
Great Power Deterrence: The Threat of an American Blockade at the Strait of Malacca

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Abstract:

The evolving relationship between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is the defining event of our geopolitical era. This paper explores the strategic posture of the United States toward the PRC, with a particular focus on China's fossil fuel-related insecurity and American strategy to leverage this vulnerability. The Strait of Malacca is a vital maritime choke point for Chinese fossil fuel imports. This paper argues that the threat of an American blockade of Chinese imports at the Strait of Malacca exemplifies a successful deterrent against serious Chinese military aggression. The United States has the requisite military capabilities to blockade the Strait of Malacca, even when the considerations of proximity and third-party involvement are accounted for. In the event of such a blockade, fossil fuel inputs would be restricted from China to an extent that the industrial Chinese economy would fail in its most basic functions. By threatening a blockade at the Strait of Malacca, the United States deters a significant Chinese military escalation.

Keywords: Strait of Malacca, deterrence theory, United States, China, hegemonic competition

Introduction

At the start of the 2020s, the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (PRC) formalized their relationship as direct strategic adversaries. As China grew to rival American economic primacy, it began to impose its will on its neighbors and its rhetoric became increasingly militant. The question of Taiwanese sovereignty loomed. Many began to speculate on the likely occurrences and outcome of a future military confrontation between the two great powers. A key aspect of the strategic calculus from the American perspective became clear: the Strait of Malacca represented a serious point of vulnerability for the adversary and was therefore of primary strategic concern. Every day, over 21 million barrels of oil pass through the Strait of Malacca, including the large majority of all Chinese fossil fuel imports (Zeihan, 2022). This paper will examine this vulnerability in the Chinese security context, and in particular, how American strategy aims to leverage this point of weakness.

The total arsenal of capabilities at the disposal of strategic decision-makers of great powers is not limited to direct military aggression. The mere threat of military repercussions is very often all that is needed to coerce another geopolitical actor. As such, "mere threats" constitute a significant portion of the strategy of any great power. There are a variety of threats-as-strategies, but a common example is the deterrent measure. This paper examines the posture of the United States toward Chinese interests in the Strait of Malacca to determine if the posture constitutes a true instance of deterrence. This paper argues that the threat of an American blockade of Chinese imports at the Strait of Malacca exemplifies a successful deterrent against any serious Chinese military aggression on the basis of the decisive American military advantage and the devastating consequences of such a blockade on Chinese society.

In pursuit of this thesis, a series of sub-theses will be given and substantiated. Once proven and taken together, these sub-theses will sustain the thesis. These sub-theses are as follows: 1. The United States has the capabilities necessary to suspend Chinese imports at the Strait of Malacca. 2. The United States would be supported or at least unopposed by the other major strategic actors in Asia in a serious conflict against China. 3. China cannot exist as a functioning industrial society without those imports that a blockade at the Strait of Malacca would restrict.

Theoretical Framework

In this investigation, a judgment will be made on whether a particular geopolitical interaction properly instantiates deterrence in its successful form. It is therefore necessary to provide a clear account of the meaning of deterrence. Deterrence involves an actor coercing an opposing actor with threats, with the explicit aim of preventing an unwanted action from being carried out by the opposition. According to Dr. Thazha Varkey Paul, three elements constitute every true instance of deterrence. First, the deterring actor must have an appropriate military capacity (Paul, 2009, 2). Second, the deterring actor must be able to project the credibility of its threat in a manner that inspires sufficient fear in the adversary (Paul, 2009, 2). Third, there must exist a perpetual and robust line of communication between the two actors (Paul, 2009, 2). Furthermore, the theory relies entirely on the assumption that states act rationally in their own interest (Paul, 2009, 5). With this core assumption, the theory advocates that actors aim to manipulate the supposedly rational cost-benefit analysis of their adversary (Paul, 2009, 5). Without the rational component, there can be no expectation that an opposing state will refrain from unwanted action as a result of threats alone.

Within the conceptual academic framework of deterrence, a variety of subtypes have been outlined. This investigation will only explore the delineation of deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. The former refers to the more intuitive notion of deterrence, in which an actor threatens retaliatory measures that will inflict pain upon an adversary (Paul, 2009, 2-3). In contrast, deterrence by denial entails that the deterring state credibly threatens to nullify the benefits that would have otherwise been enjoyed by the adversary as a result of their undertaking of the unwanted action (Paul, 2009, 2-3). In both senses, there is an attempt to affect the cost-benefit analysis of the adversary through the utilization of negative possibilities as threats. This investigation aims to evaluate whether our case study adheres neatly to either sub-type of deterrence.

