

Deterring an attack on Taiwan

Policy options for India and other
non-belligerent states



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MARCH 2024

Special Report

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Whats the problem?

No country is obligated to fight to defend Taiwan. China has signalled a singular strategic priority to gain control of the island, by force if necessary, and is building a formidable military arsenal for that purpose.¹ In response, the US has increasingly signalled its willingness to defend Taiwan—but the timing and scale of an American response remain uncertain political decisions, and its capacity to effectively thwart an attack remains doubtful.² Japan has a powerful military and vital geography that would be indispensable, but it remains uncommitted.³ Australia provides the US with ever-greater levels of access, basing and military cooperation, although its political leaders remain coy.⁴ Some others, especially the Philippines, may find themselves drawn into a spreading conflict.⁵ Most other regional states fear Chinese retaliation and won't willingly join in direct combat for Taiwan.⁶

Dire as the picture may appear, China remains deterrable. A military attack on Taiwan is not inevitable.

What's the solution?

To deter conflict, a larger group of states will need to take a wider range of policy actions. Any state interested in preventing conflict can help to deter an attack on Taiwan by widening its policy aperture. States need not equate deterrence only with military preparations to strengthen Taiwan's defences, much less a commitment to fight in the event of conflict. In this way, states that have no intention of becoming belligerents in a Taiwan conflict still have a valuable role to play.

Most states have a national self-interest in deterring an attack on Taiwan. Conflict would be ruinous for the global economy and would undermine the regional security order on which most states depend. Non-belligerent states can advance their interests through a range of political, diplomatic and economic options, as well as military activity outside the immediate Taiwan theatre. Such action could meaningfully shape Chinese calculations about using military options, would be more domestically politically palatable than direct military intervention in Taiwan, and is increasingly urgent given the shifting military balance across the Taiwan Strait.

Beijing's determination to take control is clear and firm, and it's working assiduously to create multiple military options, of which a full-scale conventional invasion is only the most extreme alternative.⁷ It will exercise a military option when it judges that non-military pathways to unification are closed, and when it judges that the chances of its military success are at their highest. By the same token, conflict would be economically devastating, including for China, and would create unpredictable risks for China's global position—so Beijing would doubtless prefer unification through less risky and disruptive non-military ways. Given the risks of conflict, it will defer any attack until it judges that it has adequately set the political and military conditions for success. Targeted and coordinated international action in peacetime can thus shape Beijing's decision calculus by convincing it that an attack would be uncertain of success—or at least more uncertain than continuing non-military efforts.

This report focuses on India as its primary case of a presumably non-belligerent state that has interests in deterring an attack on Taiwan. I argue that India has the potential to act as a global leader of non-belligerent states in deterring Chinese aggression. I offer six broad policy options that India and others could adapt and apply: international legal arguments; the construction of narratives against aggression; coordinated diplomatic messaging; economic statecraft to increase resilience; information operations to support Taiwan's populace; and military support to the US outside the Taiwan theatre.

The cross-strait military balance will be the most potent factor in Beijing's thinking but, given the difficulty and importance of the challenge, such self-interested policies could still meaningfully contribute to deterrence. States could calibrate these policies in accordance with their own interests, capacity and risk appetite. These policies will incur costs, to varying degrees, but those costs would be dwarfed by the costs of failing to deter an attack on Taiwan.

Introduction

The threat of Chinese aggression against Taiwan is growing. According to the US Defense Department's latest public assessment, Beijing's top strategic priority beyond the regime's domestic power is Taiwan; and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is accumulating a formidable mass of modern weapons and accelerating the field-testing and training required for an attack.⁸ China's leader, Xi Jinping, has set modernisation goals for the PLA, which would probably give it credible options to seize Taiwan by 2027.⁹ Facing them, Taiwan's military has made a half-hearted and under-resourced shift to an asymmetric defence doctrine, and its political will to resist attack is highly uncertain.¹⁰ The US has signalled its intent to defend the island, but its military production hasn't kept pace with China's, and, in a crisis, its forces will have much greater distances to travel to the war zone.¹¹ The conventional military balance is shifting in China's favour.

