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The Changing Global Politics of Nuclear Weapons: Taiwan's Decisive Role

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Summary

Taiwan's position in the Global Nuclear Order is important but underappreciated. Observers might mistakenly assume that the only way to influence nuclear stability or practice deterrence is by possessing nuclear weapons. Taiwan has no plans or capability to develop them. Despite this, Taiwan is at the forefront of global trends in conventional deterrence. In the 21st century, the country has developed a small number of long-range weapons to support its more traditional capacity to counter the Chinese military in the Taiwan Strait itself. A direct nuclear strike by China against Taiwan is highly unlikely, but this is not the only scenario where Taiwan interacts with global nuclear politics. Due to the nature of China's dual-use (nuclear and non-nuclear) weapons, such as missiles and aircraft, Taiwanese counterstrikes against Chinese missile and bomber units will also degrade China's nuclear deterrent against the US. This conventional deterrence posture enables Taiwan to influence the nuclear threshold in future crises and conflicts. This fact is underestimated in public discourse in the Anglosphere and Europe.

Despite enormous pressures and limited support from international institutions, Taiwan has disavowed responding to the threat of China with nuclear weapons. It has also made significant efforts to stop the malicious export of Taiwanese technologies for weapons production.[1] These efforts have largely gone unnoticed in the international disarmament community, however.

The analysis in this report points to three main recommendations for policymakers in Taiwan and its partners.

- Deterrence requires assurances as well as threats – Taiwanese and US policymakers should agree on assurances they can communicate to the CCP leadership to signal a desire to keep a future war limited in scope.
- Deterrence requires revealing capabilities. Taiwan should consider revealing more information about its long-range capabilities – either publicly or through deliberate leaks – while keeping the most sensitive information secret, such as the number of missiles in the stockpile.
- The international disarmament and arms control communities must do more to recognise Taiwan's commitment to global norms on nuclear weapons and increase their criticism of China's nuclear threats to Taiwan's security.

Locating Taiwan in the Global Nuclear Order

That Taiwan occupies a unique position in global nuclear politics should not be surprising. In foreign and security policy, no other state shares the significant challenges of a threatening great power neighbour, a lack of formal diplomatic recognition, and a world-leading technological base. These factors combine into a serious and overlooked importance of Taiwan in the context of global nuclear politics. According to a growing number of scholars and government officials in multiple countries, the world is entering a Third Nuclear Age.[2] This shorthand refers to a return of great power politics, the simultaneous emergence and maturation of novel strategic technologies and the rapid erosion of institutions and treaties previously limiting the worst excesses of competition. Taiwan is both influencing and under the influence of all of these trends.

Taiwan's significance or involvement in these trends may not be immediately apparent to all onlookers. After all, Taiwan has no nuclear weapons of its own, and there are no signs that this will change. This is quite different to South Korea, which also faces a belligerent nuclear-armed neighbour but has a public debate that is increasingly open to acquiring nuclear weapons.[3] Many other US allies and partners are seeing increased demand for their own nuclear arsenals. Taiwan is taking a drastically different approach, preserving its commitments to international norms and principles of non-proliferation.

The threat of Chinese nuclear weaponry towards Taiwan is less explicit or direct than North Korea's threats towards the South. Instead, nuclear threats between the US and China reflect on Taiwan in a sometimes-unintuitive manner. To begin to understand this dynamic, it is necessary to explore the nature of Taiwan's deterrence posture.