China's Economic Rise

It is often argued that the scale of China's modern economic rise indicates, or even necessitates, that a Chinese strategic hegemony is imminent. In the early decades of the 21st century, the PRC enjoyed economic growth at a scale unprecedented in human history. Over the past four decades, Chinese economic growth quadrupled that of the United States (Allison, 2022, 2). In absolute terms, China's economy grew from \$1.2 trillion in 2000 to \$17.7 trillion in 2021, while the economy of the United States in the same period grew from \$10.3 trillion to \$24.0 trillion (Allison, 2022, 2). Moreover, China's economy leads that of the Americans in purchasing power parity (PPP), a metric that measures how much a nation can purchase while controlling for domestic costs and currency strength (Nye, 2019, 73). Finally, the Chinese population exceeds that of the United States by approximately one billion people. Critics of the thesis of this paper would argue that China's economic rise was a natural consequence of its colossal size and, on this basis, infer that its unprecedented economic growth in the early 21st century will continue at roughly its current pace. For these reasons, it

is argued that China will succeed in seriously disrupting America's present-day dominant position in global geopolitical affairs.

However, the unquestionable advancements in the Chinese economic position realized in recent decades do not necessarily lead to a proportionate advancement in China's strategic capacity. America's economy is the foundation of its strategic position, but it is certainly not the limit of its advantages.

Sub-thesis 1: Relative Military Capabilities

At present, the United States maintains a position of dominance over the PRC across the vast majority of domains that constitute great power rivalry. This decisive advantage enables the credibility of the threat of an American blockade at the Strait of Malacca. The United States has a larger, better-funded, and more capable navy and air force. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the U.S. Navy fleet of warships amounted to 3.6 million tons in 2024, while China's fleet totaled two million tons in the same time period (International Institute, 2024). The United States enjoys the advantages of 11 aircraft carriers compared to China's two, 73 Destroyers compared to China's 42, and 15 Cruisers compared to China's eight (International Institute, 2024). China's superiority in total number of vessels overstates Chinese naval capabilities because the majority of these vessels are small and lacking in range (Sawant, 2021).

The United States enjoys a decisive advantage over the PRC in military technology. American fifth-generation fighter aircraft are undetectable to an extent that their Chinese competitors are not, and American submarines can remain underwater far longer as a result of innovative nuclear energy generation mechanisms (Sawant, 2021). Regarding relative technological capabilities, Mangesh Sawant writes: "China would be decimated by the superior US military. China has not dealt with any external crisis, nor has fought full-scale

wars in modern history. A technological gap exists between the United States and China. They definitely are not in the same league.” (Sawant, 2021). The true magnitude of American technological capabilities is not known publicly. However, U.S. military technology is superior to such an extent that the PRC views its piracy of American intellectual property as a core tenant of its own research and development for defense (Tosi, 2020, 99). The technological advantages intersect with American superiority in tonnage to create a context entirely antagonistic to the prospects of successful Chinese military aggression against American authority.

It might be argued that the relative proximity of China to the Strait of Malacca entails a big enough advantage to China that it alone suffices to overcome all that has been shown thus far in favour of American military preeminence. However, the Strait of Malacca is located over 1000 miles from Chinese territory. China’s military has grown substantially, but it remains unable to project naval power far from its borders (US Naval Institute, 2024, 4-5). China’s navy in its current form is purpose-built for a confrontation in East Asia; the majority of its Vessels cannot perform to a sufficient standard in a military conflict far from the Chinese coast (Sawant, 2021). Moreover, the United States enjoys limited partnerships with countries with more direct access to the Strait of Malacca compared to China. As an example, India is located to the north-west of the Strait and must be passed in relative proximity when traveling from the Persian Gulf to China (Zeihan, Disunited). It is therefore conceivable that the U.S. might even hold the advantage of proximity to friendly territory in any potential blockade of the Strait. Regardless, it is clear that the factor of proximity does not favour China to such an overwhelming degree that it overcomes all that has been demonstrated thus far in support of American military preeminence.

Sub-thesis 2: Regional Strategic Alignments

The American network of allies serves as another decisive advantage against the PRC on every level of military analysis. The United States maintains a military budget larger than those of China, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, and South Korea, combined, but the gravity of this advantage is understated until it is considered that the majority of states on this list are reliable strategic partners of the United States. The extent of American military capabilities is properly accounted for only when reliable allied capabilities are factored in. For this reason, the extent of American capabilities within the Asian security context in particular must be understood with reference to the allies in the region and the likelihood of support from each influential actor.

