

Europe and Deterrence in East Asia

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The European Union needs to contribute to the system of deterrence as it currently exists in East Asia, in particular in regard to Taiwan.

The EU has a major stake in a stable China-Taiwan relationship. A cross-strait crisis would trigger economic sanctions and counter-sanctions between the West and China. This would probably mean the end of economic relations between Europe and China. It could lead to a Sino-U.S. war and also draw European nations, most of whom are military allies of the United States, into the conflict.

In order to help prevent such a crisis, the European Union and its member states need to support not just the status quo between China and Taiwan, but also that between China and the United States.

Deterrence based on armed force has long played a key role in the continuation of Taiwan's autonomous status. It has served to maintain stability across the Taiwan Strait, and to prevent a war between China and the United States. How much longer the system will continue to function, however, is unclear.

The military balance between China and the United States is changing to the advantage of the former. China is increasing its military pressure on Taiwan, especially by sending increasing numbers of warplanes to and beyond the median line between the island and the Chinese mainland. Meanwhile China itself is under increasing pressure from the United States, which is expanding its regional alliances in Asia and limiting China's access to foreign technology.

Although armed deterrence cannot preserve stability in East Asia indefinitely, for now there is no better alternative. The European Union can make important contributions to the region's deterrence mechanism.

To start, the EU's member states can do more to support the United States' role as a military balancer in East Asia. The greater their ability to protect themselves and prevent Russian hegemony in Europe, the more the U.S. can focus its attention on Asia. Europeans should therefore spend more on defense than they already started doing since the start of the Ukraine War. They need to do so in ways that free up U.S. strategic attention and military assets. As long as it cannot defend itself, Europe should stay away from any kind of military role in Asia.

Europe should also take steps that relate directly to the situation in East Asia. Deterring China requires both a credible threat and credible reassurance. The United States with its military might, and supported by its regional allies, is well capable of taking care of the threat side. China's increased military power means that it has become uncertain what the outcome of a China-U.S. war would be. But it remains clear that such a war would potentially be highly destructive, including for China.

The EU's most effective contribution to deterring China is not by threatening it but through reassuring China that it makes good sense for it *not* to resort to aggression toward Taiwan.

Providing reassurance is no guarantee that China will not, at some point, use force against Taiwan. Yet if there is no reassurance, deterrence does not work, and what remains is a highly tense and militarized stand-off controlled by no one.

The EU should therefore make clear that as long as China does not use military force against Taiwan, it will not become economically or technologically isolated from the West. European leaders must do more to convince China that it is not simply a matter of time before such ties will be severed anyway. To this end the EU must clearly define the scope of its current "de-risking" campaign.

The EU should also be more outspoken about how it views the status of Taiwan. The U.S. government has been very explicit that it opposes any unilateral changes to the status quo and that it does not support Taiwan independence. The EU member states and the European Commission have a similar position on China-Taiwan relations, and yet they have been less articulate about opposing Taiwan independence. The EU and its member states should clearly state that they would not recognize Taiwan as an independent state if the island would unilaterally declare its independence. Doing so limits the risk of a conflict between China and Taiwan, while it does not prevent the European Union from having close economic and technological ties with Taiwan.

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