Conventional deterrence and uncomfortable questions

While it may surprise observers, Taiwan is increasingly less reliant on the US for access to advanced weaponry. That is not to say Taiwan does not need US arms imports. President Lai Ching-te's plan for an additional $40 billion (USD) in defence spending will likely involve major purchases of American equipment.[4] Spare parts, used to ensure continued operations of both US- and some domestic-origin systems, constitute continued reliance in some areas.[5] However, in the mid-2020s, the country is no longer totally reliant on its benefactor. An analysis by SIPRI, endorsed by Taiwan's INDSR analyst Su Tzu-yun,[6] demonstrated that 64% of defence procurement is domestically produced.[7]

It is developing a substantial arsenal of domestically designed and manufactured conventional weapons that could deny Chinese attempts to invade or blockade Taiwan in the future. Taiwan is increasingly able to present China with a strategy of **conventional** deterrence. The 2025 Quadrennial Defence Review terms this 'multi-domain deterrence' and 'multi-domain denial'.[8] Taiwan is explicitly practising deterrence without nuclear weapons, in contrast to the highest

profile form of deterrence during the Cold War. The theory is similar – threatening the use of force in an attempt to convince an adversary not to attack.

In the imagination of Anglosphere observers, Taiwan's capabilities to sink Chinese warships and landing craft are probably most prominent, along with air defence missiles to defend against Chinese air raids. The dominant discourse emanating from Washington is for Taipei to adopt a Porcupine Strategy that tends to emphasise short-range defence and criticise Taiwanese efforts to develop long-range capabilities.[9] Taiwan does possess a range of anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles that fulfil tactical-range roles. However, Taiwan has a growing arsenal of advanced, non-nuclear weapons with ranges capable of hitting targets deep inside China.[10] Analysts speculate that the Ching Tien hypersonic missile will have a range between 1,200km and 2,000km,[11] allowing Taiwanese leaders to order strikes on the headquarters building of the PLA in Beijing, for example, or a variety of other military targets.

The uncomfortable question when designing a deterrent force, particularly for a socially liberal, democratic country, is "how much is enough"? In polite, public government politics, this can be expressed in numbers of missiles. For strategic analysis, it must boil down to an honest analysis of how many enemy soldiers must be killed before the adversary gives up. As Russia continues its disastrous illegal invasion, Ukraine has inflicted hundreds of thousands of casualties. President Putin has faced political problems as a result but has maintained tight control regardless. As such, the war goes on.

Ukraine's situation is a relevant comparison for Taiwan. Conventional deterrence there means threatening to kill large numbers of PLA troops, either in their transport ships or in naval vessels attempting to strangle maritime trade routes. If deterrence were to fail, this hypothetical would need to be put into action. Success would rest on whether Taiwan could destroy enough PLA equipment (and kill enough personnel) to prevent them from trying a second or third attempt to invade or blockade. Convincing the CCP leadership of the credibility of this scenario would be the successful implementation of deterrence by denial. That is, ensuring the undesirable enemy adversary action would fail, so the adversary thereby never even makes the attempt in the first place.

It is impossible to know in advance whether PLA casualties would destabilise the CCP regime, however. Given their control of the information space in the PRC and their many methods of political control, CCP leaders may feel confident enough that a public backlash (from bereaved loved ones of dead soldiers) could be dismissed. Disturbingly, losing large numbers of troops might increase the CCP and PRC public commitment to a kinetic campaign against Taiwan because of a need to make the losses mean something through eventual victory.

The more traditional conceptualisation of deterrence by punishment does not apply in Taiwan's case. It lacks the intent or capability to kill the enormous numbers of civilians envisaged by Western, Soviet and PRC nuclear strategists in their pursuit of this approach. Arguably, Taiwan does not possess these killing capabilities because it lacks the intent required

to gain them. Military strategy is about achieving political ends: Taiwanese strategy cannot and should not undermine Taiwan's liberal-democratic values. If this intent were to change for some reason, Taiwan would still lack the weaponry to engage in mass attacks on the PRC public as some kind of attempt to coerce the CCP leadership into peace. While Taiwan possesses missiles that can hit PRC cities, they cannot devastate them in a comparable manner to nuclear weapons. Even the semi-mythical proposal for a punishing raid to destroy the Three Gorges Dam[12] would be devastating without meeting the threshold of catastrophe offered by nuclear strikes.