An attack on Taiwan would be a matter of global consequence. A recent *Bloomberg Economics* study estimated the costs at over \$10 trillion, dwarfing the effects of the 2007–08 global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.¹² The security implications of a conflict for the Indo-Pacific region would depend greatly on the trajectory of the conflict. If China, through the crucible of battle, displaces the US as the region's pre-eminent military power, that would undermine the entire regional security architecture based on US alliances. American allies, most especially Australia and Japan but also its new partners, such as India, would be forced to reassess how they maintain the centrepiece of their security policies.

India is a prime example of a state that's highly unlikely to join in direct combat to defend Taiwan, but whose interests would nevertheless be severely endangered in the event of conflict. As a developing state with its own persistent security challenges, India has an abiding interest in a stable *status quo*—both in the Indo-Pacific region generally, where great-power conflict would derail its national growth, and in Taiwan specifically, where it's cultivating a burgeoning trade and technology relationship. India also has a particularly wide range

of policy tools at its disposal, plus considerable global political influence and regional military leverage. It therefore has the interests and capacity to generate a rich menu of policy options. Other states, including Australia and countries extending from Southeast Asia to Europe, could then select from and adapt those policy options in accordance with their own interests and capacities.

The analysis and options presented in this report have been workshopped and refined through extensive consultations with research analysts and government officials in Australia, India, Taiwan and the US. The options are framed in a deliberately generic way, so they can be adapted and applied by a range of states.

“An attack on Taiwan would be a matter of global consequence.”

The body of this report is divided into three parts. First, it establishes that an attack isn't inevitable—China can be deterred, because it sees Taiwan's status as a political issue and pursues its goals through both military and non-military ways it can be persuaded to defer or deprioritise the military options. Second, I outline the importance and logic of how non-belligerent states could contribute to deterrence, showing how they can offer a valuable supplement to military deterrence. Third, I propose six types of policy options that India and other countries could develop to help deter an attack, even while remaining uninvolved in any potential fighting in and around Taiwan. The report then concludes by reminding readers of both the limits and the importance of non-belligerent deterrence.

China can be deterred

Beijing's views on Taiwan are abundantly clear: unification is the grand-strategic goal, and any and all instruments of national power, military and non-military, are on the table.¹³ Chinese leader Xi Jinping has staked his personal legacy to the 'national rejuvenation' of China and has since 2017 explicitly tied the unification of Taiwan to that project.¹⁴ In this context, the prospect of a brute-force military invasion is only one, relatively costly option to be used only *in extremis*. Beijing is also preparing a range of coercive measures that may or may not involve China firing the first shots and would make a US military intervention even more difficult.¹⁵ Military options, then, could manifest in many gradations and would be among many tools in the service of a larger political objective.

China's campaign to gain control of Taiwan involves a range of policy tools, many of which are non-military and many of which aren't even directed at Taiwan itself. Beijing uses international legal arguments, sometimes referred to as 'lawfare', to frame Taiwan as nothing more than a province of China, which therefore doesn't merit diplomatic recognition or membership of international organisations.¹⁶ Beijing also uses information warfare to shape elite and popular attitudes in Taiwan and globally, to paint the US as the meddling provocateur, and to discredit pro-independence politicians, as it did in the January 2024 election.¹⁷ And Beijing also uses economic statecraft as an inducement and punishment against Taiwanese and global firms that depend on access to the Chinese market.¹⁸ China's ultimate goal is to isolate and pressure Taiwan to capitulate to unification, using as little military force as possible. It understands that conflict would be enormously disruptive to its own economic performance and to the global economy on which it depends. As long as the core political issue of Taiwan allows for the possibility of non-violent unification, a rational China would prefer that to a costly and uncertain military attack—a lesson probably reinforced by the unexpectedly protracted war in Ukraine.¹⁹

China's comprehensive approach to Taiwan means that it can be deterred from taking military action. If

China regarded Taiwan exclusively or largely through a military lens, it would have no alternative option other than an eventual attack—regardless of Taiwanese and partners' military efforts to deter it. But, because Beijing sees Taiwan as a fundamentally political contest and would prefer to avoid using force, appropriate international action could help to keep the military option unattractive to Beijing, at least as long as other options remain available.

