

STRATEGIC TRENDS RESEARCH INITIATIVE

US-JAPAN-TAIWAN DIALOGUE: DETERRENCE SIGNALING, DOMESTIC POLITICS, DEFENSE COOPERATION, AND WAR TERMINATION

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DISCLAIMER: The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, the US Department of Defense, or the United States Government.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The risk of a war over Taiwan is higher today than at any time in the past half-century. Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping has declared that Taiwan's reunification with the mainland is an "inevitable requirement" for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and "should not be passed down generation after generation." Yet peaceful means of reunification have all but disappeared because most Taiwanese are more determined than ever to maintain their de facto independence. This stance threatens China's territorial integrity, as defined by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and Xi's legitimacy as top leader.

In response, China is brandishing its military option. Over the past three years, it has conducted the largest and most provocative show of force in the Taiwan Strait in a generation. Chinese military patrols, some involving a dozen warships and more than fifty combat aircraft, menace Taiwan almost daily and often simulate attacks on Taiwanese, Japanese, or US targets. Meanwhile, China has been amassing ships, aircraft, and missiles as part of the largest military buildup by any country in decades. Its military budget increased tenfold from 1990 to 2020. From 2020 to 2023, it doubled the size of its nuclear arsenal. China now militarily outspends every other country in Asia combined. It wields the world's largest ballistic missile inventory and navy by number of ships. Moreover, Beijing has become increasingly belligerent in its relations with neighbors from Japan to India.

The United States has tried to deter Chinese aggression by declaring its support for Taiwan. But it is no longer clear that the US military could immediately respond to a Chinese assault on the island. Historically, the United States has relied on its manufacturing prowess to outproduce adversaries after a war starts. But now that China is the world's leading manufacturing nation by output, it is possible that both sides could sustain a protracted conventional war—and might be tempted to break the stalemate by using nuclear weapons against military targets.

These dangerous trends make deterrence and defense cooperation among the United States, Japan, and Taiwan extremely important. Toward that end, the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) convened a US-Japan-Taiwan Track 2 dialogue in November 2023 to discuss deterrence and defense cooperation.



FINDINGS SUMMARY

The dialogue yielded several key points of broad agreement.

1. **Military conflict in the Taiwan Strait is likely to evolve into a protracted war.** Both the United States and China have the resources and motivations to continue fighting and escalate the conflict even after enduring heavy losses, making it a high-stakes clash for regional dominance.
2. **Deterring the use of nuclear weapons requires preventing a conventional war from breaking out in the first place.** Both sides could be tempted to use nuclear weapons to turn the tide of battle or break a grinding war of attrition.
3. **The US, Japan, and Taiwan must redouble efforts to modernize and prepare their respective militaries for potential war in the 2020s.** The current funding levels and military plans do not match the speed and severity of the Chinese threat.
4. **Internationalizing the conflict over Taiwan is an essential component of deterrence.** The United States must develop diplomatic and economic strategies that emphasize economic, political, and human costs of war for countries around the world.
5. **There is not enough domestic support in the United States, Taiwan, or Japan for trilateral defense cooperation.** New and improved public awareness campaigns should communicate the importance of peace in the Taiwan Strait and the need to mobilize resources for deterrence.
6. **Reassurance is essential for deterrence.** Beijing must believe that the United States is maintaining its Taiwan policy, and that peaceful reunification remains possible.

METHODOLOGY

FPRI convened a US-Japan-Taiwan Track 2 dialogue in Washington, D.C., on November 13-14, 2023. Participants included retired military leaders, former government officials, and non-government subject-matter experts from the United States, Japan, and Taiwan. The dialogue was comprised of five 75-minute sessions on the following topics: (1) deterrence signaling; (2) domestic politics; (3) defense cooperation; (4) war termination; and (5) policy recommendations. Every session began with a brief presentation by a participant from each country, then shifted to a moderated open discussion involving all participants. These conversations operated under the Chatham House Rule.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding: A war over Taiwan will likely become protracted because the United States and China have the resources and incentives to fight multiple battles in the world's most strategically vital region. Deterring or winning such a conflict will require substantial forces deployed ahead of time in theater and the capacity to regroup and reload indefinitely.

Recommendation: The US Department of Defense (DOD) should direct the Pacific Command to increase rotational deployments of air, naval, and ground forces in key locations along the first island chain, especially Japan, the Philippines, and other allied territories. This includes deploying additional missile defense systems, strike assets, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms.

Recommendation: The US State Department and deputy assistant secretaries of defense for Asia should work with countries along the first island chain to negotiate increased access and basing rights for US forces. This includes enhancing existing agreements with Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, and exploring new partnerships with nations like Vietnam and Indonesia.

Recommendation: The US Congress should authorize and appropriate more funding for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) to support the deployment of advanced capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region, including anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, cyber and space defense assets, and unmanned systems.

Recommendation: The US DOD and US Congress should implement and fund a long-term plan to expand the US defense industrial base, focusing on critical munitions, strategic materials, and dual-use technologies. This includes increased investment in missile production, hypersonic weapons, and next-generation fighter and bomber aircraft.

Recommendation: The US Department of Commerce and Department of Treasury should utilize economic levers to stimulate private sector investment in defense manufacturing, such as tax incentives and direct investment. Implement policies to safeguard and promote critical supply chains for rare earth elements and semiconductors essential for military hardware.

Recommendation: The US Congress should pass legislation to streamline the acquisition and procurement process for defense systems, ensuring quicker response times from the defense industrial base to meet military needs. This could involve reforming the Defense Production Act to facilitate rapid expansion of production capabilities in times of crisis.

Recommendation: The US DOD, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND), and Japan's Ministry of Defense (MOD) should coordinate comprehensive joint military planning sessions, regular staff talks, and large-scale exercises simulating defense scenarios in the Taiwan Strait. These activities should focus on interoperability, command and control integration, logistics, and supply chain resilience.

Recommendation: US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), Taiwanese forces, and Japanese forces should enhance trilateral maritime patrols and air surveillance operations to ensure a constant presence in the region, deterring aggressive actions through visible readiness.

Recommendation: The US DOD, Taiwan's MND, and Japan's Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA) should establish a trilateral technology-sharing initiative to accelerate the

development and deployment of critical defense technologies, such as missile defense systems, cyber defense capabilities, and advanced surveillance tools.

Recommendation: US, Japanese, and Taiwanese national security councils should prepare and collectively wargame potential peace settlements and diplomatic compromises that all parties, including Beijing, might find politically acceptable.

Finding: Both China and the United States could be tempted to use nuclear weapons against military targets to turn the tide of battle. The best way to avoid nuclear escalation is to prevent a conventional war from breaking out in the first place. Failing that, the United States will need to deter Chinese nuclear use by credibly threatening to retaliate in kind and by establishing crisis communication mechanisms with Beijing.

Recommendation: The US Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), in collaboration with the National Reconnaissance Office and the US Space Force, should upgrade nuclear detection and monitoring infrastructure. DTRA could spearhead the deployment of nuclear detection and surveillance technologies across the Indo-Pacific. This initiative will improve the early detection of nuclear mobilizations.

Recommendation: The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) with technical support from DTRA, should lead the effort in enhancing intelligence-sharing networks, particularly among the Five Eyes and Japan. This will involve creating a more robust framework for sharing critical nuclear threat intelligence on China.

Recommendation: The United States should consistently communicate a willingness to respond to Chinese nuclear strikes with severe consequences, possibly including US nuclear strikes on Chinese military targets. US national security officials at all levels should communicate such messages in meetings with Chinese counterparts and ideally include the US president, secretary of defense, national security advisor, and US ambassador in Beijing. In addition, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia should communicate the same message in the recently reestablished annual military meetings between the two countries. US leaders should highlight that the American public supports the idea of retaliatory nuclear strikes (see research by Scott Sagan at Stanford on this topic) and that the Pentagon is currently modernizing its nuclear arsenal and missile defense systems to prepare for such a contingency.

