Punishment or Denial: What Deters in a Cold War Setting?
A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis

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Abstract: While deterrence is common among state actors in restraining conflict escalation, deterrence attempts during the 1947-1989 Cold War were particularly complicated and more often produced unexpected outcomes due to the unique characteristics of cold war dynamics. These include the lack of clear and direct communication channels, great power competition, and the presence of nuclear threats. Accommodating rising suspicions about a cold war redux between China and the United States, this paper explores the practice of deterrence by the two states in two Cold War events—the Korean War (1950-1953) and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-1955)—to supplement existing arguments about the effectiveness of different deterrence mechanisms and shed light on the current bilateral tensions. Borrowing insights from previous scholarship on the use of deterrence by denial versus punishment, the author conducts in-depth analysis of deterrence attempts in each event and incorporates cold war characteristics into the discussion. The paper theorizes that deterrence by denial is prone to produce more positive outcomes in a cold war setting, with the exception of using nuclear threats as a deterrent for punishment.

Keywords: *deterrence theory, US-China relations, cold war*

Introduction

When powers clash, the outcomes have generally diverged into two streams—crises and conflicts—over the course of history. What marks the difference is whether or not a dispute militarizes or even escalates into a full-scale war.[1] In many cases, deterrence strategy is applied to prevent a crisis from escalating into an open conflict, in which a polity would *dete*r its opponent not to initiate an attack or any other "unwanted actions" that would worsen the situation.[2] The goal is to convince the adversary that the benefit of not attacking outweighs the potential cost, thereby resolving a potential crossfire. That said, deterrence does

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[1] Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, "Deterrence Failure and Crisis Escalation," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, (1988): 29-30.
[2] Michael J. Mazarr et al., *What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), 2.

not always work. For instance, the mutual deterrence failure between China and the United States in 1950 is considered by many scholars as a major cause of the outbreak of the Korean War.[1]

With regard to recent growing tensions between China and the United States over the Taiwan issue, the North Korean nuclear threat, and more, it is evident that a new crisis is emerging and practices of deterrence, such as increased military deployment, have been suspected of occurring. Some even argue that a "new Cold War" is emerging and that deterrence has been and will continue to be a crucial part of the foreign policies of China and the US.[2] Thus, it is a suitable time to revisit the concept of deterrence, especially deterrence in a cold war setting, and understand the implications for Sino-US relations in the contemporary era. To elaborate, a cold war redux may signify the return of an international setting where great power competition prevails and states are divided into independent blocs, accompanied by the obstruction of direct communication and an escalation of nuclear competition.

This study examines the practice of deterrence policies during the Korean War and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis as both events revealed the dynamics of the 20th century Cold War in Asia and both involved China and the US as the two primary actors, either as the deterrer or the deterred. These two particular events may also offer further insight for current policymakers focused on the Taiwan and North Korea issues, which continue to be major sources of contention between China and the US today. By exploring the two events, this study hopes to answer the questions of what deters (the deterrent) and how to deter (the deterrence approach) in a cold war setting.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II summarizes foundational information and significant arguments of existing scholarship related to the research questions of this paper and addresses the anticipated contributions of this study. Section III introduces the methodology for this research. Section IV reviews deterrence attempts during the Korean War and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis respectively and identifies the deterrents and deterrence strategies involved. Section V conducts a comparative analysis between the deterrence attempts in these two events and further elaborates on which deterrence approach was more effective. Section VI concludes the findings of this study, arguing that deterrence by denial with conventional means is generally more effective in a cold war setting, with the exception of using a nuclear threat when practicing deterrence by punishment.

Literature Review

<u>The Deterrence Theory Revisited</u>

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[1] Thomas J. Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams," *International Security* 17, no.1 (1992): 128.
[2] Yang Yao, "The New Cold War: America's New Approach to Sino-American Relations," *China International Strategy Review* 3, (2021): 20.