Washington is officially agnostic on Taiwan's political future, having left the matter to 'peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves' in a 1972 US–PRC joint communique.²⁰ But, even as successive administrations have begun to increasingly clearly signal a willingness to fight for Taiwan, commentators and officials have begun to focus on the costs of potential unification, rather than the costs of potential conflict.²¹ National-security elites may have erroneously introduced ambiguity about the goals of American policy—which have not actually been revised.

If Beijing becomes convinced that the US and other partners are bent on opposing unification, its calculus will be reduced to a military operational problem—it will have scant incentive to wait for more favourable political conditions. If anything, it will have an incentive to act quickly and to accept more risks in a decision to attack if it believes that it has no better option. Recent reporting from Beijing suggests a growing Chinese concern that US policy is drifting away from its original intent and taking a position on the unresolved question of unification. From Beijing's standpoint, this would be a provocative revision of the *status quo*, which it must thwart.²²

The US and its partners could reinforce deterrence by complementing it with assurance.²³ China is more likely to defer a risky military attack if it's convinced that other tools remain available. Thus, a clarification that the US's policy goals are limited—opposing the use of force only, rather than unification—will give Beijing confidence in the continued viability of other, non-military tools of its policy. For the same reason, Washington and partner capitals should continue to underscore that they don't

seek Taiwanese independence. Absent that reassurance that unification can be eventually achieved through non-violent ways, Beijing will have little incentive to defer military action.

“The US and its partners could reinforce deterrence by complementing it with assurance.”

Setting a clear and bounded policy goal of deterring conflict is therefore preferable to implying an opposition to unification *per se*. But one important caveat to this argument is in order. Focusing on the policy goal of deterrence, rather than opposing unification, isn't to suggest that unification would be costless. Chinese control of Taiwan would be a troubling revision to the region's strategic *status quo*—especially for regional states, including India.²⁴ China would then control Taiwan's economic and industrial resources—most especially its semiconductor industry, on which global supply chains depend. It would also have unimpeded access to the deepwater commons of the Pacific Ocean east of the 'first island chain', greatly improving its military capability to project force undetected and unhindered. It would probably be more emboldened to press other territorial claims, including those that to date have been deprioritised—such as in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. It certainly would no longer need to pour resources into preparations for a Taiwan contingency and could modernise and posture its military for a larger regional role, including into the Indian Ocean.

The logic and importance of non-belligerent deterrence

While many regional states wish to avoid war, very few are willing to take the military action necessary to deter it. Even non-belligerent states, however, have a range of policy tools available to help deter China from taking military action. China's military and economic power is so formidable, with the narrow military balance tipping in its favour, that deterring the military option will require enlisting more states to mobilise more non-military instruments of power. It will require action not only in the central theatre on and around Taiwan but coordinating action globally.

We can expect many non-belligerent states to privately voice disapproval of an attack, or even meekly call for an end to hostilities, but we can equally expect Beijing to price such token opposition into its calculations. China will be deterred from military action only if it fears that an attack on Taiwan would fail.²⁵ The military balance across the Taiwan Strait is obviously the decisive factor in that calculation. But non-belligerents can also contribute to deterrence by convincing Beijing that it hasn't adequately set the conditions for military operations. Given the stakes involved and the sophistication of its whole-of-government strategy for Taiwan, it would only exercise the military option once other supporting efforts have worked to its satisfaction—that is, once it has established the legal and political legitimacy of its claims, reduced the scale and likelihood of international intervention, and softened Taiwan's will to resist. By targeting those supporting lines of China's strategy, non-belligerent states could seek to convince Beijing that its ducks aren't quite in a row—that more preparations are required to maximise its chances of success—so that it defers military action to some uncertain point in the future.

Deterrence by non-belligerents therefore can't materially deny Beijing victory in the same way that defensive military preparations could, but it could inject a greater degree of risk into Beijing's calculus, making it less confident of success and thereby convincing it to shelve the military option. The involvement of non-belligerent states would also demonstrate to China that its plans

are opposed not only by Taiwan and the US but by a wider global collective of states, so any aggression could undermine Xi Jinping's wider project of national rejuvenation—the only political goal larger and more cherished than unification with Taiwan.