Recommendation: DTRA should foster dialogue and confidence-building to reduce the risk of nuclear escalation. Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy efforts with China can establish crisis communication links and confidence-building measures, including the establishment of a nuclear risk reduction center modeled on the center that used to coordinate communications between the United States and Russia.

Finding: The pace of US, Taiwanese, and Japanese defense modernization does not match the speed and severity of the Chinese military threat.

Recommendation: US INDOPACOM should undertake a program to disperse and harden military bases across East Asia. This program should prioritize the construction of resilient infrastructure and pre-positioning of critical assets, including missile launchers and drones, to ensure sustained operational capability in the face of potential attacks.

Recommendation: The US DOD should streamline procurement processes for critical defense systems destined for rapid deployment in the Indo-Pacific. This includes prioritizing contracts for mobile missile systems and armed drones, and ensuring these systems are compatible with allied platforms for integration into joint operations.

Recommendation: Taiwan's MND should expedite the acquisition and deployment of mobile missile systems and armed drones by entering into direct government-to-government deals. Priority should be given to systems capable of rapid deployment and high mobility to counteract maritime threats and bolster island defense capabilities.

Recommendation: Taiwan's Chief of the General Staff should enhance asymmetric warfare training programs, focusing on countering superior forces through guerrilla tactics, cyber warfare, and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies. This includes expanding joint exercises with US and Japanese forces to improve interoperability and readiness.

Recommendation: Taiwan's MND, in collaboration with the Ministry of Economic Affairs, should initiate a rapid expansion of hardened shelters and stockpile reserves of fuel, medical supplies, food, and water. This should involve leveraging accelerated construction techniques and securing diversified supply chains for critical resources.

Recommendation: Japan's MOD should focus on enhancing its offensive and defensive capabilities against naval threats, particularly through the development and deployment of anti-ship missiles and supporting US forces in logistical and operational domains. This includes the establishment of joint command structures and the alignment of operational protocols to ensure effective coordination in times of crisis.

Recommendation: The Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) should accelerate their maritime domain awareness and anti-submarine warfare capabilities to secure the northern approaches to Taiwan. This involves investing in advanced surveillance systems, submarine detection technologies, and rapid-response maritime assets.

Finding: Military preparations should be bolstered by a diplomatic and economic strategy that internationalize the Taiwan conflict.

Recommendation: Whenever an American or allied leader meets with the Chinese government, they should remind Beijing that non-peaceful outcomes in the Taiwan Strait would result in sanctions and potential military intervention by their nations. At the same time, US and allied diplomats should reiterate that their nations do not support Taiwanese independence and will continue to make their military support of Taiwan conditional on Taipei refraining from official declarations of independence.

Recommendation: The national security councils of the US, Taiwan, and Japan should establish a trilateral strategic dialogue focused on developing integrated defense plans against Chinese military coercion. The goal would be to create a menu of retaliatory measures to counter Chinese shows of force and other "gray zone" activities in and around the Taiwan Strait. These actions should demonstrate to China that belligerent behavior will tighten a ring of allied military cooperation against it. Such measures should include joint military exercises (including in the South China Sea with Southeast Asian nations), arms transfers from Washington to Taipei, diplomatic meetings, and intelligence-sharing.

Recommendation: The defense ministries of the US, Taiwan, and Japan should initiate a trilateral logistics and supply chain agreement to ensure the uninterrupted flow of military supplies and reinforcements during periods of heightened tension. This agreement would support sustained military operations and deterrence efforts.

Recommendation: The US Coast Guard, in partnership with its Japanese counterparts, should establish multinational maritime patrols to monitor Chinese activities and provide assistance to regional nations subjected to Chinese maritime militia harassment.

Recommendation: Taiwan's MND should rapidly enhance its maritime domain awareness capabilities by deploying additional surveillance assets, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and radar systems, specifically in response to Chinese shows of force. This will ensure timely and detailed intelligence-sharing with US and Japanese forces.

Finding: Political will for robust trilateral defense cooperation is lacking.

Recommendation: The US Department of State, in coordination with DOD, should initiate a public communication effort aimed at explaining the strategic importance of Taiwan to US national security and economic interests. This includes detailing how a Chinese takeover of Taiwan would disrupt vital shipping lanes, compromise global semiconductor supplies, and erode the rules-based international order.

Recommendation: The White House, through the Press Secretary and the National Security Council's spokesperson, should articulate the rationale behind US commitments to Taiwan's defense. This should include explaining how deterrence efforts are both feasible and cost-effective, emphasizing the strategic investments being made to prevent conflict rather than engage in one.

Recommendation: The Office of the President of Taiwan, supported by the MND and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should launch a comprehensive public information campaign highlighting Taiwan's readiness and resolve to defend itself, drawing parallels with Ukraine's resistance to underscore the importance of national unity and preparedness. The campaign should emphasize Taiwan's geographic advantages and technological capabilities that bolster its defense posture.

Recommendation: Taiwan's Government Information Office, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, should develop educational programs and materials for schools and public forums focusing on Taiwan's strategic significance in the Asia-Pacific region, the importance of maintaining a robust defense capability, and the role of international partnerships in ensuring the island's security.

Recommendation: The Prime Minister's Office of Japan, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the MOD, should engage in a targeted public relations campaign informing the Japanese public about the implications of Chinese control over Taiwan, including threats to Japan's security, disruptions to trade routes, and impacts on regional stability.

Recommendation: Japan's Cabinet Public Relations Office should coordinate with media outlets and educational institutions to disseminate information on Japan's role in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. This includes detailing Japan's defense initiatives, contributions to regional security architectures, and the importance of collective defense efforts with the US and Taiwan.

Finding: Deterrence must be coupled with credible reassurance.

Recommendation: The United States and Japan should diplomatically engage with Beijing and reiterate that peaceful means of reunification remain possible. The US president could deliver an address clarifying that the United States has not changed its longstanding policy over Taiwan, does not support Taiwanese independence, and will not try to encourage Taiwanese independence.

Recommendation: Competition with China may be inevitable, but the United States and Japan could limit that competition to a few key areas, such as Taiwan. The United States and Japan do not need to confront China everywhere at once. Instead, they should focus on blunting Chinese aggression over Taiwan while reacting calmly to, or even encouraging, initiatives that channel Chinese resources in less militaristic directions. For example, if Beijing fritters away money on loss-making projects as part of its Belt and Road Initiative or builds aircraft carriers that will not be combat-ready for decades, so much the better.

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INTRODUCTION

The risk of a war over Taiwan is higher today than at any time in the past half-century. Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping has declared that Taiwan's reunification with the mainland is an "inevitable requirement" for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and "should not be passed down generation after generation." Yet peaceful means of reunification have all but disappeared because most Taiwanese citizens now view themselves solely as Taiwanese, not Chinese, and are more determined than ever to maintain their de facto independence. This stance threatens China's territorial integrity, as defined by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and Xi's legitimacy as top leader.

In response, China is brandishing its military option. Over the past three years, it has conducted the largest and most provocative show of force in the Taiwan Strait in a generation. Chinese military patrols, some involving a dozen warships and more than fifty combat aircraft, menace Taiwan almost daily and often simulate attacks on Taiwanese, Japanese, or US targets. Meanwhile, China has been amassing ships, aircraft, and missiles as part of the largest military buildup by any country in decades. Its military budget increased tenfold from 1990 to 2020. From 2020 to 2023, it doubled the size of its nuclear arsenal. China now militarily outspends every other country in Asia combined. It wields the world's largest ballistic missile inventory and navy by number of ships. Moreover, Beijing has become increasingly belligerent in its relations with neighbors from Japan to India.

