

Above, where seated in his tower,
I saw Conquest depicted in his power
There was a sharpened sword above his head
That hung there by the thinnest simple thread.
Canterbury Tales, Chaucer

A matter of time

Taiwan and a European doctrine of deterrence

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Damocles' sword is dangling dangerously. Nobody can claim to know if or when its thin thread will snap. Deterrence is no fix, but the mere attempt to win time to let the situation change and our capabilities to influence it grow. This time we must seize. I argue that we must now do what we can and aspire to be able to do more in the future. Deterring an attack on Taiwan is an issue of European security, plain and simple. The European Union's (EU) Indo-Pacific strategy stated that the 'display of force... in the Taiwan Strait may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity.' Deterrence also means not doing things that can be – wilfully, strategically, or in earnest – construed as provocation. A thin thread indeed.

Timelines | will the sword drop?

The Taiwanese Ministry of National Defence estimates that from 2025 onwards an invasion may be feasible for China, if the US does not get directly involved, that is. The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) ambition is to have a 'world class military' by 2027, which is broadly interpreted as being able to resist what the People's Republic of China (PRC) would perceive as an act of American aggression in its backyard.

Xi Jinping sticks to the goal of peaceful reunification without ruling out the use of force. Xi's next term as president of the PRC will start in 2028 – he will then be 75. In the current term Xi seems set on crafting perhaps the largest upheaval of the Chinese political economy since Deng – a feat on which he stakes his leadership and is all but certain to succeed. It is very unlikely he will have a good chance of starting and winning a war before 2028 and could reasonably be expected to be occupied with organizing succession after. Then again, some argue that if his economic agenda fails, Xi may need another legacy project within a very small window of opportunity.

Worrying are the timelines driving Washington. 2024 could give us Trump. It is unclear what his leadership would bring Taiwan. Where Biden has been unprecedentedly willing to express his intention to aid Taiwan militarily, Trump before him casted a scramble of signals: the eagerness to confront China, as well as to do so over trade and trade alone, showing deep adoration for Xi's power and a complete disregard for America's role in protecting liberal democracy worldwide, to name but a few. China's rapid escalation of air identification zone incursions and other forms of intimidation have happened in response to what it construes as acts of US interference in the status quo, Pelosi's visit chief among them. A new Biden administration may be more provocative to Xi than another term of Trump – Trump would certainly bring more uncertainty. The US CHIPS Act aims to reduce American semiconductor dependency significantly by 2030. China is far further removed from the goal of self-reliance, continuing to fail to make its intermediate deadlines, and has fewer options for diversification. Taking TSMC by invasion is wholly unfeasible. Taiwan's life insurance with the US is thus running out quicker than that with China.

None of these timelines offer assurance. Great powers are in a perpetual state of existential paranoia. That is after all what the parable of Damocles teaches: the sword hangs over the head of those in power – Conquest – rather than those they may wish to conquer. Invasion would be catastrophic to China, the US, Taiwan and the world at large. This does not mean it will not happen. Taiwan is increasingly a screen on which the USA and PRC project their fear and hubris. This we must expect to persist – with ups and downs. Any European or Dutch policy on Taiwan should be considered against the background of these dangerous times. There is time for deterrence, though: making it through the next five years without a hot conflict is a goal worthy of pursuing.

Acting now | what the Netherlands can do for Taiwan

Taiwan's *Overall Defense Concept* defines success as preventing a PLA invasion as well as the CCP exerting political control over Taiwan. I believe the Netherlands can make contributions to the Taiwan's deterrent capacity in both dimensions in the short to medium term, even if these contributions do not answer to the larger historic dynamic of great power strife. Such aid should flow from Dutch strengths toward real Taiwanese needs.

Taiwan's information space is bombarded on a daily basis with cyber-attacks and disinformation. European NATO-members of strong cyber-capability – the Netherlands ranking among the top together with the United Kingdom, France and Estonia – could explore ways of aiding Taiwanese networks in resisting and lowering the costs of attacks. One option could be to lend ununiformed emergency response teams during peak attacks via an civilian capacity building cooperative platform with other likeminded countries.

The Netherlands could cooperate on shared research into the PLA's evolving capabilities in the cyber-domain and research into ways to counter as well as challenge the CCP's evolving global tactics of political warfare. There is a clear shared strategic challenge for Taiwan and European countries in this respect: third parties cultivating the narrative that the democratic world is in decay across the globe is hurting both Taiwanese and Dutch security interests. NGO and thinktank cooperation in these fields could make a real difference in building capacity to deal with such evolving threats. Taiwan shows us what is happening around the globe: political warfare is back.