Taiwan is also unlikely to attempt to violently punish the CCP civilian leadership directly, unlike explicit plans in South Korea that target the leadership of the North.[13] A Taiwanese legislator has welcomed US plans to financially sanction CCP officials in the event of an invasion.[14] Moreover, as the US law of manual points out, there is an international custom not to attack national leaders during wartime, not least because some authority must survive to negotiate peace.[15]

Taiwan's approach to deterrence, despite being solely reliant on conventional weapons[16] and diplomatic means, nevertheless has significant implications for nuclear stability.

Taiwan and US-China nuclear stability

A large proportion of PLA Rocket Force and Air Force bases lie within range of Taiwanese missiles.[17] In the event of a blockade or invasion, China will deploy weaponry from these bases to attack Taiwan and any supporting coalition. Taiwan would therefore be justified in attacking these sites in China in order to protect Taiwanese troops and civilians. In the 2000s, Taiwanese defence practitioners emphasised combat in the Strait itself, rather than strikes against PRC territory or battles on or over Taiwanese land.[18] Given the procurement of long-range weapons like the Hsiung Feng IIE and the initial deployment of the Ching Tien missile, along with hints in policy statements, there is a (somewhat) new paradigm: deep strikes against PRC military infrastructure.[19]

While Taiwanese leaders may not wish for these strikes to affect US-China nuclear stability,[20] the nature of these systems and China's military posture means that some impact is inevitable. The US, China and Taiwan must therefore all grapple with the outcomes from Taiwan's capabilities in times of peace, crisis and war.

Table 1: Chinese missiles facing Taiwan[21]

Type	Range	Estimated No. Launchers
Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile	3,000-5,500km	250
Medium Range Ballistic Missile	1,000 km–3,000 km	300
Short-range Ballistic Missile	300 km–1,000 km	300
Ground Launched Cruise Missile	150	>1,500 km

There was a sense of surprise among some policymakers and journalists that Ukraine's decisions could impact Russian nuclear deterrence and threat-making after the full-scale invasion. After all, Ukraine had no nuclear weapons, no intent to degrade the Russian nuclear arsenal and few weapons capable of doing so. However, Ukraine defied thinly veiled Russian nuclear threats not to destroy the bridge connecting Crimea to Russia. It went even further with Operation Spiderweb, an elaborate scheme to smuggle drones into Russia to undertake attacks on based for bomber aircraft. For Ukraine, destroying these bombers was an important step toward reducing the cruise missile attacks on its cities, carried out by these aircraft. However, for Russia, these bombers were a part of its nuclear forces. Any attack on nuclear weapons infrastructure, according to their doctrine, could warrant nuclear retaliation.[22] None was forthcoming. In the event of a war or major crisis, Taiwan will face similar decisions and dynamics.