The United States has tried to deter Chinese aggression by declaring its support for Taiwan. President Joe Biden has publicly stated on four occasions that the US military would defend the island from a Chinese attack. Some members of Congress and prominent pundits are advocating an unambiguous US commitment to preserve Taiwan's autonomy. But it is no longer clear that the US military could immediately respond to a Chinese assault on Taiwan because Chinese forces have developed capabilities to attack US aircraft carriers and disable American bases on Okinawa. Historically, the United States has relied on its manufacturing prowess to outproduce adversaries after a war starts. But now that China is the world's leading manufacturing nation by output, it is possible that both sides could sustain a protracted conventional war—and might be tempted to break the stalemate by using nuclear weapons against military targets.

These dangerous trends make deterrence and defense cooperation among the United States, Japan, and Taiwan extremely important. Toward that end, the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) convened a US-Japan-Taiwan Track 2 dialogue in November 2023 to discuss deterrence and defense cooperation.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

The dialogue yielded several key points of broad agreement. First, participants agreed that a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait is likely to evolve into a protracted war. Both sides have the resources and motivations to continue fighting and escalate the conflict even after enduring head losses. As the war persists, the incentives for China and the United States to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) would strengthen. For these reasons, deterring conventional war from breaking out in the first place is a chief priority.

Participants agreed on the need to modernize, diversify, and fortify military capabilities for Taiwan, the United States, and Japan. Military forces are on track for battle in the 2030s, but not the 2020s. Moreover, many participants called for pre-planned coordinated responses to Chinese shows of force, including joint military exercises, arms transfers to Taiwan, and trilateral diplomatic meetings. Participants also agreed that

diplomatic caution regarding Taiwan's status remains important, as unclear messaging or hasty moves toward Taiwanese independence could provoke Beijing and catalyze an unnecessary crisis. The United States and Japan need to reassure China that peaceful reunification is a viable future.

In order to build up and invest in US, Taiwanese, and Japanese forces, each government requires stronger public backing from their domestic populations. A “chicken-egg” problem arose repeatedly in discussion: Taiwan requires assurance of external support before preparing to mount a fierce resistance to China, but the United States and Japan want to see such Taiwanese preparations before fully committing to defend Taiwan. Although participants agreed on the need to internationalize the conflict by drawing in other US allies, they also acknowledged that this would be difficult given Washington's deteriorating credibility following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and shaky support for Ukraine.

METHODOLOGY

FPRI convened a US-Japan-Taiwan Track 2 dialogue in Washington, D.C., on November 13–14, 2023, to address the challenges of defense and deterrence in responding to the threats posed by China and its nuclear arsenal. Participants included retired military leaders, former government officials, and non-government subject matter experts from the United States, Japan, and Taiwan. Approximately eight participants attended from each country. Leading non-government subject-matter experts and retired officials with intimate knowledge of their home country's politics and military engaged in candid and informed discussions about prioritizing challenges and taking constructive and feasible actions.

Roughly half of the participants attended a previous Track 2 dialogue run by FPRI in July 2022. The 2023 dialogue provided an opportunity to delve into critical yet unresolved issues from the 2022 event. For many Japanese and Taiwanese participants, the 2023 dialogue was their first opportunity to travel to the United States and interface directly with their counterparts in more than a year.

The dialogue was comprised of five 75-minute sessions on the following topics: (1) deterrence signaling; (2) domestic politics; (3) defense cooperation; (4) war termination; and (5) policy recommendations.

Each session began with brief presentations from participants from each country and then shifted to a moderated open discussion. The dialogue operated under the Chatham House Rule, which allows participants to use information from the dialogue but does not permit identifying participants by name. This dialogue covered a broad range of topics, partly to identify questions that require further examination and to lay the groundwork for future US-Japan-Taiwan dialogues.

ANALYSIS

DETERRENCE SIGNALING

There was a consensus among participants that nuclear weapons do not serve as a significant brake on Sino-American conflict. In fact, several participants explained how nuclear weapons may increase the likelihood of a conventional war through what scholars call the “stability-instability paradox,” whereby blind faith in nuclear deterrence risks unleashing a massive conventional war. In such a scenario, both sides might strike hard with their conventional arsenals under the assumption that their nuclear arsenals would shield them from crippling retaliation. Chinese military writings often suggest that the People's Liberation Army

(PLA) could wipe out US bases and aircraft carriers in East Asia while China's nuclear arsenal deterred US attacks on the Chinese mainland. Conversely, some American strategists have called for striking Chinese mainland bases at the outset of a conflict in the belief that US nuclear superiority would deter China from responding in kind.

Participants generally believed that deterring the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) requires preventing a conventional war from breaking out in the first place. Once a conventional war over Taiwan begins, both sides could be tempted to use nuclear weapons against military targets—participants believed countervalue strikes on civilians were unlikely—to turn the tide of battle or break a grinding war of attrition. These pathways to nuclear escalation are discussed further in the “War Termination” section.

Given the pathways from conventional war to WMD use, and the inability of nuclear deterrence to prevent conventional war, discussion focused heavily on ways to enhance conventional deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. Two main views emerged during that discussion. The first, articulated most clearly by several American participants, holds that conventional deterrence remains robust—Chinese leaders believe an assault on Taiwan would be extremely risky and costly and are unlikely to attempt it—but deterrence alone is insufficient to prevent conflict. If Chinese leaders come to believe that war is the only possible route to unification—especially if they believe that Taiwan will permanently separate from the mainland—then they will attack despite the significant costs of war. A successful deterrence signaling strategy must pair deterrence with reassurance. Essentially, this means making clear to Beijing that non-military paths to unification remain viable.

Advocates of this view argue that deterrence remains robust for several reasons. One is the inherent difficulty of conducting an amphibious invasion or sustaining a blockade against a developed island nation backed by a military superpower. Another reason is the ongoing internationalization of the Taiwan issue. Many nations, including Japan, Australia, and major European powers declared that they would view a Chinese assault on Taiwan as a grave threat to their interests. Beijing cannot assume that it would only have to fight Taiwan and the United States in the event of a war. Rather, it could face military attacks from Japan and Australia and economic sanctions from many of the world's wealthiest nations. In addition, some participants believe that Russia's bloody experience invading Ukraine has instilled caution in Beijing by showing that large-scale conquest is difficult and that the West is more united than many observers had assumed prior to February 2022.

In this view, a Chinese assault on Taiwan remains unlikely—unless Taiwan or the United States provokes China into military action by suggesting that Taiwan is formally independent, that the United States will restore a clear alliance commitment to defend the island, or that Taipei or Washington will oppose unification under any circumstance. Some participants argued that Taiwan and the US president should dispel such signals by reiterating that the United States does not support or seek Taiwan's independence, is not pursuing a “two Chinas” or “one China, one Taiwan” policy, and does not seek to use Taiwan as part of a broader strategy to contain China.

The other main view, articulated by several participants from each nation, claims that deterrence is failing. Even if Taipei and Washington avoid blatant provocations, Beijing is not content to postpone unification. Given the chance, China will try to take Taiwan during Xi's tenure in office. Beijing may have such an opportunity for several reasons. First, the military balance in the Taiwan Strait is shifting in Beijing's favor. In the 1990s, Taiwan outspent China militarily and outclassed it technologically. But now China's military budget is twelve times larger than Taiwan's, and China concentrates military investments on capabilities that

exploit Taiwanese and US vulnerabilities. Taiwan is an island that imports most of its food and fuel, and the US and Taiwanese militaries rely on a relatively small number of exposed bases that could be knocked out by preemptive Chinese air and missile attacks. A Taiwanese participant noted that Chinese strategic writings and TV shows routinely disparage Taiwan's military capabilities and suggest that Taiwanese forces would surrender early in a conflict. Even if this narrative is merely propaganda, Chinese leaders could start to believe their own disinformation. That risk is heightened by the many non-Chinese reports that similarly conclude that US and Taiwanese forces are ill-prepared for war against China.

