

On "Reaffirming the Utility of Nuclear Weapons"

Robert H. Gregory

This commentary is in response to Bradley A. Thayer and Thomas M. Skypek's article "Reaffirming the Utility of Nuclear Weapons" published in the Winter-Spring 2013 issue of Parameters (vol. 42, no. 4/vol. 43, no. 1).

Bradley Thayer and Thomas Skypek make the following assertion: "Nuclear weapons deter enemies such as al Qaeda who would deliberately attack the United States as well as countries like China that might be tempted to attack the US homeland as the result of escalation from a crisis (e.g., Taiwan in 1995-96)." This assertion groups together state and nonstate actors in a problematic manner. Both components of the assertion are questionable. The claim that nuclear weapons can deter al Qaeda from attacking the US homeland, or China from attacking the US homeland in a potential Taiwan Straits crisis, lacks both nuance and evidence.

There are no historical examples to support the assertion that al Qaeda is deterred by nuclear weapons. On the contrary, al Qaeda has made several attacks against the United States despite our nuclear status. In those cases, the use (or threat of use) of nuclear weapons was not feasible because these weapons are too blunt to target anything of significance to a terrorist organization. Al Qaeda seems to be unaffected by traditional conceptions of deterrence as forged during the Cold War. Terrorist organizations may be deterred more by Special Operations Forces (SOF) raids, drone strikes, or the vigilance of local law enforcement than by fear of a nuclear strike. In fact, a nuclear strike might play into terrorist hands. Fear and credibility are central elements of deterrence. Deterrence and coercion require credibly putting something at risk an adversary holds dear. Some terrorists do not even fear losing their lives, so they are impossible to deter; however, this does not mean their efforts cannot be foiled, though not with nuclear weapons.

Would Chinese military strategists be "tempted" to consider attacking the US homeland with nuclear weapons to advance interests in Taiwan during a crisis? It was actually the other way around during the First Taiwan Straits Crisis when the Eisenhower administration considered using nuclear weapons against China. By the Third Taiwan Crisis, China was a well-established nuclear power, capable of putting some American cities at risk. That crisis involved two nation-states with nuclear weapons, yet these weapons did not alter the strategic calculus of either side. It started when the United States granted a visa for Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to visit and present a speech at Cornell University in May 1995. The speech was intended to trumpet the accomplishments of democratization in Taiwan and was seen by China as a public display of Taiwan's ambition towards diplomatic recognition and independence. China responded to this visit with a show of force

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consisting of missile launches into waters near Taiwanese ports, and live fire artillery exercises off the coast of mainland China adjacent to the Taiwan Strait. The United States subsequently responded with the deployment of two carrier battle groups to the region in March 1996. At no time during the crisis did either side make decisions solely based on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. Instead, both sides reacted to each other's deployments of conventional naval and land forces while simultaneously engaging in high-level diplomatic exchanges.

The United States' tit-for-tat strategy, with proportional displays of conventional force, eventually deterred further escalation—when combined with reassurance that the decision to grant a visa to Lee was not a change in the United States' official position regarding Taiwan. During the crisis, then President Clinton privately communicated in a letter to then President Jiang Zemin, “that U.S. policy opposed Taiwan independence, did not support Taiwan membership in the UN and did not support a two-China policy or a policy of one China and one Taiwan.”⁴ Neither side delivered a *fait accompli* during the crisis. Essentially, China's show of force caused the United States to reaffirm its refusal to recognize Taiwan, and the United States' reciprocal show of force affirmed America would not back down from its decision to grant Lee a visa. Even today, the United States does not formally recognize Taiwan; it continues to perform a similarly delicate balancing act with its position on Taiwan independence. This position is more one of diplomatic ambiguity to save face in a crisis rather than one of extended nuclear deterrence. Extending the nuclear umbrella to Taiwan does not serve as a credible deterrent. Should the United States risk American cities in a nuclear exchange with China to save Taiwan from a Chinese onslaught? During the Cold War, would we have risked losing New York to save Berlin? These are the dilemmas that would be created by the type of nuclear brinkmanship the authors espouse. Raising the stakes ever-higher to even the playing field is a strategy that stems from weakness.

