



**NDU Foundation National Security Briefing
United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War
with Robert Blackwill & Dr. Philip Zelikow
02.18.2021 Transcript**

JAMES SCHMELING: Good morning, and welcome. I'm James Schmeling, the CEO and President of the National Defense University Foundation.

We're privileged to be able to bring you these National Security Briefings, because our sponsors, Leidos and ViON, have made it possible for us to be able to prepare these broadcasts and bring in guests.

Today, we'll have Ambassador Robert Blackwill and Professor Philip Zelikow.

We'll be talking about China, Taiwan, and the United States, and we'll be discussing a variety of policy prescriptions, the history of the status of the relationship, and so on, today. I am looking forward to having them speak.

Before I do that, however, I want to introduce our 17th National Defense University President, Lieutenant General Mike Plehn. He is our President and has been for a little over two weeks now, so [he is] new to the role. Thank you for joining us, General Plehn. I will let you introduce yourself to our participants, and then we will go into our National Security Briefing.

LT. GEN. MICHAEL PLEHN: Well, thank you, James, for that very kind introduction, and a very good morning, ladies and gentlemen, with special thanks to our distinguished speakers who have joined us today, Ambassador Blackwill and Dr. Zelikow. As James noted, with a whopping two weeks under my belt here at NDU, I'm pleased to report that I'm already impressed by the richness of the learning experience, and today's discussion certainly is another example of that.

I'm telling you that I'm a lifelong believer and, quite frankly, a beneficiary of the promise and power of education. So, for me, this truly is a dream job at NDU, and it's a pleasure to be here with you today.

But I would also tell you that I look forward to working with James, the NDU Foundation, and all of you to focus on and advance NDU's vital mission as our nation's premier national security leadership development institution.

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Over the years, NDU's colleges have graduated more than 20,000 current and former military leaders, ambassadors, senior agency officials across the national security enterprise, and partners from over 150 countries around the world.

I'm sure we all realize that Advanced Joint Professional Military Education is more important now than ever.

Our leaders of today and tomorrow face an increasingly complex global security environment.

Our challenge is to develop leaders who can outthink our adversaries and operate effectively in this increasingly complex and dynamic world. Their approaches must combine all instruments of national and international power.

They must also be able to navigate the strategic challenges of an environment increasingly characterized by great power competition.

NDU has cultivated a rich learning space for rising leaders from the U.S. government and those of our allied and partner nations to prepare them to meet these current and future national and global security challenges.

In fact, it's the Chairman's vision that NDU will create strategic advantage by developing joint warfighters and other national security leaders to do exactly that.

As I once heard from a former commander, "We train for certainty, but we educate for uncertainty."

At NDU, our faculty and staff remain laser-focused on providing a world-class Joint Professional Military Education that will allow our graduates to prevail through future uncertainty.

That brings us to today's interactive discussion. This webinar marks the first National Security Briefing of 2021 by the National Defense University Foundation.

It's also the first briefing hosted by the NDU Foundation in collaboration with Prism, NDU's journal of complex operations. So, thank you to Michael Miklaucic and the entire Prism team for partnering with the Foundation on today's important discussion.

Finally, I would offer my thanks to our esteemed speakers for their decades of public service, [and] our country's practitioners, educators, and scholars of national security. We continue to benefit from your experience and expertise, especially on the issues of China and Taiwan, and we look forward to the rich exchange of ideas today.

Thank you, James, and back over to you.

JAMES SCHMELING: Thank you, General Plehn. I appreciate that.

I am very pleased to be hosting them for the first time in collaboration with Prism. It's a great opportunity for us to partner with the NDU Press and Michael Miklaucic. Yesterday, they brought to us General Petraeus. Today, they're bringing us Ambassador Blackwill and Professor Zelikow.

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I'm privileged to introduce both of them. They have a long history of engagement with our national security leadership and with educational institutions.

Ambassador Blackwill is currently the Henry Kissinger Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation Distinguished Scholar at the Henry Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. We've been privileged to host Henry Kissinger himself at some of our working meetings, and this is a privilege to have you, Ambassador Blackwill.

Professor Zelikow is the White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia and also the J. Wilson Newman Professor of Governance at the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. He perhaps is most well-known to our audience as the Executive Director for the 9/11 Commission. Robust scholarship is in his wheelhouse, and we're pleased to hear from both of them.