Second, China is led by Xi, an ambitious and ruthless leader. Several participants claimed that Xi has attached his legitimacy and historical legacy to unification, though one American participant cautioned against a selective reading of Xi's statements on the issue. This participant noted that many of Xi's statements on Taiwan, such as those implying the "inevitability" of unification with the mainland, echoed those of previous Chinese leaders. Xi's statement that the Taiwan problem "cannot be passed down generation to generation" was initially made in 2013 at a time of more friendly cross-Straits relations and when Ma Ying-jeou was in power, so may have been intended to encourage continued peace. However, another participant pointed out that Xi reiterated the statement in 2019 in his "message to Taiwan compatriots" which seemed much more threatening in tone. A Taiwanese participant claimed that Xi is a dictator who "smells weakness" and will not abandon his ambitions unless checked by overwhelming force. Several other participants argued that it is impossible for Taiwan or the United States to reassure Xi that peaceful reunification remains viable, given the increasingly independent national mood in Taiwan. These participants worried that overeager efforts to placate Chinese demands might feed false hopes in Beijing that conquest is possible. As one American participant explained, there is an inherent tension between deterrence and reassurance, because efforts to assuage Beijing might signal a lack of Taiwanese or US resolve to fight, thereby encouraging China to strike.

Several participants pointed out that Russia's invasion of Ukraine might further encourage China to attack Taiwan. By some indications, Russia's war is going reasonably well for Vladimir Putin despite enormous costs on the battlefield. Russia remains in control of roughly 20 percent of Ukrainian territory. The United States has refrained from getting directly involved in the fighting, possibly out of fear of nuclear escalation. US support for Ukraine may soon be withdrawn, and Putin remains ensconced in power. Chinese strategists generally assume that China's military is better armed and trained than Russia's. They further assume that Taiwan, as an island, could be sealed off from Western support with a blockade, preventing the kind of resupply operations that have kept Ukraine in the fight against Russia. Chinese strategists assert that Russia successfully deterred the United States from transferring advanced weapons to Ukraine by issuing threats of nuclear escalation. Most importantly, Russia's invasion focused US and Allied attention on Europe, leaving less bandwidth available for major war in East Asia.

Despite these differences in perspective on the state of deterrence in the Taiwan Strait, participants agreed that Taiwan, the United States, and Japan should increase their military capabilities and avoid unnecessary diplomatic provocations. All participants, even those who believed deterrence was already robust, supported efforts to modernize, diversify, and harden Taiwanese, US, and Japanese military forces. Most participants, even those who warned against appeasing Beijing, agreed that Taiwan should avoid declarations or moves that the Chinese government might interpret as steps toward independence and that the United States ought to retain its traditional One China Policy and ambiguous commitment to Taiwan's defense. The best approach, most participants agreed, would be to "talk softly while developing a big stick."

Participants elaborated on how to enhance allied military forces in the third session on defense cooperation, discussed below.

Participants further agreed that the United States, Japan, and Taiwan should pre-plan a menu of countermeasures to Chinese shows of force and other gray zone activities in the Taiwan Strait. The basic idea is to show Beijing that aggression yields a tightening ring of anti-China encirclement. For example, participants suggested that the United States, Japan, and Taiwan could respond to a Chinese show of force with a trilateral military exercise, a major transfer of arms to Taiwan, or a high-level meeting between officials from Japan and the United States about jointly defending Taiwan.

In sum, there was consensus on the need for rapid military modernization, sustained diplomatic caution on Taiwan's status, and a demonstrated ability to expand trilateral security cooperation in direct response to Chinese provocations. However, there was some disagreement about balancing deterrence and reassurance in particular instances. For example, one American participant argued that the way the United States managed Taiwanese Vice President Lai Ching-te's stopover in New York City and Los Angeles in August 2023 should serve as an example of how to reassure Beijing. According to this participant, the Biden administration discouraged Lai and US lawmakers from meeting directly. By contrast, in early 2023, Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-Wen visited the United States and met with then-House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and several other members of Congress. A Taiwanese participant, however, argued that the limitations imposed on Lai's 2023 visit sent a demoralizing message to Taiwan and emboldened China to continue to threaten war and conduct brazen shows of force. This participant noted that China conducted a three-day military exercise in the East China Sea near Taiwan a few days before Lai's 2023 stopover, creating the impression that the display successfully coerced Taiwan and the United States into a more cautious approach—a dangerous precedent.

Japanese participants were divided about their nation's interests vis-à-vis Taiwan and what role, if any, Japan should perform in trying to deter China. Some Japanese participants argued that Taiwan's autonomy from the mainland constituted a vital interest for Japan. According to these participants, Japan should pledge to assist the United States in Taiwan's defense and conduct highly visible joint-military exercises to convey that Japan would respond militarily to Chinese aggression. By contrast, two other Japanese participants argued that Japan's main interest was to avoid Chinese attacks on Japanese territory. These participants argued that Japan should not pre-commit itself to join a war over Taiwan. If China struck US bases on Japanese territory, then a Japanese military response would be warranted. But if China refrained from striking Japanese soil, then Japan should stay out of the conflict.

Several other participants from each country noted that this lack of Japanese commitment is a major impediment to deterrence signaling, a situation made worse by Japanese leaders' reluctance to share intelligence with Taiwan due to concerns over Chinese spy infiltration. Taiwanese participants agreed that the lack of trust is a major barrier to trilateral cooperation and could only be overcome through more frequent unofficial meetings among current and former national security officials such as the annual Monterey Security Conference and additional Track 1.5 and 2 dialogues.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

Participants agreed that the critical variable in deterring Chinese aggression is the Taiwanese public's willingness to fight for its autonomy. Yet several participants noted that there is a "chicken-egg problem" in this area: the Taiwanese will mount a fierce resistance only if they think the United States and Japan will

arrive to aid them in a war, but the United States and Japan will prepare to fight only if they think Taiwan will withstand an initial Chinese onslaught.

There was a general consensus that Chinese use of WMD against Taiwanese, US, or Japanese targets would radically shift public opinion in Tokyo and Washington in favor of large-scale strikes on Chinese forces. Participants did not explicitly reference the idea of a nuclear taboo, nor did they imply that US or Chinese use of WMD depended on such a norm. Instead, participants maintained that the use of WMD depended overwhelmingly on battlefield outcomes. As explained further in the “War Termination” section, China or the United States might use limited nuclear strikes on military targets—participants agreed that strikes on population centers are unlikely—to prevent a rout of their conventional forces or to try to shock the other side into a ceasefire during a grinding war of attrition. Several participants noted that Chinese use of WMD likely would make the American public more inclined to support US use of nuclear weapons, but participants did not argue that WMD use by one side would automatically trigger WMD use by the other.

Further complicating the domestic political situation is the perception among many Taiwanese that the United States intends to sacrifice Taiwan in a broader struggle for US primacy in Asia. American defense plans typically call for Taiwan to endure enormous punishment to exhaust Chinese forces, thereby allowing the US military to deliver a knockout blow. Taiwanese participants stressed that such plans would likely result in reducing Taiwan to rubble and encourage Taiwanese citizens to sue for peace with Beijing. As one participant put it, “The Taiwanese are practical people; they have no interest in waging a Masada-like struggle to the death.” The shambolic US withdrawal from Afghanistan and waning support for Ukraine reduced the Taiwanese public’s faith in the United States as a wartime ally.

Another Taiwanese participant claimed that if Taiwanese air and naval forces were hit hard in the early stages of a conflict, the entire island might fold; there would be no protracted ground war or insurgency. A porcupine defense strategy in which Taiwan assumes a defense crouch might be optimal from a tactical point of view, but there are political constraints on putting it into practice. Taiwanese politicians are incentivized to overinvest in flashy high-tech platforms, such as missile defense systems and F-16 fighter aircraft that give the public the impression that Taiwan’s military can defeat China beyond Taiwan’s shores. By contrast, reinstating conscription, raising taxes to fund a bigger army, and stocking up on mines and ground-based missile launchers are all deeply unpopular because they entail public sacrifice both in peacetime and in war. Given these electoral realities, Taiwanese politicians gravitate toward military showpieces while hoping that the United States will bail them out if China ever attacks.