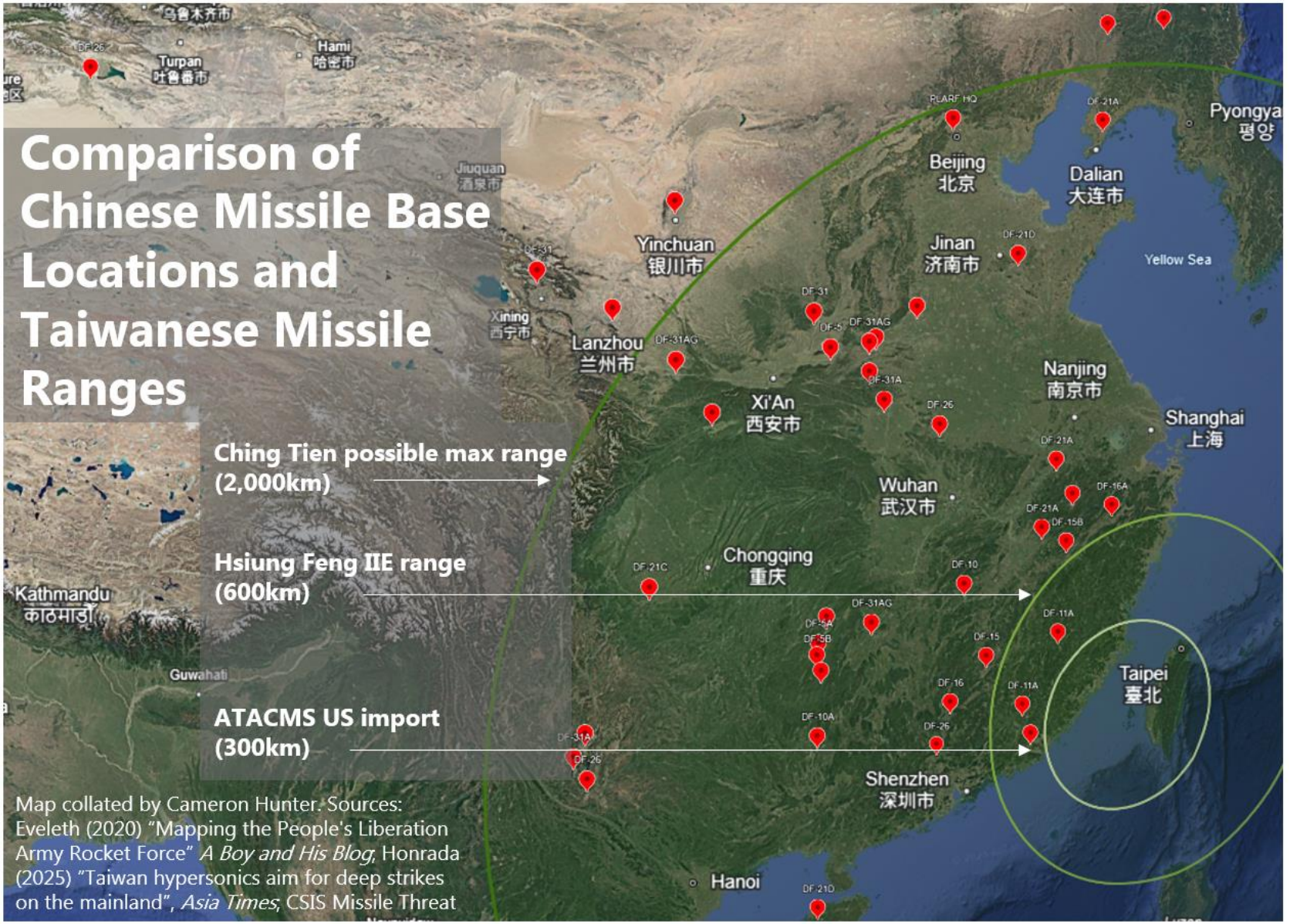
US analysts are already concerned with the potential effects of US actions on China's threshold for nuclear use,[23] but rarely consider the effects of Taiwanese long-range conventional strikes in the same way. There are two concepts of stability that are useful to consider in this context. The first is strategic stability, defined as the likelihood that one side will see a possibility for a successful attack. The second is crisis stability, more specifically, capturing the chance that a political crisis escalates to war.

China uses the same sensors to target Taiwan as it would to attack US military assets in the region. Additionally, many of the long-range missile forces in the PLA are capable of launching nuclear or non-nuclear payloads. In a future conflict, Taiwanese efforts at self-defence would likely involve destroying these sensors and missiles. However, as this happens, the PLA's ability to deter the US will also be degraded. In peacetime, Taiwan's latent potential here affects strategic stability by changing the calculations of the US and China on the desirability of starting a conflict. During a crisis, Taiwanese threats and actual strikes against China will

modify the risk that the crisis becomes a wider war. This is not an argument that Taiwan alone controls the chance of war. Rather, this analysis should be a corrective to policy elites in the Anglosphere who mistakenly assume Taiwan does not influence US-China stability.