India is one of the very few countries that can muster the necessary state capacity and political will to engage across the full range of available policy tools. As its strategic competition with China has intensified in recent years, so too has its apparent willingness to undertake a range of balancing measures. India has a major territorial dispute with China along the two countries' lengthy land border, where China has already demonstrated a willingness to use force, to India's long-term strategic detriment.²⁶ Although New Delhi hasn't embarked on a major defence expansion, as Japan and Australia have begun, it has nevertheless embraced relatively cheaper options, such as unprecedented strategic cooperation with the US and the Quad group of like-minded partners. As surprising as such steps may have been at the time, New Delhi took them in accordance with its changing threat perceptions and risk appetite. In other words, its policy settings are flexible, not fixed.

“India is one of the very few countries that can muster the necessary state capacity and political will to engage across the full range of available policy tools.”

Policies that non-belligerent states could pursue are self-interested policies. They aren't favours for Taiwan or the US, and they don't imply membership of any coalition. In previous Taiwan crises, New Delhi established the principle that it has significant national interests at stake, and it has recently begun to elevate its political and economic relationship with Taipei.²⁷ India has artfully signalled that it's invested in the *status quo* and stability in cross-strait relations: it disregards China's usual demands to parrot the 'One China' shibboleth;²⁸ three recently retired Indian military service chiefs visited

Taipei on a high-profile visit;²⁹ New Delhi bestowed a high national honour on a Taiwanese high-technology business leader;³⁰ and it has agreed to a new scheme to enable Indian migrant workers to live in Taiwan, greatly increasing the number of Indian citizens who would be at direct risk in a conflict.³¹ According to a recent *Bloomberg* study, India's economy would be even more battered by a Taiwan war than the economies of the US or Australia³²—and that exposure is likely to grow as economic ties grow. Recognising the stakes involved, the Indian military has commissioned an internal review of policy options, which remains conspicuously out of public view.³³ This burgeoning relationship with Taiwan not only creates a greater incentive for India to contribute to deterring conflict but may also build an expectation in Beijing that India is credibly interested in opposing the destabilising use of force.

More broadly, however, policies that may help to deter aggression against Taiwan all serve to better posture India in its pre-existing and overarching strategic policies. By taking certain policy actions, India stands to gain power and influence in that dyadic competition, regardless of whether those actions help to deter aggression against Taiwan. It also tightens New Delhi's relationship with the US—the key to building India's national power—and burnishes its international influence, especially in the global South. But, additionally, with its growing national capacity and regional interests and its policy independence from the US, India has the potential to act as a global leader of non-belligerent states in deterring Chinese aggression.

Indicative policy options

India could initiate action along six broad lines of effort to help shape Beijing's calculus away from the use of force. This is only an indicative menu of options, from which New Delhi or other states could select. Other countries, from Europe to Southeast Asia and in between, could adapt and implement some of these initiatives, or develop others, in accordance with their own state capacity and political interests. Each line of effort can accommodate from relatively modest to relatively ambitious versions of policy action. Non-belligerent states then have the freedom to calibrate their policy settings in accordance with their contingent perceptions and risk appetite.

1. International law advocacy

The international community has been slow to deploy legal arguments against China's territorial revisionism. China's neighbours have generally been reactive and haven't integrated international legal arguments into national strategies. In the South China Sea, for example, China was unimpeded in building and militarising new purported 'islands'—it established a *fait accompli*, which couldn't then be reversed despite an international arbitral ruling in the Philippines' favour. As that case shows, however, international law is often not on China's side, and states can coalesce around legal arguments to pre-emptively contest the legitimacy of its actions.³⁴

In the case of Taiwan, non-belligerent states have the potential to frame a legal argument in peacetime, well in advance of a crisis or a Chinese bid to attack. The question of whether Taiwan would qualify as a state under international law, should it seek independence, is debatable.³⁵ Certainly, many regional states would be unwilling to go so far as recognising its independence,³⁶ but they would be on considerably firmer ground arguing against the use of force against Taiwan, regardless of its status. The UN Security Council and regional security organisations have consistently ruled that even internal conflicts could constitute a threat to international peace and security, legitimately engaging the interests of other states. The UN justified its actions in the former Yugoslavia and in Somalia on those grounds.³⁷