The authors make reckless assertions regarding the utility of nuclear weapons. The rapid ability to cause massive, indiscriminate damage is not always militarily useful, particularly when dealing with a terrorist organization or another nuclear power. The authors contend that having less than 300 nuclear weapons will make the United States impotent. They do not consider the possibility that nuclear weapons have diminishing marginal utility for deterrence and coercion when possessed in ever-greater quantities. The highly destructive power of nuclear weapons, combined with the possibility a conflict may escalate to the point of nuclear exchange, demands a higher level of academic scrutiny when making assertions regarding the utility of these weapons. Unfounded assertions raise the potential for miscalculation in a crisis.

4 Robert S. Ross, “The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and Use of Force,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 8.

The Authors Reply

Bradley A. Thayer and Thomas M. Skypek

We thank Robert H. Gregory for raising several excellent points and welcome the opportunity to respond. Gregory raises two objections: first, that nuclear weapons do not deter terrorists; and, second, that China would not attack the United States over Taiwan. We address each in turn in this brief reply.

We agree that deterrence of terrorists is a complex and multifaceted issue as terrorists are motivated by many ideologies and beliefs. In addition, we concur that deterrence of terrorism requires many tools in the toolkit, including those he suggests. Where we disagree is in the nature of the threat. First, if we focus specifically on al Qaeda and associated movements, we see they are dynamic and evolving organizations, whose motivations and capabilities might be even more dangerous and potent in the future. We would not want to dismiss the role that nuclear weapons—in this instance, low yield nuclear weapons—may play in targeting a potential underground facility, or providing US decisionmakers with the option of doing so. Second, as state sponsorship is a likely path for al Qaeda and associated movements to acquire fissile material or nuclear weapons, we recognize the important role nuclear weapons may play in deterring state sponsors of terrorism. It is critical any potential state sponsors of al Qaeda and associated movements know the United States will hold them accountable if weapons of mass destruction are shared with terrorist groups. Indeed, this has been proclaimed by senior US national security decisionmakers and was a major motivation for the French declaration in 2006 that limited nuclear strikes might be employed against a state that launched a terrorist attack against it.

Concerning China, there are two reasons we are less sanguine than Gregory about the willingness of the Chinese to escalate over Taiwan. The first reason is the balance of resolve: the Chinese believe Taiwan is a part of China, thus making their threats and readiness to use force more credible. The second reason is the Chinese are not transparent in strategic matters so we do not know in what circumstances the Chinese would believe escalation served their interests. We do not know if the Chinese conceive of escalation as the Soviet Union and the United States did during the Cold War, if escalation may be controlled, or what its thresholds are. Gregory ascribes the peaceful resolutions of the Taiwan crises to diplomacy alone. However, he fails to acknowledge the role played by nuclear weapons in establishing the environment that led to peaceful resolutions.

Accordingly, it is essential to acknowledge that the role of US nuclear weapons is to deter escalation over Taiwan or other significant territorial disputes. The United States must have the capability to deter Chinese escalation and coerce Beijing into deescalating. International stability, prudence, and the credibility of the United States require strategic superiority. This superiority requires robust strategic capabilities, including an arsenal large enough to meet multiple present and future

threats—coupled with the appropriate declaratory policy, doctrine, training, and other critical support.

No strategic tool solves all strategic problems. US nuclear weapons did not prevent America's loss in Vietnam, and, at present, China and the United States are fighting a cyberwar unclouded by their strategic arsenals. Yet, it would be a disastrous mistake to yield to a proclivity to minimize or dismiss the contributions of nuclear weapons to the security of the United States in the past, present, or future. The United States must have robust conventional and strategic forces to meet its many strategic commitments in a host of circumstances. Fundamentally, international politics has not changed. The role of military power and the need to deter and coerce opponents is the same today as in Metternich's or Sun Tzu's time. The strategic arsenal of the United States plays a major role in protecting the American people and its allies, and allows the United States to advance its interests against those who oppose it. Indeed, the lack of any great power wars since 1945 can be largely attributed to the environment, fraught with risks to be sure, created by these weapons. The value of the absolute weapon identified by Bernard Brodie almost 70 years ago remains true today.