Several Japanese participants stressed that Japanese public support for defending Taiwan is shaky. Although the Japanese government has increased defense spending and openly discusses Taiwan’s importance for Japan’s security, there is still an ingrained public pacifism that prevents large-scale preparations for deterrence and defense against China. As one Japanese participant noted, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) is not militarily prepared or legally permitted to fight a full-scale war in defense of Taiwan, so Japanese leaders tend to cater to public pacifism. Top leaders that try to rally the nation around greater military investment, as former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe tried to do, only come around “once in a generation,” this participant said. Another Japanese participant noted that there was a “huge gap” between public sentiment and military thinking: whereas military leaders are developing plans to involve the SDF in the defense of Taiwan (mainly by providing rear-area support for US forces), a majority of the Japanese public opposes Japanese participation in a war over Taiwan.

Other participants were more sanguine about the prospect of Japanese political support for a defense of Taiwan. One Japanese participant noted that Japanese forces are already prepared to shield US forces in a major war. Japan has eight Aegis-destroyers, for example, that train to protect US aircraft carriers; Japan has more than 100 runways on its territory that could accommodate large-scale US operations; American F-35s practice landing and takeoff from Japanese amphibious ships; and US and Japanese forces train together in a variety of capacities. Whereas it might be hard to rally Japanese public support for offensive strikes against China, it should be possible to convince a majority of the public to support defending US military forces operating in the region, because US protection is what makes Japanese pacifism possible in the first place.

Several American participants further noted that public opinion tends to shift radically once a war begins. If a Chinese assault on Taiwan starts with attacks on US bases in Japan, Japanese public opinion would swing in favor of a robust defense of Taiwan. The main issue, according to these participants, is not whether public support for Japanese military operations would be forthcoming in wartime, but whether sufficient support could be generated in peacetime to support crucial preparations essential to deterrence and defense planning.

An important complicating factor is that there are thousands of US and Japanese citizens in Taiwan at any given time. In the event of war, the US and Japanese governments would likely prioritize the evacuation of their citizens. Several participants wondered how the United States and Japan could effectively deter China from escalating a crisis, or defend Taiwan from a Chinese attack, while simultaneously conducting evacuations from Taiwan. For example, if China imposes a blockade of Taiwan, Beijing could erode US and Japanese support for a military response by promising to let American and Japanese citizens flee the island—provided the US and Japanese militaries abandon Taiwan. In short, US and Japanese citizens could quickly become hostages.

A related issue raised by another Japanese participant is that China could bribe Japanese neutrality over Taiwan by offering Tokyo concessions on other issues, such as the Senkaku Islands and East China Sea. This participant noted that the Japanese public might back a military response to Chinese aggression if it looked like an assault on Taiwan was the first stop in a broader Chinese offensive in East Asia. But if China dropped or curtailed its claims to the East China Sea, this participant believed the Japanese public would abandon Taiwan and possibly oppose the use of Japanese territory by American forces.

Several American participants worried about the inherently confusing nature of US policy toward Taiwan. While not officially recognized as a country, the United States acknowledges China's claim that Taiwan is part of its territory. Nonetheless, the United States seriously considers defending the island from China, a nuclear-armed great power. This convoluted policy makes it difficult for the US government to rally public support for additional defense preparations. American citizens can reasonably question the rationale behind US involvement in what appears to be a Chinese civil war.

The seemingly obvious answer is for the US president and other leaders to explain repeatedly and consistently that Taiwan is pound-for-pound the most strategically vital location in the world. It is an unsinkable aircraft carrier at the epicenter of the East and South China Seas, through which nearly half of the world's trade flows. Strategists generally consider Taiwan to be the central node in the First Island Chain, which stretches from Japan in the north to the Philippines in the south, which hems Chinese forces within the East and South China Seas and prevents their easy access to the Western Pacific. Taiwan also may be a crucial litmus test of US alliance credibility: if the United States were to abandon Taiwan, US allies around the world might doubt the reliability of US security guarantees. Taiwan is also vital to the global economy, as

it is the producer of 90 percent of the world's high-end computer chips. Finally, Taiwan helps promote American values, because it is a flourishing Chinese democracy, whose very existence disproves the CCP's claim that Chinese culture is incompatible with liberal government. Yet as noted above, several Taiwanese participants believe this type of messaging could undermine Taiwanese resolve by portraying the island as a US pawn. Several American participants countered by noting that it should be possible, at least in theory, to make the moral and strategic case for defending Taiwan simultaneously. Participants suggested some ways of doing so in the later session on policy recommendations.

DEFENSE COOPERATION

Participants began the third session by noting that Taiwan retains advantages that could make it virtually unconquerable—provided that Taipei, Washington, and Tokyo capitalize on them. Forces of the kind China would need to invade or blockade Taiwan are vulnerable to modern missiles and mines. The Taiwan Strait is perilous—typhoons and 20-foot waves are common—and Taiwan itself has natural barriers. Its east coast consists of steep cliffs, and its west coast is mostly mud flats that extend miles out to sea. As a result, there are only a dozen beaches in Taiwan where an invading force could even land.

Taiwan also has historical reasons for optimism. No blockade in the past two centuries has coerced a country to surrender its sovereignty; and amphibious assaults, such as the D-Day landing, have generally succeeded against overstretched forces defending hastily dug positions on foreign or contested territory with small arms and mortars. If China invaded Taiwan today, by contrast, it would be attacking massed forces defending fortified positions on home soil with precision-guided munitions.

Given these advantages, participants noted that effective deterrence and defense do not necessarily require a high degree of interoperability among US, Taiwanese, and Japanese forces, but rather a division of labor in which each nation prepares to perform a particular role. The collective goal would be to field an array of forces that deprive Beijing of any hope of landing a knockout blow—thereby confronting Chinese leaders with the prospect of a protracted war that could threaten the CCP's hold on power at home.

Participants agreed that the United States had to be the “quarterback” of the group, providing the bulk of the offensive military forces and munitions, and serving as the intelligence bridge between Taiwan and Japan, which currently lack channels for sharing sensitive information or coordinating military operations.

The first crucial step for the United States would be to turn the Taiwan Strait into a minefield by positioning hordes of missile launchers, armed drones, electronic jammers, and sensors at sea and on allied territory near the strait, such as Japan's Ryukyu islands. These diffuse networks of munitions and jammers could be installed on cargo ships, barges, and aircraft, and would be difficult for China to eliminate without drawing in other nations. The United States must also ensure that its military is resilient to a Chinese surprise attack by scattering US forces across dozens of small operating sites and outfitting the few remaining large bases with hardened shelters and missile defenses. Participants also stressed that the United States needs to function as the arsenal of the group, a step that requires dramatically ramping up production of key munitions, especially anti-ship missiles.

The next priority is for the United States to help Taiwan transform itself into a fortress. The Taiwanese government plans to amass mobile missile launchers, mines, and radars; harden communications infrastructure; and enlarge their army and ground-force reserves. But participants noted that Taipei is not implementing these plans fast enough given assessments that China might invade sometime in the 2020s.

To help Taiwan redouble its efforts, several participants maintained that the United States should replace the existing cumbersome arms transfer process with donations of ammunition and sensors as well as subsidies for Taiwanese procurement of missile launchers and mine layers. One participant suggested that the United States pledge to match Taiwanese investments in vital military infrastructure, including hardened bases; stockpiles of munitions; and food, fuel, and medical supplies for civilians. Some participants pointed to Israel as an example of how the United States can help Taiwan cultivate its war stocks.

One American participant also noted that the United States and Taiwan should exploit China's lack of combat experience. The Chinese military has not fought a major war since 1979 or tested modern command-and-control processes in battle. By developing the ability—through cyberattacks and related means—to sow chaos in Chinese military communications networks, the United States and Taiwan can undermine Chinese leaders' confidence in their forces.