New Delhi may have some sensitivities about deploying this argument because the same argument could be deployed against it over its territorial disputes in Kashmir. But there's a precedent for India using this argument—it occupied a non-permanent seat on the Security Council in 1991–92 and voted in favour of the arguments on the former Yugoslavia and Somalia. And the argument echoes India's position during the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, which Prime Minister Nehru declared wasn't merely a local or even regional matter, but 'a world problem'.³⁸

UN Security Council action over a future attack is obviously implausible, given China's veto power, but non-belligerent states such as India could use historical precedents—including their own positions where appropriate—to emphatically and explicitly refer to potential military action against Taiwan as a matter not of national interests, but international law, regardless of Taiwan's legal status. As the 2016 South China Sea arbitral ruling shows, legal arguments—whether about the unacceptability of aggression or otherwise—can become rallying points for states that might otherwise have few vehicles to condemn military action.

2. Narratives opposed to conflict

With a clear legal rationale, non-belligerent states could craft a number of narratives to shape regional elite and popular discourse. Beijing seeks to frame the Taiwan dispute as an internal Chinese political matter, needlessly inflamed by the US. Taiwan's international partners could counter that narrative and claim a principled stand by advancing at least three mutually reinforcing narratives.

First, India and others could assert that the use of force in the Indo-Pacific is illegal and unacceptable. This is a matter of both principles and interests. India considers itself both a champion of non-aggression and a leading voice for the global South. Promoting those ideals would strengthen both international norms and India's strategic influence. Many regional states, including India, are territorial disputants with China and have a direct interest in maintaining an uncompromising standard on the non-permissibility of force. As China's August 2023 official map revealed, it has continued—and in

some cases even slightly expanded—territorial claims all around its periphery.³⁹ Beijing’s priority may be Taiwan today, but Arunachal Pradesh could be next.

Second, India and others could repeat the message that the destabilisation and costs of any conflict would be catastrophic.⁴⁰ This narrative would be especially compelling among countries of the global South, which couldn’t escape the economic costs even if they’re far from the zone of conflict. India has begun to make some tentative statements warning against unilateral and forceful revision of the *status quo* for Taiwan.⁴¹ At the most recent US–India 2+2 dialogue, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh made an unusual reference to ‘countering Chinese aggression’.⁴² But such statements are still rare enough to be newsworthy. Narratives are more likely to resonate among popular opinion and influential commercial interests if the costs of conflict are expressed as tangible losses—long-term disruptions to the supply of iPhones, cars and pharmaceuticals, for example—rather than as abstract top-line figures of economic loss.

Third, India and others could remind China that major wars bring with them the risk of unforeseen political discontinuities. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, directly and quickly prompted Finland and Sweden to seek accession to NATO, in a major blow to Russian strategic interests. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan could yet yield political outcomes that could be disastrous for the Chinese Communist Party—plausibly including, for example, tighter India–US defence–industrial integration, or deeper Indian defence cooperation with Southeast Asian states. Aggression could, in other words, precipitate exactly the countervailing coalitions and isolation of China that would set back Xi’s grander strategic goal of national rejuvenation.

If India consistently broadcast narratives about the illegality, costliness and unpredictability of conflict around Taiwan, those narratives may become widespread and constant features of regional diplomatic and public discourse, rivalling the Chinese narrative about the legitimacy of its claim to Taiwan.

3. Coordinated diplomatic messaging

Narratives may help to set international political conditions, but their deterrent effect will be more

effectively carried to Beijing’s door if they’re amplified in diplomatic messaging. Non-belligerent states, including India, could seek to use existing diplomatic networks and groupings to issue coordinated public and private diplomatic messages about the non-permissibility of military action against Taiwan. Beijing should be left in no doubt, well before it plans any hostilities, that the international community—encompassing many actors that don’t necessarily align with the US—would condemn an attack.