Together with France, Germany and Italy, the Netherlands is one of the few EU countries within NATO deploying military presence in the Indo-Pacific. After the missions by the HNLMS Evertsen, the Dutch government has promised to organize such a mission every two years, the frigate HNLMS Tromp supposed to set sail March 2024. In the slipstream of these missions, the Netherlands could take a leading role in developing naval cooperation between European countries, especially with France and Germany. It could seize the moment of the new upcoming European Commission to prioritize European naval cooperation within NATO and simultaneously propose to hold joint Freedom of Navigation Operations in the Indo-Pacific under a EU flag, following a Team-Europe approach, as part of the often underused Coordinated Maritime Presence.

The missions should be about protecting international order from great power strife rather than hegemonic competition between the US and China. They could send a number of powerful signals at once: that the EU is intent on operating as an autonomous geostrategic bloc and views the Indo-Pacific as central to its security. To Taiwan, this shows that European countries are willing to step up even while facing a European war and uncertainty over the future of US leadership. To China, this shows that stability in the Indo-Pacific is not just a matter of Sino-US rivalry, but a matter of broader concern, to be discussed with European partners, too. Military diplomacy is a powerful tool: the upcoming missions in the Indo-Pacific should be used to engage likeminded countries in the region on the issue.

When it comes to the life-insurance provided by the Taiwanese semiconductor-industry, it is key that the industrial impulse given by the European Chips Act will not undercut the Taiwanese position, as some fear the American act does, whilst being mindful of the real European need to remain competitive in semi-con. Other key economic sectors ought not be forgotten: when Chinese coercive measures hit the Taiwanese agricultural industry, Japan was quick to offer relief and purchase more Taiwanese agricultural goods. This provides an example of how the Netherlands may help Taiwan remain resilient in the face of coercive measures.

Thinking long | toward a European doctrine of deterrence

Rather than making conflict impossible or forcing de-escalation, the power of deterrence lies in slowing down the pace of escalation – and building capacity in the meantime. The USA and the PRC are set on a path toward increased tensions for the foreseeable future. If European countries are intent on being able to shape that dynamic in the future, they must not only act now, but think long.

The EU's lack of voice on the big issues of global security is hindering its member states' ability to shape world order, even, I believe, more so than the lack of raw military might. As a thought leader on EU policy regarding China, the Indo-Pacific, economic security and a key shaper of the Strategic Compass, the Netherlands is well placed to help build strategic maturity, a European voice on the issues of our time. Such change is long-term, no quick fix.

With talks of the appointment of a European Commissioner for Economic Security in the new Commission, the Netherlands should seize the moment to think through how the EU and its member states can do more to project their power globally, and how to do so more systematically.

The potential for European power lies first and foremost in the value of access to its market. Xi knows this all too well, and so does Putin. The various packages of sanctions against Russia since its invasion of Ukraine have shown European resolve to use its economic power. Making clear how far European sanctions would go in case Taiwan were to be attacked could be the most powerful form of deterrence European countries have to offer. The praxis of the European Council is powerful, but a doctrine is lacking. Having such a doctrine – and communicating it, unabashedly – is what could translate economic potential into real deterrent power.

I will not presume to lay out a doctrine in a few sentences, but the basics can be sketched. Its stated aim should not be actor-specific, but rather claim as its mission the containment of great power strife. It should, furthermore, not only trigger sanctions against aggressors, but increased engagement with victims. Think of an Anti-Coercion Instrument with global reach, targeting hard security threats above and beyond economic coercion, or indeed a version of the recently floated notion of an Economic Article 5, whereby the EU forms the basis of a global coalition of states that promise to counter great power escalation by economic means.

Crucially, such a doctrine should not just stipulate what offenses cause which punishment, but the advantages that playing by the rules brings. Deterrence only works on the presumption of innocence and the promise of a future that works for all. Such an imagined future is now painfully lacking in the narratives of the USA and PRC over Taiwan. It is all conquest and gloom. Even sketching something else could make a difference.

Any formal doctrine would require fundamental changes in the way foreign policy decisions are made within the EU itself. This is not feasible in the short-term. And yet, the all too painful presence of Damocles' sword should not wholly distract us from thinking long. It might be there, dangling dangerously, for a long time still.