By classic definition, deterrence in international relations refers to the practice of discouraging or restraining an adverse polity—usually a nation-state—from deploying military force to achieve its foreign policy objectives.[1] Huth (1988) further categorizes deterrence policies into direct and extended deterrence, depending on the "protégé" of the deterrence.[2] According to Huth (1988), direct deterrence counters threats targeted only at the defendant, while extended deterrence involves the defense of a third party—often an ally or partner—against the potential attacker. Extended deterrence is often applied to superpowers, and to many scholars, including Schelling (1966), presents a greater challenge as it has to be "made credible" rather than being "inherently credible" as in the case of a direct deterrence.[3]

Regarding deterrence in practice, scholars generally distinguish between two fundamental mechanisms—denial and punishment. While deterrence by denial is preemptive, aiming at making an attack unfeasible or unlikely to succeed upfront, deterrence by punishment is consequential and focuses on threatening *ex-post* retaliation if the attack actually occurs.[4] To illustrate, upgrading the defender's own military defense and convincing the adversary that it is capable of countering any attempted attack would be a typical example of deterrence by denial, as a "capability to defend" is inherently a "capability to deny."[5] Another would be initiating a preventive war against the attacker, such that its capability of launching the attack is denied at its origin.[6] On the other hand, actions such as threatening to wage a retaliatory war—a nuclear one at its extreme—would be considered an attempt of deterrence by punishment. The punishment strategy does not have an immediate effect, and the level and duration of the punishment could progressively mount depending on the defender's willingness.[7]

Overall, previous literature has reached a consensus on the necessary conditions for effective deterrence. As McInnis (2005) states, the key to deterrence lies in two primary factors: capability and credibility.[8] Nevertheless, whereas a state's capability of committing to a deterrence attempt is rather straightforward, the credibility of deterrence is a more complex issue. Kilgour and Zagare (1991) explain deterrence credibility in the form of "believability" and "rationality" in the eyes of the adversary.[9] For instance, Eisenhower's *Massive Retaliation* policy was largely seen as "unbelievable" and not credible from the

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[1] Mazarr et al., *What Deters and Why*, 2, 7.
[2] Paul Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *The American Political Science Review* 82, no.2 (1988): 424.
[3] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966): 35-36.
[4] Luis Simón, "Between Punishment and Denial: Uncertainty, Flexibility, and US Military Strategy toward China," *Contemporary Security Policy* 41, no.3 (2020): 364.
[5] Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983): 11.
[6] James J. Wirtz, "How does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no.4 (2018): 70.
[7] Ibid., 68.
[8] Kathleen J. McInnis, "Extended Deterrence: The U.S. Credibility Gap in the Middle East," *Washington Quarterly* 28, no.3 (2005): 179.
[9] D. Marc Kilgour and Frank C. Zagare, "Credibility, Uncertainty, and Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no.2 (1991): 306-07.

Soviet perspective given growing Soviet power.[1] Hence, deterrence credibility is tricky as it involves a great deal of subjectivity and requires absolute clarity of the deterrent and unequivocal interpretation of the deterrence from both sides. In this case, any miscommunication, misinformation, or misinterpretation between the two parties could easily trigger a deterrence failure and cause the situation to take a drastic turn, as seen in the US-China mutual deterrence failure during the Korean War.[2]

Effectiveness of Deterrence: Denial vs. Punishment

Scholars have long contested the effectiveness of the two deterrence approaches, though generally from a broader scope of interstate aggression. Classic opinions prefer denial over punishment. Synder (1959) reasons that denial—such as demonstrating a certain extent of military capability "directly in the path" of the adversary—sends a much clearer message as compared to punishment, in which actions are prewarned and involve more uncertainties regarding whether retaliation would actually be carried out afterward.[3] Huth (1988) adds that denial is more effective as it is more likely to eliminate threats "from the outset" without concern about the possibility of further unwanted moves by the aggressor in addition to the initial attack.[4]

Nonetheless, some recent studies lean toward deterrence by punishment. For example, Simón (2020) argues that punishment allows the defender state to take control of the situation.[5] While calculations for denial are challenging, as the defender is unsure about the necessary extent of its own capability to successfully deny the aggressor's attack, punishment assures the opponent that costs and undesirable consequences will occur if it decides to attack. Wirtz (2018) further suggests that the non-immediate nature of the punishment strategy could actually be advantageous, as the defender could continuously add to the object of punishment and reinforce the adversary of the increasing cost of attacking over time.[6]

Existing Literature on Deterrence Attempts during the Korean War and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis

Although deterrence efforts were prominent in both the Korean War and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, and both provided a distinct snapshot of the Cold War in Asia, their outcomes greatly differed. The 1954-55 Taiwan Strait Crisis avoided severe escalation despite relatively minor bombardments, yet the situation on the Korean Peninsula evolved into full-scale warfare, signaling divergence in the outcomes of different deterrence attempts.