India has considerable diplomatic credibility, including with states that are often shunned or ignored by the US. Across the global South, including countries of Southeast Asia, Indian diplomatic messages would carry particular resonance, in large part because it’s seen as an authentically independent actor, not an ally parroting American talking points. The messages should be coordinated around the theme that military action against Taiwan would be unacceptable and costly, but should be tailored to particular relationships and groupings. In large, politically diverse groupings such as the G20, India has already succeeded in building consensus around principles such as ‘this is not an era of war.’⁴³ The smaller, capable and outcomes-focused Quad has already referred to Taiwan obliquely, for example in the readout from its March 2022 emergency virtual summit.⁴⁴ Indian bilateral diplomatic statements with Southeast Asian states often refer to concepts such as freedom of navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputes, alluding to the South China Sea.⁴⁵ In the future, India and its partners could more pointedly stress how escalating military provocations and coercion create a real risk of regional instability.

4. Economic de-risking

Economic statecraft will be a part of any conflict over Taiwan. The US and its close allies showed in the Ukraine war that they’re willing and able to impose tough economic sanctions on great powers—even if that entails economic shock to their own economies.⁴⁶ Washington may seek to enlist a wide range of states, including India, to support such an effort against China. However, China is already taking steps to inoculate itself against the costs of inevitable American economic punishment.⁴⁷ And, moreover, China could also deploy its own economic punishment against states directly or indirectly involved in supporting Taiwan. An ASPI analysis has shown that China deploys economic

coercion to pressure other countries over Taiwan-related disputes more than over any other issue.⁴⁸ It will, therefore, very likely target non-belligerent states that deploy some of the legal, diplomatic or other policy options that I offer here.

Therefore, in anticipation of economic retaliation, non-belligerent states would be wise to take preparatory measures to deny Beijing a key instrument of coercive leverage. India, for example, has a relatively modest trade exposure to China in aggregate but relies on China for the import of critical precursors and components for its most valuable manufacturing industries, such as pharmaceuticals and electronics.⁴⁹ If India takes steps to reduce its dependence on China, especially in those sectors, it will be less vulnerable to retaliation and have greater freedom to pursue deterrence policies.

Non-belligerent states should also be alert to the certain prospect of American punitive economic sanctions on China following aggression against Taiwan. Those American sanctions would invariably have an unintended cascading impact on other states economically integrated with China—just as they did on states economically tied to Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. Preparatory economic measures by non-belligerents could include, therefore, coordination with US authorities to understand the likely targets and effects of US sanctions and to de-risk in those particular sectors as a priority.

5. Active information operations

Much of Beijing's strategy towards Taiwan—both in peacetime and in a hypothetical military crisis or war—is targeted at the will of Taiwan's people. China's ability to undermine Taiwan's political leadership and popular will to resist will be key to securing their capitulation with relatively little military effort.⁵⁰ In support of that strategy, China has deployed a mounting wave of disinformation designed to paint the US as a provocateur meddling in Chinese affairs and to cultivate a popular belief that unification would be peaceful and lucrative—and inevitable.⁵¹

A key action for non-belligerent partners of Taiwan, therefore, would be to help counter that disinformation. Campaigns to counter disinformation through alternative narratives are worthwhile, but probably have limited effect. As China's disinformation efforts and use of propaganda escalate, non-belligerent states may

consider undertaking more direct action—for example, using offensive cyber operations to disrupt the networks that carry and disseminate Chinese disinformation.⁵² Such cyber operations would require operational finesse and thorough ethical and legal reviews so that they don't constitute prohibited uses of force,⁵³ but they could be justified as actions to uphold the integrity of Taiwan's information domain against illicit state-sponsored intrusions. The US has set a precedent in launching such cyber operations to disrupt foreign-state-sponsored election interference.⁵⁴ Ultimately, foreign powers such as India can't shore up Taiwanese political will, but they can help to safeguard the information domain from external threats, making any military coercion more difficult, less likely to succeed, and ideally therefore less likely to occur.

6. Out-of-area military support

Even non-belligerent states that have no intention of fighting on or near Taiwan could undertake some military preparations to complicate China's planning for an attack, and aid in deterring it. As I have argued above, China has greater chances of succeeding militarily in a short and limited conflict for Taiwan, but a war that threatens to spread would pose multiple dilemmas for Chinese planners, preventing China from concentrating force and reducing its chances of success. Multiple non-belligerent countries around China's periphery could play such a role.