As one Japanese participant explained at length, Japan's main role would be to shield and resupply US forces into the combat theater. Japan has destroyers capable of protecting US aircraft carriers, stealth fighters armed with long-range anti-ship missiles, ground-based missile launchers on the Ryukyu islands just a few hundred miles from Taiwan, and an advanced submarine fleet. By continuing to conduct exercises with US forces, Japan can signal to China that a war over Taiwan might pit Beijing against the combined strength of a global superpower and its strongest regional ally.

The United States and Japan also can work together diplomatically to raise the likelihood that a war over Taiwan would drag in additional states on their side. For example, Japan recently forged a "quasi-alliance" with the Philippines and strategic partnership with Vietnam. The emergence of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) alliance and the revival of the Quad, which links the United States and Japan to India and Australia, create coalitions that could conspicuously rehearse a distant blockade of China's energy imports through the Strait of Malacca. The United States and Japan can also collaborate to build political support within the G7 and among other major economies for "collective resilience"—essentially a plan to form an unofficial "economic NATO" that insulates allies from the economic costs of conflict while threatening to impose painful sanctions on Beijing.

Many participants stressed that these initiatives might not actually function in a war. European powers might balk at imposing sanctions on China; India and Australia might not partake in a distant blockade; Japanese forces might focus solely on protecting Japanese territory, leaving US forces exposed; and the Philippines might deny the United States access to bases. Nevertheless, by engaging in multilateral preparations in peacetime, the United States and its allies can raise the specter that a fight over Taiwan would escalate into a confrontation between China and many of the world's wealthiest and most militarily powerful nations—a strategic price that even Xi might not be willing to pay.

WAR TERMINATION

Participants generally agreed that a war over Taiwan likely would become protracted, as nearly all great power wars have since the Industrial Revolution. The United States and China have the resources to fight even after enduring heavy losses, and a war over Taiwan would be a high-stakes clash for dominance in the world's most strategically important region. Neither side would give up easily, and the prospect of nuclear use would become more likely the longer the conflict lasts because both sides would be tempted to do something dramatic to break a bloody stalemate.

One Taiwanese participant noted that the main exception would be if Taiwan capitulated after an initial Chinese bombardment. Yet several American participants indicated that the United States might fight China even if Taiwanese resistance collapses, especially if China began the war with surprise attacks on US bases in East Asia.

Most discussions focused on scenarios in which Taiwan and the United States manage to parry the initial Chinese assault. All participants agreed that Beijing would fight on because admitting defeat would jeopardize the regime's legitimacy and ambitions for regional primacy. Similarly, the United States likely would fight on after initial setbacks, such as Chinese strikes on Okinawa, because Washington views a war over Taiwan as a clash for regional dominance and a crucial test of America's reputation as a security guarantor. Additionally, the American public might demand vengeance for the casualties suffered in China's opening attacks. If history is any guide, the Taiwanese would likely fight on as well after initially taking heavy losses, contra the claims of one Taiwanese participant: nations generally do not surrender their autonomy until they are militarily occupied by the enemy.

In addition to a high degree of resolve, both sides would have the capacity to wage protracted campaigns. Taiwan has one million reserve troops, at least on paper, and an elaborate system of underground bunkers. Moreover, Taiwan's geography includes densely packed cities and mountainous jungles that would be difficult for an occupying force to pacify. The United States could call in warships, combat aircraft, and submarines from other theaters. China could supplement its surviving air, naval, and missile forces with car ferries, coast guard vessels, and fishing fleets—many of which are built to accommodate military hardware—for a second and third assault on Taiwan. All participants would emerge from initial clashes bloodied but not necessarily exhausted, increasing the likelihood of an extended conflict.

When wars go long, their aims tend to expand. What starts as a Taiwanese and US campaign to defend the island could escalate into an effort to wipe out China's offensive military power. Conversely, if Taiwan and the United States inflict severe damage on Chinese bases, communication nodes, and command centers on the mainland, then Beijing's war aims might expand from conquering Taiwan to pushing Washington out of the Western Pacific altogether. If Japan is involved in the war, then China might also seek retribution for the atrocities Japan inflicted on China during its "Century of Humiliation" by demanding control of the Senkakus and East China Sea and striking targets on the Japanese home islands. Participants noted that there were many scenarios for ugly escalation, all of which would make a peace settlement less likely to materialize quickly.

Two Taiwanese participants suggested that China would not use nuclear weapons against Taiwanese territory, because doing so would destroy and irradiate what Beijing wants to reabsorb as a prosperous Chinese province filled with loyal Chinese citizens. Others wondered whether a defeated and bloodied China might strike Taiwan with nuclear weapons to deny it autonomy and to spite the Taiwanese and the Americans. One US participant noted how Russia is conducting indiscriminate strikes on Ukrainian cities in a blatant attempt to wreck the country and wondered whether Xi might do something similar with Taiwan.

Many other participants believed a more likely scenario would involve the use of tactical nuclear weapons against military targets. Whichever side is losing the war might be tempted to use low-yield warheads to destroy specific targets in a desperate attempt to turn the tide. One participant noted that such strategies are more common in military plans than is often appreciated: it was the strategy the United States devised to stop an all-out Soviet invasion of central Europe during the Cold War, and it is what North Korea, Pakistan, and Russia suggest they might do if they were losing a war today. China has embarked on an

unprecedented expansion of its nuclear arsenal, and Chinese military officers claim that China could use nuclear weapons if a conventional war threatened the survival of its government or nuclear arsenal—as might be the case if China were losing a war over Taiwan. If Xi faced the prospect of a humiliating defeat, he might strike an important target, such as the US military base on Guam, with nuclear weapons to regain tactical advantage or to shock US and allied forces into a ceasefire. Conversely, if China crippled US conventional forces in East Asia at the outset of a conflict, the United States would have to decide whether to capitulate to a Chinese fait accompli over Taiwan or try to regain the initiative by using tactical nuclear weapons against Chinese ports, airfields, or naval fleets.

Some participants noted that the risk of nuclear escalation will rise the longer a conflict goes on because both sides would be tempted to do something dramatic to avoid a grinding war of attrition. For example, during the Korean War, US leaders contemplated using nuclear weapons against China to compel a ceasefire. Today both countries would have such an option, and the incentives for China to employ it could be strong. As one American participant noted, some of China's conventional forces are co-located with aspects of its nuclear arsenal, thus raising the possibility that US conventional strikes on those forces could be misinterpreted by Beijing as an attempt to wipe out China's nuclear deterrent. The United States might, for example, try to sink China's ballistic missile submarines before they can hide in the deep waters beyond the first island chain. Yet such an attack could put those nuclear-armed submarines in a "use it or lose it" situation, especially if the United States also struck China's land-based missiles and communication systems. As an American participant pointed out, it is not inconceivable that China's leaders might use their nuclear weapons, even for a demonstration effect, rather than risk losing that option altogether.

Given that great-power wars tend to become protracted and messy, and risks of nuclear escalation are rife in a potential US-China war, most participants agreed that the most important goal was to avoid a conflict altogether by implementing the defense preparations and deterrence signaling steps discussed above and in the next section on policy recommendations. An additional point, made by a Japanese participant, is that Taiwan, the United States, and Japan must "dominate the escalation ladder" to compel China to choose an "off-ramp" during the conflict. In other words, the allies must communicate to Beijing that they can ratchet up the pain every time China tries to escalate the hostilities. By preparing to blockade Chinese commerce, for example, the United States and its allies can threaten to turn a conflict into an economic disaster for China.