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[1] Kilgour and Zagare, "Credibility, Uncertainty, and Deterrence," 306.
[2] Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace," 128.
[3] Glenn H. Synder, *Deterrence by Denial and Punishment* (Princeton: Center of International Studies, 1959): 35.
[4] Huth, "Extended Deterrence," 432.
[5] Simón, "Between Punishment and Denial," 364.
[6] Wirtz, "How does Nuclear Deterrence Differ," 68-69.

Prior to this research, the practice of deterrence in these two events had already attracted wide attention from academia. Christensen (1992) and many other scholars consider the outbreak of the Korean War as a mutual deterrence failure between China and the United States.[1] On the one hand, the US failed to prevent China from entering the war in the first place and to dissuade China from launching further counterattacks later in the war. On the other hand, China failed to deter the US from crossing the 38th parallel and advancing to the Yalu River. In either case, the line between denial and punishment is blurred, though previous studies have generally attributed the dual deterrence failures to a lack of clarity, credibility, and reassurance.[2]

Deterrence attempts in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis produced more diverse outcomes. The shelling of Jinmen during the 1954-55 crisis was viewed as an attempt by the Chinese to deter the US from strengthening mutual defense with Taiwan—such that it would "permanently separate Taiwan from the mainland"—and making a statement to the world about its stance on the Taiwan issue.[3] The attempt was effective regarding Beijing's aim to capture international attention, yet deterrence through limited military deployment failed to the extent that it not only resulted in stronger ties between the US and Taiwan, but it also elicited counter-deterrence by the US with a nuclear threat that was successful in preventing another full-scale war between the two states over the Strait. Again, existing literature has not drawn a distinct line between the denial and punishment strategies when discussing these attempts, but scholars' arguments concerning the failure of China's deterrence and the success of the US' deterrence in this crisis can be understood as an issue of "believability," of whether each state is equipped with the capability of committing to their deterrence.[4]

By studying the existing scholarship related to this research topic, the author has identified two major research gaps to be addressed. First, previous debates over the effectiveness of deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment, as well as discussions of the necessary conditions for effective deterrence, have not specifically delved into the Cold War. This study seeks to incorporate the distinct characteristics of the Cold War—including the undesirability of direct and massive military encounters (and the resulting prevalence of extended deterrence), the dynamics of great power competition, and the concern of nuclear deterrence—when considering the effectiveness of the deterrence attempts in Korea and Taiwan, so as to identify effective deterrents unique to a cold war setting. Second, the deterrence attempts in the Korean War and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis need clearer categorization according to their deterrence mechanisms. By distinguishing between practices of deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment, and moreover between practices of conventional and nuclear deterrence, a more thorough understanding can be

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[1] Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace," 128-29.
[2] Ibid., 133, 149.
[3] Di He, "The Evolution of the People's Republic of China's Policy toward the Offshore Islands," in *The Great Powers in East Asia*, ed. Warren I. Cohen and Arika Iriye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 223-31.
[4] Kilgour and Zagare, "Credibility, Uncertainty, and Deterrence," 306.

established to theorize which type of deterrence is more effective in a cold war setting. Moreover, further implications about potential deterrence practices between China and the United States in the future can also be derived.

Methodology

To locate the effective deterrents and deterrence approach in a cold war setting, this study will first distinguish the exact deterrents and deterrence mechanisms used in the Korean War and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis by the US and China, then conduct a qualitative comparative analysis of these components of deterrence during the two events. Additional scholarly papers and archives will be adopted as sources of information.