India itself has already begun to expand its military activities into Southeast Asia, for example with an increasing tempo of port visits and combined naval exercises and the impending transfer of BrahMos cruise missiles to the Philippines.⁵⁵ Many of those activities add incrementally to general deterrence against Chinese aggression in the first island chain—especially the South China Sea—by building local military capacity and demonstrating India's abiding interests in the region. But they don't serve to meaningfully complicate Chinese military planning for aggression against Taiwan specifically.

Several Indian military options have been mooted to shape China's calculus on Taiwan, but most would be either unviable or ineffective. Some analyses have suggested that India should signal an intent to impose a distant blockade of China, closing or selectively screening the Malacca Strait, although such a move would be enormously resource intensive, would take

effect only after considerable time and, as an act of punishment rather than denial, wouldn't draw Chinese forces away from Taiwan.⁵⁶

Others have suggested the idea of threatening to open a second front, on the disputed India–China land border, to draw Chinese attention or resources away from Taiwan.⁵⁷ Such direct confrontation would be needlessly provocative, risking a conflict in which India stands to gain little, and wouldn't draw relevant Chinese forces away from Taiwan. Short of that, however, the existing Indian forces on the border would very probably raise their readiness in the event of a Taiwan contingency, and that may still help to raise the risk of unintended escalation and add stress to China's national military command.

In contrast to those alternatives, India's most effective military option would be to support US forces on the southern flank of China's campaign against Taiwan. In this concept, the US would seek to create as many vectors of attack as possible, so that Chinese planners would face multiple operational dilemmas and struggle to concentrate force against Taiwan. The US could use long-range precision fires launched from aircraft and ships on the southern flank of the theatre to hold at risk China's military facilities on the mainland or on reclaimed islands in the South China Sea. India could play an indispensable role supporting US ships as they transit eastward through the Indian Ocean. It could, for example, offer to backfill some of the US Navy's peacetime presence in the Persian Gulf or provide its facilities for maintenance, repair and overhaul, in accordance with recently signed agreements.⁵⁸

As China's naval presence and port development in the Indian Ocean grow rapidly, India has a powerful national-security interest in coordinating more closely with like-minded partners such as the US and Australia, and that cooperation could have incidental benefits in adding to deterrence against an attack on Taiwan. An intensifying tempo of US and Australian visits and combined exercises with India would develop their familiarity with the operational environment and may eventually develop into a more routine US presence in the eastern Indian Ocean. Antisubmarine and undersea warfare would be an important enabling activity to support that presence. Australia and the US could support Indian interests by establishing more seamless, or even automated, processes for sharing a common operating picture.⁵⁹ India could play an elevated role by

upgrading and expanding its military infrastructure on the Andaman and Nicobar islands and developing them as a firm base for logistics support.⁶⁰ Eventually, this could even include the pre-positioning of US equipment or weapons for resupply in a contingency, as the US is already doing in Australia and elsewhere.⁶¹ Those activities, taken together, would secure the southern flank against disruption by the PLA Navy and help to convince Beijing that it couldn't hope to localise conflict in and around Taiwan. This, rather than the land border, is the second front that would matter.

Such Indian support may raise the risk of Chinese retaliation against India, but the PLA's Southern Theatre Command would probably already be stretched targeting US forces and their bases in Australia without taking on a new target set of Indian facilities. Even more importantly, Beijing would have to make a very grave calculation to expand the war by targeting Indian territory or forces in the Indian Ocean in aggression against what would still thus far be a non-belligerent state. A more likely avenue of Chinese retaliation would be escalating tensions on the land border, which the PLA could do without drawing forces away from Taiwan.

What's true of India's island territories is also true for other states in Southeast Asia that boast operationally useful geographies. US access, basing and overflight rights to those areas is a key asset that many non-belligerent states could offer. This policy option doesn't entail a commitment to support the US in wartime, let alone to fight. The deterrent value rests not in the operational impact of resupplying US forces but in the pre-decisional signal that China would face an operationally wider conflict, pregnant with even greater political risk, should it choose to escalate against the host nation. In accordance with the logic of non-belligerent deterrence, such policies are designed to shape China's risk calculations, lower its confidence of success and deter an attack.