Several American participants argued that the most critical element in a war termination strategy was how to craft an acceptable peace settlement, or as one participant put it, how to "define victory down" rather than allow war aims to escalate. These participants stressed that a war over Taiwan is unlikely to result in regime change or in one side occupying the other's capital. Rather, it would end with a negotiated compromise. Most participants agreed that the simplest settlement would be a return to the status quo: China stops attacking Taiwan in exchange for a pledge that the island would not seek formal independence and that the United States would not endorse such moves. However, one American participant noted that China will be expecting to get something more out of the war than it had going in. If the United States and Taiwan give the Chinese nothing, China will continue fighting. So the United States might try to enhance the appeal of a peace deal by promising to keep its forces off Taiwan and out of the Taiwan Strait.

Other participants noted that the terms of the peace deal would depend on the outcome of the fighting. If China is losing and has no prospect of occupying Taiwan or compelling its reunification, then the return-to-status-quo deal mentioned above might be acceptable to Beijing. But if there is a stalemate or if China looks

poised to win a protracted conflict, then the United States, Japan, and Taiwan might have to offer significant concessions to get Beijing to back down. One participant suggested that the United States could offer to stop providing arms to Taiwan. Another suggested a significant drawdown of US forces from East Asia. Yet another argued that Japan could offer to cede the Senkakus and significant portions of the East China Sea to China and that Taiwan withdraws from the offshore islands that it currently controls, assuming those islands are still in Taiwanese hands after the dust settles. Other participants worried that such concessions would simply embolden and empower China to press for more and ultimately result in the reabsorption of Taiwan by the mainland. Participants concluded by noting that the shaky nature of these peace deals underscored the importance of restoring the military balance in the region with major efforts to improve and harden Taiwanese, US, and Japanese forces.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding: A war over Taiwan will likely become protracted because the United States and China have the resources and incentives to fight multiple battles in the world's most strategically vital region. Deterring or winning such a conflict will require substantial forces deployed ahead of time in theater and the capacity to regroup and reload indefinitely.

Recommendation: The US Department of Defense (DOD) should direct the Pacific Command to increase rotational deployments of air, naval, and ground forces in key locations along the first island chain, especially Japan, the Philippines, and other allied territories. This includes deploying additional missile defense systems, strike assets, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms.

Recommendation: The US State Department and deputy assistant secretaries of defense for Asia should work with countries along the first island chain to negotiate increased access and basing rights for US forces. This includes enhancing existing agreements with Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, and exploring new partnerships with nations like Vietnam and Indonesia.

Recommendation: The US Congress should authorize and appropriate more funding for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) to support the deployment of advanced capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region, including anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, cyber and space defense assets, and unmanned systems.

Recommendation: The US DOD and US Congress should implement and fund a long-term plan to expand the US defense industrial base, focusing on critical munitions, strategic materials, and dual-use technologies. This includes increased investment in missile production, hypersonic weapons, and next-generation fighter and bomber aircraft.

Recommendation: The US Department of Commerce and Department of Treasury should utilize economic levers to stimulate private sector investment in defense manufacturing, such as tax incentives and direct investment. Implement policies to safeguard and promote critical supply chains for rare earth elements and semiconductors essential for military hardware.

Recommendation: The US Congress should pass legislation to streamline the acquisition and procurement process for defense systems, ensuring quicker response times from the defense industrial base to meet military needs. This could involve reforming the Defense Production Act to facilitate rapid expansion of production capabilities in times of crisis.

Recommendation: The US DOD, Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND), and Japan’s Ministry of Defense (MOD) should coordinate comprehensive joint military planning sessions, regular staff talks, and large-scale exercises simulating defense scenarios in the Taiwan Strait. These activities should focus on interoperability, command and control integration, logistics, and supply chain resilience.

Recommendation: US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), Taiwanese forces, and Japanese forces should enhance trilateral maritime patrols and air surveillance operations to ensure a constant presence in the region, deterring aggressive actions through visible readiness.

Recommendation: The US DOD, Taiwan’s MND, and Japan’s Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA) should establish a trilateral technology-sharing initiative to accelerate the development and deployment of critical defense technologies, such as missile defense systems, cyber defense capabilities, and advanced surveillance tools.

Recommendation: US, Japanese, and Taiwanese national security councils should prepare and collectively wargame potential peace settlements and diplomatic compromises that all parties, including Beijing, might find politically acceptable.

Finding: Both China and the United States could be tempted to use nuclear weapons against military targets to turn the tide of battle. The best way to avoid nuclear escalation is to prevent a conventional war from breaking out in the first place. Failing that, the United States will need to deter Chinese nuclear use by credibly threatening to retaliate in kind and by establishing crisis communication mechanisms with Beijing.

Recommendation: The US Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), in collaboration with the National Reconnaissance Office and the US Space Force, should upgrade nuclear detection and monitoring infrastructure. DTRA could spearhead the deployment of nuclear detection and surveillance technologies across the Indo-Pacific. This initiative will improve the early detection of nuclear mobilizations.

Recommendation: The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) with technical support from DTRA, should lead the effort in enhancing intelligence-sharing networks, particularly among the Five Eyes and Japan. This will involve creating a more robust framework for sharing critical nuclear threat intelligence on China.

Recommendation: The United States should consistently communicate a willingness to respond to Chinese nuclear strikes with severe consequences, possibly including US nuclear strikes on Chinese military targets. US national security officials at all levels should communicate such messages in meetings with Chinese counterparts and ideally include the US president, secretary of defense, national security advisor, and US ambassador in Beijing. In addition, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia should communicate the same message in the recently reestablished annual military meetings between the two countries. US leaders should highlight that the American public supports the idea of retaliatory nuclear strikes (see research by Scott Sagan at Stanford on this topic) and that the Pentagon is currently modernizing its nuclear arsenal and missile defense systems to prepare for such a contingency.

Recommendation: DTRA should foster dialogue and confidence-building to reduce the risk of nuclear escalation. Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy efforts with China can establish crisis communication links and confidence-building measures, including the establishment of a nuclear risk

reduction center modeled on the center that used to coordinate communications between the United States and Russia.

Finding: The pace of US, Taiwanese, and Japanese defense modernization does not match the speed and severity of the Chinese military threat.

Recommendation: US INDOPACOM should undertake a program to disperse and harden military bases across East Asia. This program should prioritize the construction of resilient infrastructure and pre-positioning of critical assets, including missile launchers and drones, to ensure sustained operational capability in the face of potential attacks.

Recommendation: The US DOD should streamline procurement processes for critical defense systems destined for rapid deployment in the Indo-Pacific. This includes prioritizing contracts for mobile missile systems and armed drones, and ensuring these systems are compatible with allied platforms for integration into joint operations.

Recommendation: Taiwan's MND should expedite the acquisition and deployment of mobile missile systems and armed drones by entering into direct government-to-government deals. Priority should be given to systems capable of rapid deployment and high mobility to counteract maritime threats and bolster island defense capabilities.

Recommendation: Taiwan's Chief of the General Staff should enhance asymmetric warfare training programs, focusing on countering superior forces through guerrilla tactics, cyber warfare, and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies. This includes expanding joint exercises with US and Japanese forces to improve interoperability and readiness.

Recommendation: Taiwan's MND, in collaboration with the Ministry of Economic Affairs, should initiate a rapid expansion of hardened shelters and stockpile reserves of fuel, medical supplies, food, and water. This should involve leveraging accelerated construction techniques and securing diversified supply chains for critical resources.

Recommendation: Japan's MOD should focus on enhancing its offensive and defensive capabilities against naval threats, particularly through the development and deployment of anti-ship missiles and supporting US forces in logistical and operational domains. This includes the establishment of joint command structures and the alignment of operational protocols to ensure effective coordination in times of crisis.

Recommendation: The Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) should accelerate their maritime domain awareness and anti-submarine warfare capabilities to secure the northern approaches to Taiwan. This involves investing in advanced surveillance systems, submarine detection technologies, and rapid-response maritime assets.

Finding: Military preparations should be bolstered by diplomatic and economic strategies that internationalize the Taiwan conflict.