The United States would be supported or at least unopposed by the other major strategic actors in Asia in a military blockade at the Strait of Malacca. Australia and Japan are close partners within the American strategic network and would therefore certainly not impede American efforts against China. On the contrary, they would likely assist in the effort. Australia is within the *Five Eyes* network of intelligence sharing between the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Given the transparency of crucial information within the anglophone world, it is hard to conceive of a closer relationship between sovereign states. Moreover, Australian leadership is threatened by the prospects of a Chinese hegemonic power structure in Asia (Pan, 2024, 20). Australia would, therefore, certainly favour the United States in any confrontation with China. Japanese society feels deep-rooted historical animosity towards China (Hao, 2015, 2). Moreover, Japan similarly recognizes Chinese ambitions to dominate the region and understands the dire implications of a Chinese hegemonic order in Asia on Japanese interests (Liff, 2019, 465). Japan would either directly assist with military operations, or indirectly aid the effort in the manner it deems itself capable of. Either way, Japan would certainly favour an American victory.

India is less aligned with the American strategic network compared to either Japan or Australia, but would nevertheless certainly favour an American victory over the PRC. During the Cold War, India explicitly refrained from closely aligning to either geopolitical pole, and aspects of that philosophy are preserved in Indian strategic thought up to the present day (Alam, 2017, 275). However, India recognizes China as a major strategic rival and a growing threat. Indian leadership perceives the ambitions of the PRC to dominate the region (Alam, 2017, 284). In a choice between a hegemonic power located in the Western hemisphere and a hegemonic power on India's northern border, India cannot choose the more proximate potential threat. Anwar Alam asserts: "India sees the USA as a crucial partner in containing the rising influence of China in the region. In other words, India is increasingly concerned with the Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, Africa, and even in West Asia and South Asia, which poses a threat to the regional hegemony of India and, hence, pushes India within the orbit of American influence" (Alam, 2017, 284). Ongoing border disputes in the Himalayan region leading to small-scale combat between Chinese and Indian forces have only furthered India's desire to oppose the PRC (US Institute, 2020, 34). As a result, the United States can be certain that India will not stand in its way in any military efforts against China. Beyond that, India would likely participate in efforts against the PRC and serve as a great asset because of its proximity to vital shipping lanes for Chinese fossil fuel imports.

Sub-thesis 3: China's Strategic Vulnerability

After having now established that the United States has the requisite military capabilities to blockade Chinese trade in the Strait of Malacca, this investigation will examine the severe consequences that a blockade would have on the Chinese economic system.

The status of China's fossil fuel security is the quintessence of vulnerability. The success of a state has always been largely determined by its geographic circumstance, but as technology has evolved, the logic that defined a given geographic characteristic as favourable has changed (Zeihan, 2020). By the Industrial Age, the new "favourable geographic characteristic" became access to a hydrocarbon reservoir - the base inputs for fossil fuel products (Zeihan, 2020). Those without immediate access to their own hydrocarbon needs became insecure in their position. At present, only 10% of the global population lives within 1000 miles of their source of fossil fuel (Zeihan, 2020). Among vulnerable countries, China stands out as an extreme case. China sources 80% of its fossil fuel imports through the Strait of Malacca from origins in the Persian Gulf and Africa over 6000 nautical miles away (Dent, 2023). These imports account for a sobering 60-70% of total Chinese fossil fuel consumption (Zeihan, 2020) (Dent, 2023). If the Strait were to be forcefully closed by the United States, the configuration of the Southeast Asian landmass entails that only a very limited number of alternative routes are available. All of these alternative passages involve choke points similar to the Strait of Malacca, and any power that could maintain a blockade at Malacca would also be able to close the other choke points in the limited number of alternative passages through South East Asia toward China. The magnitude of the Chinese dependence on Malacca-bound imports and the length and insecurity of the transportation route entail that Chinese fossil fuel demands could become dramatically underserved if international events were to unfold in a manner unfavourable to the PRC. China's inability to guarantee its maritime access to the Persian Gulf through sufficient naval capabilities is the foundation of this problem.

China's industrial economy will face catastrophic consequences and fail in its most basic functions if it is abruptly denied access to critical fossil fuel products. Fossil fuel inputs are necessary in most modern economic processes, either directly or otherwise. In an immediate sense, oil and natural gas are required as the primary sources of energy that fuel

the transportation and heating of modern society, respectively (Zeihan, 2020). Beyond that, in the words of Peter Zeihan, “everything from cars to cabbages to cell phones to condoms requires the petroleum economy” (Zeihan, 2020). If China were to be restricted from the majority of its crucial fossil fuel supply, it would lose the vast majority of what distinguishes its lifestyle from that of a society 300 years prior. Under these conditions, China would cease to function as an industrial economy; it would face widespread deindustrialization. As previously discussed, deterrence by punishment involves an actor coercing an adversary into refraining from an unwanted action by credibly threatening to inflict a degree of pain onto the adversary that it deems to be unacceptable. On this basis, an American threat to blockade the majority of Chinese fossil fuel imports and perpetuate a process of deindustrialization within their economic system is recognized as deterrence by punishment.