Case Study

Deterrents and Deterrence Strategies during the Korean War

According to Christensen (1992), the ultimate outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 was the result of dual deterrence failures between the US and China.[1] The failure of two pivotal deterrence attempts made by the two states—China's failure to deter the US from crossing the 38th parallel and the US' failure to deter China from entering the war and launching a counteroffensive—shaped the massive scale of the war. While scholars, including Christensen (1992), would also consider the US' offensive move toward the Yalu as a deterrence failure by the Chinese, this research excludes this event from the category as it did not involve a clear deterrent.[2]

Aware of the US' attempts to cross the 38th parallel and demand North Korea's unconditional surrender, and increasingly concerned about its national security, China issued successive warnings from September to October 1950 to deter the US from crossing the line.[3] These warnings included public statements by Marshal Nie Rongzhen and Premier Zhou Enlai in September, military patrols in the Manchu area, and—the clearest signal of all—Zhou's message via the Indian Ambassador K. M. Panikkar in early October stating China would enter the war were the US to cross the parallel.[4] All three warnings threatened *ex-post* consequences of potential movement by the US, and none involved immediate or direct actions to deny the US' capability in actually crossing the parallel. Therefore, China's deterrence against the US in this case should be regarded as an attempt of deterrence by punishment, with China's alleged intervention as the deterrent.

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[1] Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace," 128-29.
[2] Ibid., 129, 140-41.
[3] Richard N. Lebow, "Deterrence Failure Revisited," *International Security* 12, no.1 (1987): 199-200.
[4] Abram N. Shulsky, *Deterrence Theory and Chinese Behavior* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2000), 56-57.

Not fully convinced about the credibility of China's warnings and its capability to carry out the threatened punitive actions, and determined to achieve a quick and complete victory, US troops advanced across the 38th parallel on October 7, 1950, marking the failure of China's deterrence attempts. Consequently, following the US' failure in reassuring Chinese leaders of its non-malicious intentions toward China, the PRC entered the Korean War. Nonetheless, it was the subsequent event that caused the situation to escalate into a full-blown war. Christensen (1992) argues that at this stage, China's initial performance in the war was an additional act of deterrence by punishment, demonstrating its capacity to retaliate and attempting to prevent the US from further advancing toward the Yalu.[①] However, this seems irrational and ambiguous given China's decision to disengage in early November 1950. As Christensen (1992) himself also considers China's disengagement as a tactic to pave the way for its subsequent counteroffensive, it is fairly evident that China was no longer aiming for deterrence at that point.[②]

Meanwhile, the United States' failed deterrence attempts are reflected by its failure to prevent China from entering the war in the first place and launching a massive counteroffensive in November. Despite lacking explicit deterrent statements, it was clear that the US misinterpreted China's vulnerability, and deemed its military presence in Taiwan to be sufficient to deter China from entering the war and confronting it at the Yalu.[③] Given General McArthur's perception of China's internal strife and his decision to advance to the Yalu despite Zhou's warnings, the Americans likely considered the deterrent to be the launch of punitive air attacks on the Chinese mainland via neighboring US military bases. Again, no *ex-ante* actions actually took place to forestall China's participation in the war or launching a counterattack against US troops at the Yalu, and thus this case should be regarded as an attempt of deterrence by punishment, with potential punitive air attacks on the Chinese mainland as the deterrent. Since China was "insufficiently fearful of American punitive air attacks" and sufficiently concerned about the US' presence on the peninsula, this deterrence attempt by the US failed and did not preclude China's intervention in the war nor its massive counteroffensive at the Yalu.[④]

Deterrents and Deterrence Strategies during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis

After their costly engagement in the Korean War, the United States and China became particularly cautious of further potential clashes regarding other issues. China's major concern regarding the US during that time was what it called a "Three Front" strategy, in which China perceived the US to be applying

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① Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace," 128-29.
② Ibid., 140-41.
③ Shulsky, *Deterrence Theory*, 59.
④ Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace," 133.

military pressure on the PRC from three fronts: Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan.[1] By July 1954, the former two fronts had practically been resolved, leaving the US' ties with Taiwan (ROC) the major issue.