With that, I will turn it over to Professor Zelikow for his introductory remarks, and then he will turn to Ambassador Blackwill. Professors Zelikow, over to you.

PHILIP ZELIKOW: Well, thank you, James, for that gracious introduction, and thank you, General Plehn. If helping students cope with uncertainty is the watchword of NDU's mission, boy is the presentation today right down the strike zone of NDU's mission.

We're going to start off with Ambassador Blackwill, who will introduce our subject and talk a little bit about the overall perspective of American vital interests.

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Thank you, Philip, and thank you all. We're delighted to be here.

We wrote this report, which you all, if you haven't seen it yet, can find on cfr.org, because in the last year, we've become increasingly concerned about the crisis building over Taiwan. [We have] come to believe that it's the most dangerous flashpoint in the world for a possible war that might include the United States, China, and other major powers.

We think that this issue is half understood. People have thought about it, and, of course, now there's a flood of commentary. But we're struck by what I might call some complacency that the past is [a] prologue for the future, because all of us, as our species, tend to think along those lines.

But we think something structurally is changing and that that needs to be recognized. Of course, China's crackdown in Hong Kong ended the thought that one nation [and] two systems might be applied to Taiwan.

At the same time, we've seen, and all of you are very familiar with this, increased military pressure by the PLA on Taiwan. In Taiwan, every poll shows that the number of people who are supportive of some kind of relationship with the mainland is reduced month by month, year by year.

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So, something structurally has changed.

We think that those changes are so important that it's crucial to look again at credible options for U.S. policy toward Taiwan, and we've done that in the report.

I want to conclude these brief introductory comments by speaking a bit about U.S. national interests, which I will return to at the very end of our presentation.

We're struck by the fact that although many commentators say that Taiwan is a vital national interest to the United States, almost none of them say why they think that.

We've tried to be rigorous, and you all will be able to judge how successful we were in looking at vital US. national interests. We name five of them:

Prevent the use and reduce the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, [as well as] catastrophic and conventional terrorist attacks or cyber-attacks against the U.S., its military forces abroad, or its allies.

Stop the spread of those catastrophic weapons and long-range delivery systems.

Maintain a global and regional balance of power that promotes peace, stability, and freedom.

Prevent the emergence of hostile powers or failed states on U.S. borders.

Finally, ensure the viability and stability of major global systems: trade, financial markets, public health, energy supplies, cyberspace, the environment, [and] freedom of the seas.

We believe that Taiwan does not qualify, directly, in any of these vital U.S. national interests, contrasted with issues related to Europe, Canada, Mexico, [and] members of the U.S.-Asian alliances.

We will undoubtedly discuss that later, and I'll return to it, as I said, in [the] conclusion. But this does not mean that the United States should not take seriously the future of Taiwan.

Over to you, Philip.

PHILIP ZELIKOW: Great. Thank you, Bob.

What I'd like to do is start from the premise that the situation with Taiwan is dangerous and make three points.

One, I'd like to talk about the nature of defense strategies.

Second, I'd like to talk about possible Chinese attack scenarios.

Third, I want to work through four basic ways the United States might respond to these different scenarios, the fourth being our proposal, so that you understand the choices that might lie in front of the United States and what we recommend.

This is a very hard problem, this Taiwan problem.

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We think it's perhaps not only the most dangerous problem currently in front of the United States military, but it's also one of the hardest problems in front of the United States military.

Even the arguments in our report are actually, I think, perhaps a little more complex than meet the eye, and we're grateful to have the opportunity to explain them a little bit more.

We think that right now, China has moved into a prewar condition.

What do we mean by that?

We don't mean that we think China has already decided on a war. What we think is that China is already moving into the condition where it is preparing for war. A country prepares for war in two ways: It begins politically mobilizing the population and conditioning them to the possibility of a conflict. The Chinese government is already doing that.

Second, you begin increasing the readiness of your military forces and exercising them in more and more vigorous ways in order to raise the general readiness of your armed forces for action. The Chinese military has already begun doing that, too.

This creates a certain amount of noise from the point of view of the intelligence agencies, since they're seeing a lot of Chinese activity. It's difficult to see beyond that noise to interpret what activity is significant and what activity is just more routine harassment.

So, [my] first main point [is] understanding defense strategies.

Here, I just want to comment on campaign plans and allies.