A blockade of the majority of Chinese fossil fuel imports would devastate China’s ability to feed its population. Like all other economic sectors, modern agriculture is an industrial process. For this reason, a restriction of fossil fuel products would dramatically reduce outputs of all products related to nutrition. In an immediate sense, heavy machinery would be deficient in its primary fuel source and the basic lighting and heating functions of industrial farm operations would be threatened (Zeihan, 2022). More consequentially, however, fossil fuel inputs are a necessary component of fertilizers, pesticides, and other soil amendment products. The introduction of these products in agricultural processes since the Industrial Revolution has increased output by a fourfold multiple (Zeihan, 2022). Oil functions as the primary input for pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides, while natural gas serves as an ingredient for nitrogen fertilizers (Zeihan, 2022). If access to fossil fuel products contributing to agricultural output were to be greatly restricted, it could have devastating implications for the ability of any country to feed itself. For geographic reasons, this concern is particularly acute in China. Unfavourable farmland soil in the PRC has led to Chinese

agricultural processes consistently needing five times as much fertilizer relative to typical usage (Zeihan, 2022). China has been estimated to be 65% self-sufficient regarding nutrition (Zongyuan, 2023). Under the conditions of an American blockade at the Strait of Malacca, Chinese agricultural output would recede by an order of magnitude and, as a consequence, China would face famine. Moreover, given that such a reduction in agricultural outputs would certainly coincide with a blockade on other fossil fuel products and a broader confrontation with the United States, the ability of the Chinese government to respond effectively to mitigate food shortages in this scenario would be greatly reduced. As an example, extreme limitations on transportation capabilities on account of oil shortages would limit the viability of importing alternative agricultural products at a sufficient scale to prevent a catastrophic degree of food shortage within the Chinese population. For all of these reasons, an American blockade at the Strait of Malacca, and its particular impact on Chinese food security, would result in a level of suffering unacceptable to Chinese leadership. The sub-type of deterrence within this case study is thus further demonstrated to be deterrence by punishment, as it involves an instance of the threat of an action that would inflict a degree of pain that is unacceptable for the adversary.

China cannot circumvent its dependence on the Strait of Malacca as an open shipping lane for its fossil fuel needs. This phenomenon was articulated by the previous President of the PRC, Hu Jintao, and dubbed the “Malacca Dilemma”. It has been argued that China ought to import its energy needs by land. After all, the PRC shares both a large border and a supposed ‘unbreakable bond’ with the Russian Federation, one of the premier sources of global hydrocarbons. However, the extreme implications of this switch on unit economics make it unfeasible at the scale of the Chinese economy. It is 1/12 the cost to transport a given unit of freight by sea as opposed to by land (Zeihan, 2020). Moreover, a colossal oil pipe from western Siberia to China would be an exceptionally vulnerable target. In the event of an

open confrontation with the United States, it would be undefendable; it would stretch across a significant portion of the Eurasian continent, and a singular puncture would disrupt its function indefinitely (Zeihan, 2020). It is economically and strategically impossible to transport sufficient hydrocarbon products by land under wartime conditions to fuel the economic and military efforts of over one billion people. China must seek maritime solutions if it has ambitions of fossil fuel security. There exist relatively few sources of hydrocarbon proximate to East Asia, and none are sufficient to service Chinese demand (Myers, 2023). On this basis, the “Malacca Dilemma” is further demonstrated; China can only secure access to global hydrocarbon reserves at sufficient quantities if it can project naval power through the choke points in South East Asia which lead toward the Indian Ocean and the wider global economy. Until then, Chinese fossil fuel imports are exceptionally vulnerable.

Conclusions

For all of these reasons, the American threat of a blockade at the Strait of Malacca exemplifies a successful deterrent measure. A true instance of deterrence requires an appropriate degree of military capability in conjunction with a credible threat as perceived by the adversary. As outlined, the American military maintains a decisive advantage over that of the PRC, and this advantage is not sufficiently diminished by factors such as proximity to the Strait and third-party involvement. The credibility of the threat lies in China’s awareness of its own extreme vulnerability. As long as the PRC is incapable of guaranteeing its maritime connection to its sources of hydrocarbon, the United States will retain the capability to inflict devastation upon the most basic functions of the Chinese economic system. The gravity of this pain succeeds in deterring serious Chinese military aggression.

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