It is not only ground-based missiles that are held at risk by Taiwanese long-range precision strike weaponry. At the September 2025 Victory Day Parade, China officially debuted a new air-launched ballistic missile, the JL-1, for its Xi'an H-6 bomber aircraft.[24] Before the re-emphasis of a nuclear role for this aircraft, it was operated as a conventional cruise missile carrier and for signalling threat with overflights of contested territories in the South China Sea.[25] In the event of a war or crisis, Taiwan has a strong interest in attacking the bases from where the H-6 will operate. However, with its nuclear role, as the PLA Air Force loses these aircraft, China will simultaneously experience a reduction of its nuclear capabilities even if this is not Taiwan's intent. As China deploys its new stealth bomber, the Xi'an H-20, this dynamic will only intensify at it will have a similar dual role and will present a tempting target on the ground.[26] The H-20's substantially longer range and utility against US territory would make any losses even more sensitive for the US-China nuclear balance in a crisis or war situation.

Consequently, Taiwan will manipulate the risk of nuclear war, consciously or not, much as Ukraine has. There are major implications for decision makers in Taiwan and its partner countries. The US will have to respect Taiwan's ability to influence the nuclear balance between the US and China. As in the case of Ukraine, the US appetite for nuclear risk will be a major variable in how it approaches material support for Taiwan and may attempt to impose limits on what Taiwan can target. The US will have leverage from the threat of restricting access to military intelligence for weapons targeting or to future arms shipments. Taiwanese leaders will, in turn, have to consider trade-offs between achieving operational military goals, such as reducing the quantity of Chinese airstrikes hitting Taiwanese civilians, and balancing partners' perceptions of nuclear risk.


Comparison of Chinese Missile Base Locations and Taiwanese Missile Ranges
Ching Tien possible max range (2,000km)
Hsiung Feng IIE range (600km)
ATACMS US import (300km)
Map collated by Cameron Hunter. Sources: Eveleth (2020) "Mapping the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force" A Boy and His Blog; Honrada (2025) "Taiwan hypersonics aim for deep strikes on the mainland", Asia Times; CSIS Missile Threat
Beijing 北京
Dalian 大连市
Pyongya 평양
Yellow Sea
Jinan 济南市
Yinchuan 银川市
Lanzhou 兰州市
Xi'An 西安市
Nanjing 南京市
Shanghai 上海
Wuhan 武汉市
Chongqing 重庆
Taipei 臺北
Shenzhen 深圳市
Hanoi
Kathmandu
Guwahati
Turpan
Hami
Jiuquan
Xining

Taiwan's good nuclear citizenship merits greater international support.

The preceding two sections of this paper have introduced how Taiwan's conventional deterrence posture has important nuclear implications for the US and China. This will be a complex problem set for Taiwanese leaders, given the history of democratic Taiwan as a good citizen in the global nuclear order.[27] Now that Taiwan has shut down its civilian nuclear reactors,[28] there is virtually no potential to divert or enrich the nuclear materials required to make a bomb.

Taiwan has no plans, limited capabilities and no domestic political advocacy to develop its own nuclear weapons. When Taiwan was under authoritarian rule, this situation was reversed. President Chiang Kai-shek may have first sought nuclear weapons in the 1950s.[29] The US consistently opposed this exploratory program, with Taiwan perhaps only finally abandoning its latent capability in 1988.[30]

Because Taiwan is not a UN member state, it cannot be a party to most of the key institutions that constitute the core of the global nuclear order. In spite of this, the arms control community considers Taiwan to be critical for the success of non-proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons because of its high technology capabilities.[31] Its record is as good as similar jurisdictions, according to a study by arms control exports, which in turn recommended that INTERPOL grant Taiwan observer status to aid its efforts in further suppressing illicit technology transfers.[32]

The international arms control and disarmament communities should be more vocal in criticising China's double standard towards Taiwan on nuclear threats. There is a global norm that conducting a nuclear attack is unacceptable – the so-called nuclear taboo.[33] At a surface level, China's official policies and rhetoric reflect this. Its official policy is for No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. However, both international and Taiwanese experts are sceptical that China's NFU policy would persist during a war.[34] Additionally, China has recently re-emphasised its commitment, in line with other nuclear-armed states, not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-armed states.[35] Clearly, China does not view Taiwan as a state, limiting the importance of the pledge. While a direct nuclear attack by China is unlikely, there are other relevant scenarios. The Taiwanese government have hardened multiple key command bunkers against the disabling effects of an electromagnetic pulse from a high-altitude nuclear detonation.[36] Furthermore, Chinese officials have implied they would consider nuclear attacks against Japan,[37] an important, non-nuclear-armed partner for Taiwan in any contingency. China's continuing policy of threatening nuclear use is hypocritical in the context of its international commitments.

