**Taiwan Issue and the US Deterrence Policy Against China**

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In the post-Cold War era, Sino-US relations have developed into the most important and complex bilateral relationship in the world. [1](http://ipd.cssn.cn/ssjb/202308/t20230823_5680738.shtml#1)  The state of deep economic dependence, high strategic competition, and fierce security confrontation constitutes the main content of Sino-US relations. [2](http://ipd.cssn.cn/ssjb/202308/t20230823_5680738.shtml#2)

But the above content is not static, instead it is changing rapidly. The United States is trying to weaken its economic interdependence with China. USA imports from China continue to decline, and it is tightening its investment from China and its investment in China. The strategic competition aspect of Sino-US relations was not prominent, but the Trump administration launched a trade war and put Sino-US relations on a competitive track.

The current tone of Sino-US competition completely overwhelms cooperation. China hopes to make economic interdependence the strategic basis of bilateral relations, but the United States refuses.

The United States emphasizes that competition is the main axis of the relationship and economic interdependence must be subject to the national security needs of the United States. The security confrontation aspect of Sino-US relations has existed for a long time. After the end of the Cold War, relations between major powers have been fully eased, and peaceful development and globalization have become the mainstream.

The United States continues to maintain its alliance system in the Asia-Pasific region. The two sides have security differences over issues such as North Korea's nuclear missiles, Taiwan and the South China Sea, but it is generally just a "cold confrontation".

The conflict in security has become a negative background for the development of relations between the two countries, but it has not caused a major obstacle to the development of relations. However, as China and the United States move toward strategic competition, security conflicts have also turned from cold to hot.

The United States is worried that China's rise will change the regional military balance, and is actively renovating the regional alliance system, expanding and strengthening the network of partners, and enhancing the substantive relationship between the United States and Taiwan to deter China.

China is actively promoting national defense modernization and striving to have more options and initiative in resolving the Taiwan issue. Therefore, although China and the United States are not yet militarily equal and there is a huge gap in nuclear power, there is still an increasingly fierce security confrontation.

The security confrontation between China and the United States is mainly the United States using regional alliances to deter China. China has developed "regional denial" capabilities against possible US interference, forming a kind of counter-deterrence against the United States (and the Taiwan authorities).

Since the Ukrainian crisis, the mutual deterrence between China and the United States over the Taiwan issue has been escalating, and there is even a possibility of losing control. At present, Sino-US relations are in a downward spiral. Although there are some signs of warming recently, they are far from returning to a stable track. Normal communication and dialogue channels between China and the United States are still being restored and built.

In addition to accusing each other in the media, deterrence has become a way of dialogue. Senior US military officials often shout across the air to release deterrence information, and Chinese military spokespersons have repeatedly reiterated their determination to fight for Taiwan. In this case, it is undoubtedly necessary to seriously summarize the experience of the Cold War and clarify the meaning of deterrence in order to avoid accidental firing and effectively implement crisis management.

**The US deterrence against China is divided into several levels.**

The top level is a comprehensive and multi-faceted deterrence policy with nuclear and conventional military advantages as the core policy, the alliance system as the support, and economic diplomacy as the main means of application.

Austin, the Secretary of Defense of the Biden administration, proposed the "integrated deterrence" ("hybrid warfare" ) strategy, which is a new method to implement this type of deterrence. It was tested in the Ukrainian crisis and is generally referred to as "hybrid warfare" and "total war".

As the name suggests, it is not limited to the use of military force, but a comprehensive use of various resources and means such as economy, finance, energy, and political diplomacy to win over allies and partners to participate and act in coordination.

It forms the constant background of the entire deterrence strategy. Regardless of whether Sino-US relations improve or not, the United States will continue to promote its "integrated deterrence" strategy, which is the cornerstone of maintaining the American world order.