Recommendation: Whenever an American or allied leader meets with the Chinese government, they should remind Beijing that non-peaceful outcomes in the Taiwan Strait would result in sanctions and potential military intervention by their nations. At the same time, US and allied

diplomats should reiterate that their nations do not support Taiwanese independence and will continue to make their military support of Taiwan conditional on Taipei refraining from official declarations of independence.

Recommendation: The national security councils of the US, Taiwan, and Japan should establish a trilateral strategic dialogue focused on developing integrated defense plans against Chinese military coercion. The goal would be to create a menu of retaliatory measures to counter Chinese shows of force and other “gray zone” activities in and around the Taiwan Strait. These actions should demonstrate to China that belligerent behavior will tighten a ring of allied military cooperation against it. Such measures should include joint military exercises (including in the South China Sea with Southeast Asian nations), arms transfers from Washington to Taipei, diplomatic meetings, and intelligence-sharing.

Recommendation: The defense ministries of the US, Taiwan, and Japan should initiate a trilateral logistics and supply chain agreement to ensure the uninterrupted flow of military supplies and reinforcements during periods of heightened tension. This agreement would support sustained military operations and deterrence efforts.

Recommendation: The US Coast Guard, in partnership with its Japanese counterparts, should establish multinational maritime patrols to monitor Chinese activities and provide assistance to regional nations subjected to Chinese maritime militia harassment.

Recommendation: Taiwan’s MND should rapidly enhance its maritime domain awareness capabilities by deploying additional surveillance assets, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and radar systems, specifically in response to Chinese shows of force. This will ensure timely and detailed intelligence-sharing with US and Japanese forces.

Finding: Political support for robust trilateral defense cooperation is lacking.

Recommendation: The US Department of State, in coordination with DOD, should initiate a public communication effort aimed at explaining the strategic importance of Taiwan to US national security and economic interests. This includes detailing how a Chinese takeover of Taiwan would disrupt vital shipping lanes, compromise global semiconductor supplies, and erode the rules-based international order.

Recommendation: The White House, through the Press Secretary and the National Security Council's spokesperson, should articulate the rationale behind US commitments to Taiwan's defense. This should include explaining how deterrence efforts are both feasible and cost-effective, emphasizing the strategic investments being made to prevent conflict rather than engage in one.

Recommendation: The Office of the President of Taiwan, supported by the MND and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should launch a comprehensive public information campaign highlighting Taiwan's readiness and resolve to defend itself, drawing parallels with Ukraine's resistance to underscore the importance of national unity and preparedness. The campaign should emphasize Taiwan's geographic advantages and technological capabilities that bolster its defense posture.

Recommendation: Taiwan's Government Information Office, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, should develop educational programs and materials for schools and public forums focusing on Taiwan's strategic significance in the Asia-Pacific region, the importance of maintaining a robust defense capability, and the role of international partnerships in ensuring the island's security.

Recommendation: The Prime Minister's Office of Japan, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the MOD, should engage in a targeted public relations campaign informing the Japanese public about the implications of Chinese control over Taiwan, including threats to Japan's security, disruptions to trade routes, and impacts on regional stability.

Recommendation: Japan's Cabinet Public Relations Office should coordinate with media outlets and educational institutions to disseminate information on Japan's role in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. This includes detailing Japan's defense initiatives, contributions to regional security architectures, and the importance of collective defense efforts with the US and Taiwan.

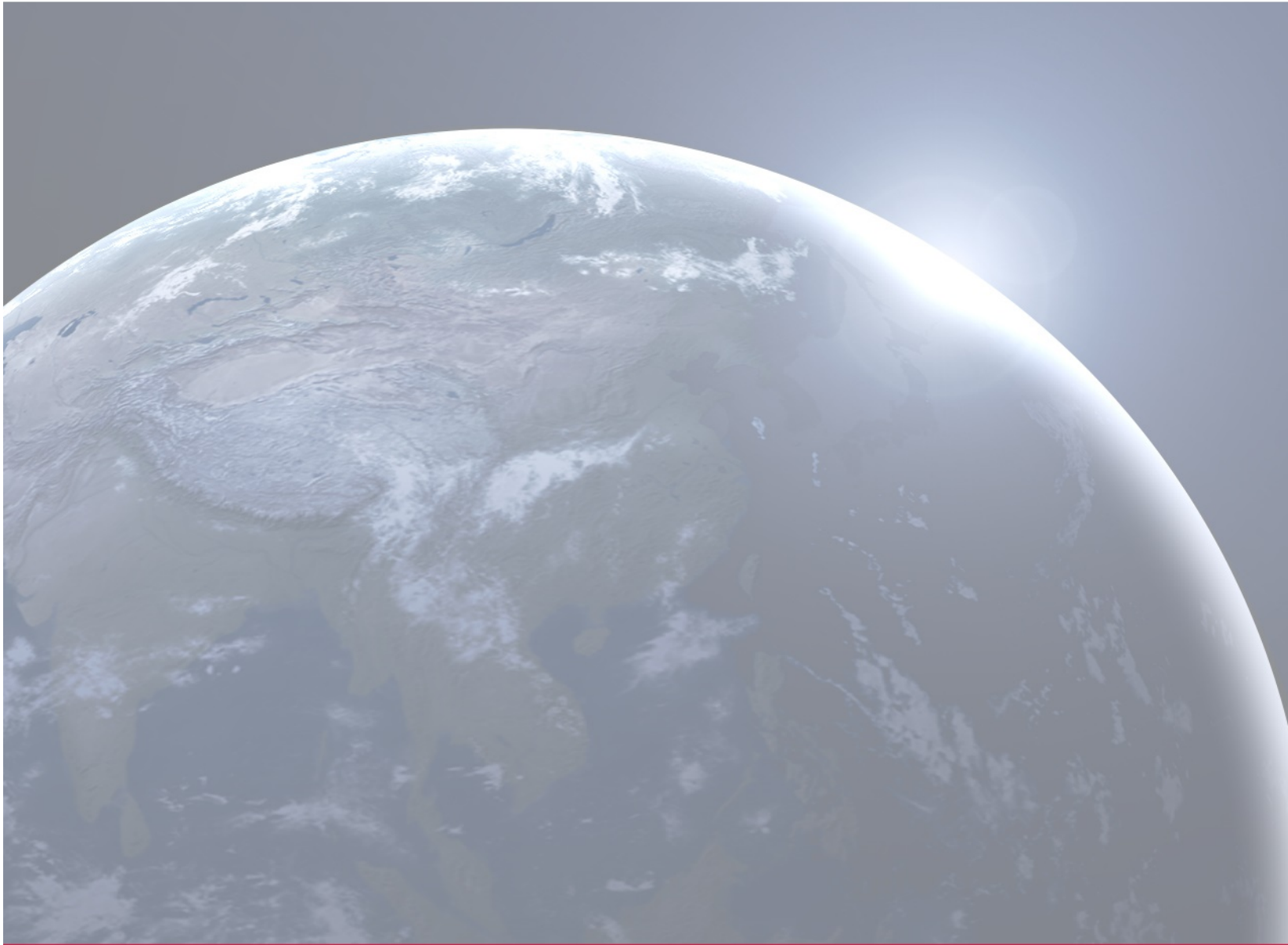
Finding: Deterrence must be coupled with credible reassurance.

Recommendation: The United States and Japan should diplomatically engage with Beijing and reiterate that peaceful means of reunification remain possible. The US president could deliver an address clarifying that the United States has not changed its longstanding policy over Taiwan, does not support Taiwanese independence, and will not try to encourage Taiwanese independence.

Recommendation: Competition with China may be inevitable, but the United States and Japan could limit that competition to a few key areas, such as Taiwan. The United States and Japan do not need to confront China everywhere at once. Instead, they should focus on blunting Chinese aggression over Taiwan while reacting calmly to, or even encouraging, initiatives that channel Chinese resources in less militaristic directions. For example, if Beijing fritters away money on loss-making projects as part of its Belt and Road Initiative or builds aircraft carriers that will not be combat-ready for decades, so much the better.

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