiority, the burden of escalation falls not on the U.S., but on China. Second, there is a widely held conviction that the Chinese would never use nuclear weapons in a Taiwan crisis, for doing so would cause China to incur significant costs and severe punishment from the United States. Third, there is deep skepticism that Beijing would ever strike preemptively. Fourth, American analysts tend to believe that unwanted escalation would prove controllable—largely through U.S. escalation dominance. Strategic culture again plays a role, as American analysts tend to greatly credit the U.S.’s ability to manage and swiftly terminate crises on terms favorable to the U.S. Fifth, and finally, most American experts seem to hold completely different assumptions from their Chinese counterparts about the long-term consequences of nuclear confrontation over Taiwan. Few believe that the U.S. would allow a return to the status quo ante, as efforts would be undertaken to prevent the re-occurrence of nuclear confrontation.

The extent to which these conflicting lines of thinking are actually reflected in war plans, or would inform the decisions of key leaders in times of crisis, cannot of course be known. But they point to the possibility of significant misperception and miscalculation in times of crisis over Taiwan. Many of these ideas seem to be the result of wishful thinking and “Groupthink.” They appear largely untested in the way that most of the key strategic concepts of the Cold War were tested through continuous investigation and debate. Cumulatively, they point to a significant potential for surprise and miscalculation by one or both sides in any future military confrontation over Taiwan.

On the Chinese side, Beijing may underestimate the manageability of a nuclear Taiwan crisis and overestimate its ability to exert escalation control. Indeed, even if there exists an
asymmetry of interests vis-à-vis Taiwan, an attack on Taiwan may alter that asymmetry. With U.S. credibility as a security guarantor on the line and with potentially strong domestic pressure for the U.S. to retaliate, the willingness of U.S. leadership to counter a Chinese nuclear attack could be higher than what Beijing might expect.

But the surprises and miscalculations might not all be on China’s side. The United States may be surprised by China’s willingness to demonstrate its resolve and pay a high price by prolonging and exploiting the crisis situation. The United States might also be caught off-guard by China’s likely perception of an American attack on its command-control capacity as an assault on the regime itself. Finally, the U.S. may also miscalculate by discounting Taiwan as an independent actor, which could undertake its own acts of escalation or even choose to quit the conflict even as the U.S. seeks to continue.

Dr. Roberts concluded his remarks by noting that the actual risks of a war across the Taiwan Strait, the risks of a nuclear escalation in such a war, and the risks of tit-for-tat nuclear exchange in such a war may all, as conventional wisdom holds, be low. But Taiwan remains one of the very few flashpoints between two important powers that may have a potential nuclear dimension. Ultimately, this fact, along with the very real possibilities of miscalculations and unexpected behavior, underscores the importance of further systematic research and analysis, as well as substantive dialogue between China and the United States, on this important subject. 

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