**The second level is specific deterrence strategies, which are designed specifically for specific potential conflicts, such as the Taiwan issue.**

The United States has long maintained "strategic ambiguity" on the Taiwan issue. According to people in the U.S. strategic community, it is a dual deterrence, hoping to both deter mainland China from using force against Taiwan (through comprehensive deterrence) and prevent China from passively engaging in conflicts provoked by Taiwan (through unclear commitments on whether to directly send troops to defend Taiwan) and being dragged into the water by the Taiwan authorities. As the military power comparison between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait tilts toward the mainland, the United States is increasingly worried that "strategic ambiguity" will not be able to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, and "integrated deterrence" will not be enough to deter China's determination to take back Taiwan by force.

The United States is considering whether to move from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity, which means that the United States will clearly publicize the conditions for sending troops to defend Taiwan. Considering that mainland China is rapidly accumulating local military advantages in the Taiwan Strait, it is probably not enough for the United States to simply promise to send troops. Its deterrence must be such that China feels that it not only has no chance of winning, but also that the cost exceeds its ability to bear. For this reason, the United States is discussing two types of policies, namely punitive deterrence or denial deterrence, and which one is more effective. Punitive deterrence is also called retaliatory deterrence, which means that if the Chinese mainland takes Taiwan by force, it will be retaliated and devastated.

The top US military officials have been making frequent statements recently. For example, in late May 2023, Aquilino, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, claimed in his speech: "There is no so-called quick victory. If we decide to engage in this war (Taiwan Strait conflict), then the US military will carry out devastating attacks on Chinese property and civilians."

Another example, at the end of June 2023, Admiral Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US Army, claimed that on the Taiwan issue, the United States hopes to use deterrence to "ensure that every day when the Chinese wake up, they say that today is not the day to attack Taiwan, and that decision will never come."

This kind of deterrence is actually an "ultimate" deterrence, which is powerful but because the stakes are too high, the possibility of actual implementation is relatively small, thereby reducing its credibility. If China has formed sufficient nuclear survivability and counterattack capabilities and can "mutually ensure destruction" with the United States, the credibility of punitive deterrence will approach zero. For this reason, the US strategic community is discussing how to shift from punitive deterrence to deterrence denial, meaning to make mainland China realize that it cannot win a local war to take Taiwan by force, or that the price it pays is far beyond its ability to bear. Since military action cannot achieve its goals, it will choose to give up the use of force. The purpose of this kind of deterrence is limited to defeating the opponent's military forces and denying them from achieving their goals and tasks. Compared with punitive deterrence, its goals are set lower, the intensity of deterrence is reduced, and it appears to be more "mild", but more feasible and more credible.

However, as the Quincy Institute in the United States puts it, due to the rapid improvement of the PLA's military modernization level, the United States is increasingly lacking the confidence to win a local war near China's coast, and the effectiveness of deterrence is also decreasing. Therefore, the US deterrence strategy has developed to the third level, that is, considering that it is impossible to deter the PLA from taking Taiwan by force, the United States and its allies can turn to encouraging Taiwan to strengthen its self-defense capabilities or destroy important resources to increase the cost of taking Taiwan and reduce its benefits, so as to deter the mainland from using force.

Around this purpose, the United States has gradually improved the targeting and practicality of arms sales to Taiwan, and designed the "Poison Frog Strategy" [4](http://ipd.cssn.cn/ssjb/202308/t20230823_5680738.shtml#4) and "Porcupine Strategy" for Taiwan, hoping that Taiwan will become the second Ukraine; around destroying Taiwan's value, the United States designed the "broken nest strategy" (also known as the "scorched earth strategy") and the "Silicon Shield Strategy" [5](http://ipd.cssn.cn/ssjb/202308/t20230823_5680738.shtml#5) , hoping that when Taiwan is faced with a military attack from the mainland and cannot hold on, it can self-destruct core strategic assets such as TSMC to prevent them from falling into the hands of the mainland, thereby adding bargaining chips to the game between the mainland and the United States.

In addition, according to a principle of deterrence strategy of the USA, "the effectiveness of threats depends on what other alternatives are available to potential enemies."

The U.S. government tries to provide China with some kind of guarantee to enhance the effectiveness of the above deterrence.