In August 1954, the ROC deployed around 58,000 troops to Jinmen (Quemoy) and 15,000 to Matsu to build a defensive line against the Chinese mainland.[2] This was particularly alarming to the PRC as these two islands are geographically adjacent to Zhejiang Province, a weak spot for the mainland if the ROC were to launch a counterattack after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War.[3] In addition, the ROC's occupation of these islands would pose a direct threat to China's offshore communications and fishing activities.[4] Meanwhile, China was aware of an ongoing discussion about a mutual defense treaty between the US and Taiwan and the US' intention to include the ROC in the newly established Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).[5] With the foregoing considerations, the PRC, without sufficient knowledge of the growing split in the US-ROC camp at that moment, decided to shell Jinmen (where US troops were not present) in September 1954 to reaffirm its stance on the Taiwan issue and initiate a dual deterrence of the ROC and the United States. The aim was to pressure ROC troops to evacuate the islands, prevent the signing of the mutual defense treaty between the US and Taiwan, and eventually liberate Taiwan.[6]

This effort is considered as a practice of deterrence by denial, since upfront preemptive attacks to obstruct the opponent's military capability—in this case, the Nationalist troops on the island—were carried out, with the attacks serving as the deterrent. As a result, China was able to hurt the ROC troops on Jinmen and force their withdrawal from Dachen (another island close to the mainland), thus securing its shore. In this sense, the deterrence attempt can be considered as partially successful. However, although China was able to make its open statement and attract wide external attention to the coalition between the US and Taiwan, it failed to deter the US from advancing its defense treaty with the ROC. That said, the content of the defense treaty revealed the US' reluctance to fully commit to defending Taiwan, and no promises were made regarding the offshore islands, revealing to the Chinese an underlying disunity among the opposition camp that was in fact exacerbated by the Jinmen bombardment.[7] Hence, the outcomes of this deterrence attempt were overall positive for China.

At the same time, China's occupation of Dachen made the US increasingly concerned about China's true intentions regarding the offshore islands and the potential military threat that China could pose. In order to secure Jinmen and Mazu as well as avoid further exacerbating its own disadvantage in the Strait,

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[1] Shulsky, *Deterrence Theory*, 62.
[2] Junghoon Lee, "The international context of the Cold War in East Asia: processes of security and economic co-operation between alliances," *SN Social Sciences* 1, no.5 (2021): 7.
[3] He, "The Evolution of the People's Republic of China's Policy," 223.
[4] Ibid., 223.
[5] Ibid., 224-25.
[6] Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 194-95.
[7] He, "The Evolution of the People's Republic of China's Policy," 230-31.

the US opted for nuclear deterrence in March 1955, warning China that the use of nuclear weapons over the offshore islands was a possibility, which quickly escalated the crisis.[1] Subsequent bilateral negotiations and Premier Zhou's statement in April elucidating China's position against armed conflict prevented the crisis from evolving into a full-scale war. It was widely considered as a deterrence success for the US[2] and was a typical example of deterrence by punishment, using the threat of consequential nuclear warfare as the deterrent.

Comparative Analysis & Discussion

From the foregoing overview, this research has reached several findings. First, the multiple failed attempts of deterrence during the two events can be attributed to several distinct characteristics of deterrence in a cold war setting. First, clear communication—which is essential for effective deterrence—is difficult to achieve during a cold war, as the separate blocs generally hinder direct communication. This characteristic is demonstrated by China's failed attempt to deter the US from crossing the 38th parallel during the Korean War. Zhou's message via the Indian Ambassador in October 1950 about China's commitment to defending its security and intention to enter the war if the US crossed the parallel was taken as a bluff rather than a serious attempt to deter, due to the lack of direct and credible channels between the two states to avoid miscommunication. Second, the involvement of superpowers in a cold war means 1) there will be a high level of mutual distrust of the opponent's displayed capacity; 2) powers generally do not favor direct encounters; and 3) nuclear threats and competition will be present. The first factor was observed in the US' perception of China's deterrence during the Korean War, and its own deterrence attempt against the PRC, while the latter two were demonstrated by the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. Since neither China nor the US wanted direct confrontation over the Strait after the Korean War, the PRC chose to deter by attacking an island not occupied by US troops, whereas the US issued a nuclear deterrence to allegedly protect an ally far from their homeland.

