

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Response to Capt. Walker D. Mills, “Deterring the Dragon: Returning U.S. Forces to Taiwan”

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The September-October edition of *Military Review* hosted a multifaceted discussion on the prospects of a conflict over the reunification of Taiwan with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

This included a policy proposal to return U.S. ground forces to Taiwan in order to deter aggression from the mainland. In “Deterring the Dragon,” the author argues that “the United States needs to consider basing ground forces in Taiwan if it is committed to defending Taiwanese sovereignty.”¹ This is a bold suggestion, but one that certainly merits discussion given the current strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific. This policy prescription focused on how deploying heavy U.S. ground forces could balance the growing gap in capability between PRC and Taiwanese forces, and therefore shore up deterrence across the strait. However, the proposal failed to consider any reaction by the Chinese government or the willingness of the Taiwanese to make such a significant change to the status quo.

This article prompted a response from Chinese state-run media, which cited Capt. Mills and claimed “a potential US military deployment in Taiwan may trigger a PLA reunification-by-force operation.”² While Chinese media is known for bellicose rhetoric, this is not a new threat. In 2017, a Chinese diplomat stated, “The day that a U.S. Navy vessel arrives in Kaohsiung [a major Taiwanese port] is the day that our People’s Liberation Army unites Taiwan with military force.”³ This aggressive response to the notion of U.S. military presence in Taiwan even extends to the Marine Corps security at the American Institute in Taiwan (a de facto U.S.



Deterring the Dragon Returning U.S. Forces to Taiwan

Capt. Walker D. Mills, U.S. Marine Corps



During the Cold War, the primary objective of the U.S. military's conventional deterrence was to prevent a Soviet invasion of Western Europe and most of the literature on conventional deterrence focused on Europe. Since then, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the expansion of the NATO alliance to include many post-Soviet states have dramatically lowered the threat of a conventional invasion of Western Europe. While there remains a risk of an unexpected invasion and other strategic behaviors, the overall risk does not compare with the risk of invasion during the height of the Cold War. Meanwhile, the United States has "pivoted" to Asia and is primarily concerned with an aggressive and "revisionist" People's Republic of China, the so-called mainland China. China has made it clear that it views the Republic of China (Taiwan) as a part of its territory and that it would use force to prevent the Taiwanese independence. Chinese leadership has also made clear that they intend to reunify Taiwan with mainland China by 2049. Pivotal to this strategy is the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its ongoing modernization and rapid operational growth with U.S. forces in some areas and has surpassed U.S. forces in others like intermediate range missiles. Current trends including the increasingly assertive Chinese military over Taiwan, an increasingly potent and aggressive Chinese military, and the U.S. pivot to Asia have not changed the strategic environment over Taiwan. The United States needs to recognize that its conventional deterrence against PLA action to reunify Taiwan may not continue to hold without a change in the general deterrence should deter by potential anti-air conflict, but, even just in case, it is not a sure bet. If the United States wants to maintain credible conventional deterrence against a PLA attack on Taiwan, it needs to consider basing troops in Taiwan.

Assessing Intentions

Among the intentions or will of foreign governments is particularly difficult, and the United States has an intricate track record with China that may not be as clear as it seems. Chinese intentions in the Taiwan Strait are difficult to gauge. Chinese leadership has stated intentions to reunify Taiwan and China by force, if necessary, and it is clear that the PLA has been calling for the reunification of Taiwan since 1949. Since at least 1995, the PLA has held a general of course, most operation as that includes the "strategic opening" (some analysis by Tom York and James E. Hulse) again in the book *Red Star over the Pacific*.⁴ There is one more variable in China that many Western analysts recognize as the risk of a conflict.

The Taiwan Issue

The Taiwan issue involves far more than strategy and deterrence. The United States is currently engaged in

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embassy), which has only recently been acknowledged due to Chinese sensitivity to uniformed American military personnel on the island.⁴

In addition to the potential for a military response from the PRC, there is little appetite for a major change in the status quo in Taiwan. While attitudes on the island are hardening against the PRC, a strong majority of Taiwanese citizens still favor the status quo over an immediate move to de jure independence.⁵ A move to fortify Taiwan with U.S. forces would undoubtedly suggest that the U.S. is renegeing on the agreements made in the Three Joint Communiques, and that commitment to the One China Policy is only lip service.

The PRC certainly understands the deterrent effect of even a limited U.S. military presence in Taiwan. This is why they protest any proposal to return even a token force to the island, knowing that it could act as a tripwire to ensure a full U.S. response to a Chinese attack. Also, such a force could open the door for a larger rotational

or permanent U.S. presence, one that could deter China by denial and prevent it from being able to achieve its military objectives. Deterring U.S. intervention would be paramount to any forced reunification. An effective U.S. tripwire force would eliminate this possibility. Injecting heavy U.S. forces right on China's doorstep, even in the pursuit of deterrence, would severely exacerbate the security dilemma and risk major escalation.

The growing concern over cross-strait relations and broader competition between the United States and China has driven extensive debate in foreign policy circles. Deterring Chinese aggression and reassuring our Taiwanese partners are important roles for the U.S. military in the Indo-Pacific. Any dramatic change to force posture in the region must take into account the adversary's reaction and the willingness of the host nation to incur the risks involved. The United States cannot afford to manufacture a potentially disastrous crisis or conflict in the pursuit of regional stability. ■

Notes

1. Walker D. Mills, "Deterring the Dragon: Returning U.S. Forces to Taiwan," *Military Review* 100, no. 5 (2020): 65.

2. Liu Xuanzun, "Returning US Forces to Taiwan Will 'Trigger Reunification-by-Force Operation,'" *Global Times* (website), 25 September 2020, accessed 24 November 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1202011.shtml>.

3. Staff, "A Warning to Taiwan-Independence Forces," *Global Times* (website), 10 December 2017, accessed 24 November 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1079620.shtml>.

4. Staff, "Marines to Guard New US Compound in Taiwan," *Asia Times*, 4 April 2019, accessed 24 November 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/04/marines-to-guard-new-us-compound-in-taiwan/>.

5. Russel Hsiao, "Poll: People in Taiwan Feel China Is Unfriendly, Prefer Independence, and Favor Slower Pace of Cross-Strait Exchanges," *The National Interest* (website), 12 April 2020, accessed 24 November 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/poll-people-taiwan-feel-china-unfriendly-prefer-independence-and-favor-slower-pace-cross->



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