USA constantly promises China that the U.S. government adheres to the "One China" policy. Although the U.S. "One China Policy" is significantly different from the "One China Principle" required by China and has been hollowed out by the United States, it still retains the "One China" shell. The United States believes that this strategy is enough to make China accept deterrence and thus avoid real military conflict.

China certainly cannot rely on the United States' guarantee to safeguard its "core interests".

In China's view, the United States' strategic goal is not to maintain the "status quo in the Taiwan Strait", but to use Taiwan to contain China's rejuvenation. The above-mentioned deterrence by the United States can be regarded as different manifestations of the strategy of "using Taiwan to contain China". China itself is also implementing counter-deterrence.

**China's counter-deterrence policy**

China's counter-deterrence includes at least two directions. One is to take military deterrence against "Taiwan independence", and at the same time use diplomatic, legal, economic and political means to form a "comprehensive" deterrence against Taiwan.

The second is to actively promote national defense modernization in response to possible military interference from the United States and other external forces, and strive to build military capabilities to prevent the US military from intervening and controlling local battlefields. The United States calls it "anti-access and regional denial capabilities". This kind of deterrence in China is closer to "denial deterrence" rather than "punitive deterrence". China's nuclear policy is to promise not to use nuclear weapons first, which means that China's nuclear deterrence against the United States is limited, which means that China's deterrence is mainly based on conventional military power, and China's conventional military power cannot yet implement punitive retaliation against the US mainland.

The distinction between punitive deterrence and deterrence denial is for the convenience of discussion. It means different types and directions of resource investment. Punitive deterrence focuses on investing long-range heavy firepower in the United States and overseas forward bases, while deterrence denial focuses on strengthening military presence at the frontier and deploying targeted weapons to resist large-scale landings in Taiwan. In reality, although this distinction has certain significance, the factors and procedures that affect the investment and deployment of military resources are very complex. The formulation, deployment and development of strategies are subject to many constraints. All types of strategies will be reflected in practice or change at any time.

In terms of the strength of China and the United States, especially the military strength, the credibility of the US deterrence is higher than that of China. However, the interactive relationship in deterrence is very complex, and seemingly favorable conditions may in turn become constraints. For example, there is a view in the US strategic community that China lacks the means to strike back at the US mainland. This may seem like a weakness, but it may put the United States in a dilemma of lacking escalation options.

If the mainland launches an attack on Taiwan and the United States sends troops to intervene in the PLA's cross-sea landing operations, as an escalation action, the mainland can choose to attack the US bases in Guam or even Hawaii. This is a limited escalation action that can control the war locally while causing sufficient losses to the US military. According to rational reciprocity, mainland China can believe that this should not lead to full-scale retaliation from the United States because it targets military targets and does not hit the US mainland. Due to the large number of US overseas military bases around China, China has many options to appropriately upgrade its deterrence against the United States without triggering a full-scale nuclear war. In contrast, the U.S. escalation strategy lacks these transitional options. Once faced with China's limited escalation actions, if the United States wants to escalate its response, it can only attack Chinese domestic targets, which carries great risks. It may force China into a desperate situation, forcing China to abandon its commitment not to use nuclear weapons first and launch a full-scale retaliation against the United States, thus entering a full-scale nuclear war.

Whether Sino-US relations will get out of control depends on Taiwan.

The deterrence strategy is also mainly based on possible events in the Taiwan Strait. However, we must also be aware that since the Taiwan issue arose, there have been various factors that have maintained stability in the Taiwan Strait, and the logic of their interaction is very complex. Military deterrence is only one of them. The political power structure on the island, international consensus and order, the balance of interests of all parties, and the strategic balance of power among major powers have played a more important role. For a long time, the mainland has not simply relied on its own military strength to deter Taiwan independence, but has relied more on diplomatic, legal and economic means, as well as external resources such as the United Nations order and international law after World War II, using its comprehensive national strength to attract each other with benefits and warn each other with harm. Force is only the last resort that will never be abandoned.