Conclusion

To convince Beijing that armed unification would fail, there's no substitute for concerted military preparations to build Taiwan's defences. In this, the role of the US military—and Taiwan itself—is irreplaceable. But the threat from China is so acute and multifaceted that effective deterrence requires overcoming a collective-action problem to amass the capacity of many like-minded states and summoning all the instruments of national power. Xi's decision to attack or not won't be an operational military calculation but a national strategic decision involving a range of military and non-military factors.

To shape that decision, this menu of policy options is only the beginning. It's not exhaustive, and not universally applicable. India will probably generate more and different options; certainly, other states should think creatively to suit their own interests and capacities. This paper is designed only to begin that process. And these non-military policy options should in no way be misconstrued as a substitute for military preparations to deter an attack—those remain vital, even though they're shouldered by a small band of partners.

“Once a crisis or conflict begins,
policy space shrinks drastically.”

The notion of non-belligerent deterrence isn't designed to tie states' hands into involvement in a Taiwan war; quite the contrary, these options are designed to maximise policy flexibility for states that have an interest in averting a conflict and would otherwise suffer acute policy dilemmas during a conflict. As with many other deterrent measures, the policy options offered here are effective if they're exercised now, in peacetime. Once a crisis or conflict begins, policy space shrinks drastically, and states wishing to deter a further escalation and prevent a bad scenario becoming worse are left with fewer and blunter tools: impose harsh sanctions or not; join the fight or not.

No policy is without cost, but the menu of policy options outlined here has the virtue of being relatively inexpensive, compared with a significant defence expansion or a commitment to fight for Taiwan. However, while the direct material cost of these policies may be modest, non-belligerent states are still likely to bear the costs of Chinese retaliation, and India certainly has vulnerabilities—including through economic coercion and possibly including provocations along the Line of Actual Control. But India has shown an increasing willingness to weather Beijing's ire and absorb the costs of competing with and deterring China. Every state—non-belligerents and belligerents alike—will have to weigh the expected costs against their national interest in averting an armed conflict. And every capital will have to make its own calculation regarding which deterrent policy options it chooses and when and how it executes them. Every capital must also recognise that opting out of efforts to deter war is also a policy choice, which carries its own potentially devastating costs.

Notes

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Acronyms and abbreviations

PLA	People's Liberation Army
UN	United Nations

WHAT'S YOUR STRATEGY?

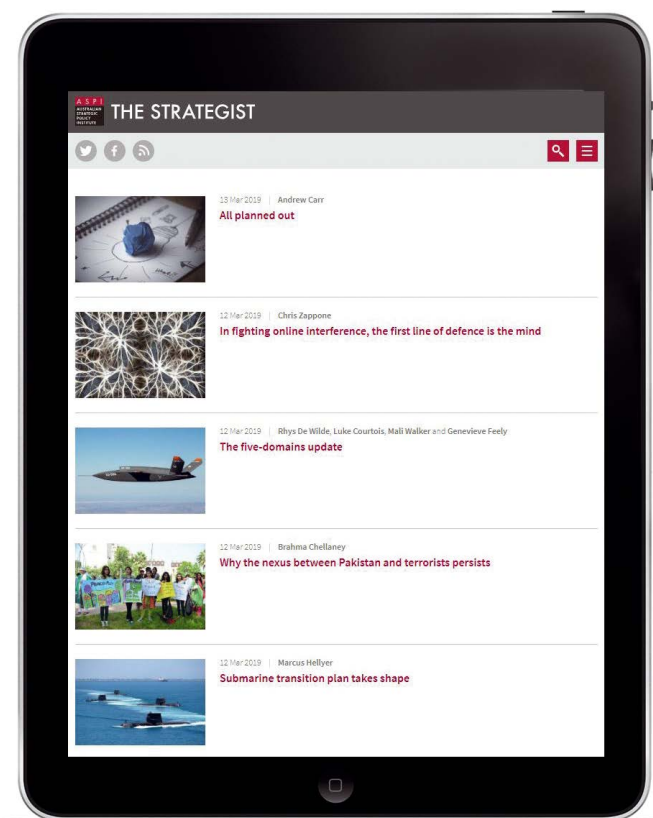


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