Accordingly, the foregoing discussion illustrates that deterrence by denial was generally more effective in these cold war events, with the exception of using nuclear threat as deterrence by punishment. However, it should be noted that scholars tend to put nuclear deterrence in an independent category apart from normal means of deterrence by punishment, since the involvement of nuclear weapons could lead to unreversible damage, fatalities, and "uncontestable cost" with which conventional weapons could barely be on par with.[3] Hence, the subsequent discussion will be divided into deterrence by conventional means versus nuclear threats.

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① He, "The Evolution of the People's Republic of China's Policy," 228.
② Gordon H. Chang and Di He, "The Absence of War in the U.S.-China Confrontation over Quemoy and Matsu in 1954-1955: Contingency, Luck, Deterrence," *The American Historical Review* 98, no.5 (1993): 1519.
③ Wirtz, "How does Nuclear Deterrence Differ," 59-60.

When looking at the failed deterrence attempts during the Korean War and the relatively more effective deterrence by the PRC on the Taiwan issue, the aforementioned distinct characteristics of cold war scenarios could adequately explain the variations in the outcomes and advantages of using deterrence by denial. Given the distrust of the opponent's capacity during the Korean War, applying deterrence by punishment would have endured a higher risk, as miscalculation of the opponent's capacity—in this case the US' misperception of China's capacity—could result in a disastrous misinterpretation of the opponent's capability to bear the potential costs, and thereby underestimate or overestimate the credibility of the opponent's deterrence. Deterrence by denial, on the contrary, involves fewer uncertainties and can send more direct messages for both sides to deliberately consider the opportunity cost of aggravating the situation.

In addition, the undesirability of direct encounters, which resulted in extended deterrence attempts in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, reinforces the advantage of using deterrence by denial. When any of the major players in a crisis is physically absent from the center of the crisis, the uncertainties associated with *ex-post* warning further increase. By launching direct preemptive attacks, the deterrer can take a more proactive role in the crisis, leaving its opponent to consider both the visible and invisible consequences of sustaining or escalating the crisis. The opponent would then be more cautious with its own calculations and more suspicious of the attacker's capabilities beyond the initial attack, and would thus be more easily deterred.

Finally, the assertions would be deemed insignificant if any nuclear deterrent were involved. No strategy or instrument to date could outweigh—or even balance—the level of destruction that can be wrought by nuclear weapons, thus indicating that nuclear deterrence would remain the predominant and most effective deterrence approach in any setting.

Conclusion

By conducting a comparative analysis between deterrence attempts and outcomes during the Korean War and the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, this study has drawn two primary conclusions: 1) Among conventional mechanisms of deterrence, the practice of deterrence by denial produces more positive outcomes and more effectively prevents war in a cold war setting; 2) punishment is more effective only when nuclear threats are involved.

In consideration of these findings, the author further suggests rational decision making by both current Chinese and US administrations regarding rising tensions over the current Taiwan Strait and the North Korean nuclear issues. As both issues are of major interest to the US and China, it is crucial that both states accurately interpret the claims and actions made by the other. Meanwhile, in order to prevent unwanted actions from the other, both states should make their stances absolutely explicit and ensure that the other state fully comprehends every message. In either case, direct and candid communication as well as mutual understanding of the stakes involved would be necessary to prevent miscommunication and conflict

escalation. For instance, China has constantly warned the US that the Taiwan issue is an "insurmountable red line" in an attempt of deterrence by punishment. In this case, China may want to consider clarifying the deterrent in its warnings, elucidating the intended consequences if the US crosses the "red line" to enhance the credibility of its deterrence practice. At the same time, the US should carefully estimate China's and its own stakes in this issue when deciding its response to China's warnings. Ergo, clarity and direct communication remain pivotal, and both states ought to learn from the lessons of the Cold War in order to avoid the undesired outcomes of failed deterrence and escalated tensions.

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