Similarly, the United States does not rely solely on military deterrence to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. The US deterrence strategy is actually a careful balance between contradictory choices. The United States encourages Taiwan to defend itself against the mainland's unified attack, but does not indulge Taiwan in attacking the mainland and causing real military conflict; the quality and quantity of weapons sold by the United States to Taiwan have been carefully evaluated to maintain the balance of military power between the two sides of the strait, which is enough to deter the mainland from easily using force, but not enough to encourage Taiwan to take the initiative to attack the mainland, which is especially true in the early days when the military power of the two sides of the strait is not favorable to the mainland; the United States supports Taiwan's participation in international affairs but does not support its participation as an independent country. In the final analysis, mainland China is far more important to the United States than Taiwan. Taiwan's strategic value must be included in the strategic chess game of the US Indo-Pacific strategy and "outcompete China". If Taiwan plays a big enough role in the chess game, the United States can support it more. If Taiwan cannot play a role, it will become a discarded piece.

Therefore, although the Taiwan issue has always been a major source of tension and mutual deterrence between China and the United States, the "deadlock" entangled in it is not completely unsolvable, and armed conflict is not inevitable. All parties still have great opportunities to find a way to turn the situation around and achieve a balance of interests under mutual deterrence.

**Deep Notes:**

1  According to the U.S. State Department website on July 29, 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken once again talked about Sino-U.S. relations in an exclusive interview with Australian media. His original words were: "we have an obligation that we feel strongly to responsibly manage the relationship with China. For us as for Australia and many other countries, it's one of the most consequential and complicated relationships that we have, and you can't sum it up on a bumper sticker on a car."[https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-amelia-adams-of-60-minutes-australia/Accessed](https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-amelia-adams-of-60-minutes-australia/) on August 2, 2023.

2 Some scholars describe the main content of Sino-US relations as follows: "The highly complex structure formed by China and the United States over a long period of time.

Deep interdependence, high-end strategic competition and assured mutual destruction are the objective reality of Sino-US relations over the past decades." **See Wang Honggang: Wang's "New Two Hands" and "New Dilemma" in the US Strategy toward China,**

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3 According to the Quincy Institute in the United States, "active denial" policy is a defensive strategy characterized by a phased approach to action. This approach focuses on deploying resilient and primarily defensive U.S. and its allied forces to blunt and disrupt adversary attacks while preparing to focus on counterattacks later. "Active denial" policy relies on a smarter division of labor and optimized resilience between allied and forward-deployed U.S. forces. It also takes a restrained approach to escalating conflicts and seeks to limit the scope of combat, with the ultimate goal of defeating the offense rather than conquering the adversary.

4 On October 26, 2021, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), a U.S. think tank, released a war game report, The Poison Frog Strategy—Preventing a Chinese Fait Accompli Against Taiwanese Islands, by Chris Dougherty, Jennie Matuschak, and Ripley Hunter, which assessed how the United States would respond if China seized an outlying island in the South China Sea.

A war game conducted by the Center for a New American Security found that in this scenario, the United States and Taiwan have few credible options to push China to withdraw its troops without escalating the crisis. In view of this, the report recommends that the United States and Taiwan should use a "poison frog strategy" to prevent China's attack on the islands, that is, the United States and regional allies such as Japan work together to make the islands an unwelcome target of attack by China.

5 In 2021, Taiwan's semiconductor output value exceeded US$120 billion for the first time, accounting for 19.8% of the world's total, ranking second, of which Taiwan’s wafer foundry accounted for 60% of the world's total.

In 2001, Australian journalist Addison published the book "Silicon Shield", saying that "Silicon Shield" is Taiwan's most powerful defense against attacks from the mainland.

The Taiwan company TSMC accounts for more than 50% of the global wafer foundry field, and is even more unique in advanced processes, and is known as Taiwan's "guardian mountain". See Gould: Will Taiwan's "guardian mountain" be razed? Lianhe Zaobao, November 1, 2022. https://www.zaobao.com/forum/views/story20221101-1328458.