Taiwan's national security strategy relies on maintaining the moral high ground and support from the public around the world. Opinion polls during the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine provide a relevant scenario – the public in several countries feared Russian

nuclear use.[38] This, and the same fears held by Western leaders, were a factor in limiting support for Ukraine. President Joe Biden initially refused to transfer long-range missiles to Ukraine in 2022, only lifting the ban in 2024.[39] The PLA has long considered the effect on global public opinion in the design of its military campaigns.[40] China will likely attempt to limit Taiwan's options for deterrence and actual strikes by appealing to a sense of nuclear risk among the publics of Taiwan's partners. Leaders of Taiwan and its security partners must be prepared to counter these narratives and materially respond to China's efforts to manipulate nuclear risk in a crisis.

Understanding Taiwan's agency and constraints in nuclear politics

Successful deterrence rests on the successful communication of a threat. Taiwan's conventional weapons, domestically developed and largely political independent of the US, pose a threat to China's strategic forces. This fact is not well understood outside the Taiwanese government, however, and the signals might not be reaching Beijing as strongly as required. Taiwan should therefore consider revealing more information about its long-range capabilities – either publicly or through deliberate leaks – while keeping the most sensitive information secret, such as the number of missiles in the stockpile. Because Taiwan now possesses weapons capable of hitting Chinese systems used for both conventional and nuclear war, Taiwan has a growing agency to affect nuclear stability in East Asia. Both the US and China have reasons to attempt to limit this agency, but all parties will have to adjust to this new situation.

Deterrence requires assurances as well as threats. Taiwanese and US policymakers should agree on assurances they can communicate to the Communist Party leadership to signal a desire to keep a future war limited in scope. Without conceding anything, Taiwan and the US could instead publicly affirm their intentions towards China, such as disavowing a campaign of regime change that Beijing has feared for decades.[41] This will, in turn, strengthen deterrence by signalling a limited requirement for success.

This report has asked uncomfortable questions about the practice of deterrence. For a peaceful, defensively motivated democracy like Taiwan, it is (and indeed should be) painful to consider these scenarios involving war. Under such difficult circumstances, Taiwan has adhered to its values and embodied good nuclear citizenship in the global non-proliferation regime. The international disarmament and arms control communities must do more to recognise Taiwan's commitment to global norms on nuclear weapons. This is doubly the case when China has committed itself not to make nuclear threats against non-nuclear armed opponents and to eventually dismantle its own nuclear weapons. Instead, China is rapidly increasing the size of its nuclear forces. There is, therefore, ample room for the international community to increase its criticism of China's nuclear-enabled threats to Taiwan's security.

[1] Semiconductors and advanced computing capability in general are used to make advanced weapons, even for the supercomputers required for nuclear weapon design and simulation testing. See Sujai Shivakumar and Charles Wessner, 'Semiconductors and National Defense: What Are the Stakes?', *CSIS*, 8 June 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/semiconductors-and-national-defense-what-are-stakes; Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 'El Capitan: NNSA's first exascale machine', N.D., https://asc.llnl.gov/exascale/el-capitan

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[15] Office of General Counsel, 'Department of Defense Law of War Manual', June 2015, https://ogc.osd.mil/Portals/99/department_of_defense_law_of_war_manual.pdf, p. 225

[16] In nuclear strategy terms, the conceptualisation of 'conventional' includes techniques elsewhere considered 'unconventional' such as uncrewed vehicles and electronic warfare. Computer network exploitation and psychological operations are also relevant to Taiwan's defence but are beyond the scope of the discussion in this paper.

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