There's a lot of discussion about defense strategies. Take, for example, if you think the Taiwan problem is a really dangerous problem, you might ask yourself: "What is the U.S. defense strategy for Taiwan?"

Ask yourself that question: "What is the U.S. defense strategy for Taiwan?"

Now, ask yourself: "If there was a Chinese assault of some kind on Taiwan, do you think you have a pretty decent idea of what the United States [would] do about it?"

If the answer is that "yes, you have a very clear idea," then you are smarter than me and smarter than Bob.

We don't have a clear idea of what the United States will do about it. That's partly deliberate. That's part of our so-called strategy.

Our argument about defense strategy is this: Defense strategies are campaign plans in outline.

Defense strategies forecast the basic character of the campaign plan.

If you don't know the basic character of the campaign plan, you don't know what the defense strategy is.

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If you don't know the basic outline of the campaign plan, how can you possibly judge whether your forces are sufficient to credibly execute the strategy?

Since we don't really know what the campaign plan and outline is for various Taiwan contingencies, we are unable to judge whether or not the United States has a viable defense strategy for Taiwan.

This is a very serious problem.

The other point I wanted to make about defense strategies has to do with allies.

If you don't have a clear campaign plan in outline, it's very difficult to coordinate those campaign plans with allies so that allies know what they're supposed to do in the choreography.

If you never rehearse a dance number, people might not know what it is they're supposed to do onstage.

If the allies actually don't know exactly what role they're going to play, and no one practices or trains for it, then the credibility of the campaign plan goes down, and with it, therefore, the defense strategy, whatever it is.

Our argument is that it's very difficult to see a very credible, realistic strategy to defend Taiwan that does not, at a minimum, deeply involve Japan and Taiwan.

If we have not pretty carefully choreographed what it is Japan and Taiwan would do in various scenarios, then how can we feel confident in our defense strategy?

The first point I wanted to make was just some general comments on defense strategy and that the defense strategy is related to campaign plans and to allies. Of course, you could then say, "Well, by keeping the defense strategy so mysterious, that mystery makes it more effective, because the enemy is uncertain as to what we may do, and the enemy's uncertainty will confuse and intimidate them."

In our report, we have the famous scene in the movie, *Dr. Strangelove*, where there's a nuclear crisis that's broken out, and the Soviet Prime Minister reveals that they've created a doomsday machine to blow up the world if there's a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, but they had not revealed that this machine exists yet.

The American President asked the Soviet Premier, "Well, why didn't you tell us about this?" The Soviet Premier said, "We were planning to announce it at a press conference at the next Party Congress, but we hadn't gotten around to that yet."

In that scenario, deterrence didn't work very well. In the Cold War, the Soviets perfectly well understood, at least in outline, what the campaign plans were of the United States and of its NATO allies. Those plans were the subject of endless public discussion, and the Soviets also had excellent espionage penetration, enough to understand the basic campaign plans.

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That actually helped deterrence work. It didn't undermine deterrence; it was essential to deterrence.

So, first point: defense strategies, campaign plans, [and] allies.

Second major point: scenarios for possible Chinese military action. Of course, we're not saying that Chinese military action is certain in the next year or two. All we argue in the report is that the odds of such action are now at a level that one ought to take it very seriously indeed.

How much do the odds need to be for you to take it super seriously?

Ask yourself the question: "If a doctor told you that there was a chance that you could get a deadly disease like cancer, or that you had a deadly disease like cancer, how high would the odds have to be before you could be persuaded to take quite aggressive treatment to deal with it?"

Five percent? Ten percent? Fifteen percent?

You judge for yourself, but you see the point.

We think the odds now are at the level where you need to take the danger of military scenarios very seriously.

What kinds of military scenarios are there?

We break out three.

One is a set of scenarios that are attacks on Taiwan's periphery, like a Chinese attack on one or another of the offshore islands.

There are questions about how Taiwan handles that attack itself.

We go into some detail about the Taiwan preparations.

Also, how would Taiwan respond to the attack with forces on Taiwan? In addition to the forces on the island itself, after the Chinese begin the attack, what would Taiwan then do with its submarines or its aircraft to try to interfere with Chinese assault, and what might the United States do in those scenarios? That's one kind of Chinese scenario.

We actually argue that although those scenarios seem very tempting, they are actually scenarios that would polarize Taiwan opinion and other opinions yet not solve China's fundamental problem.

These options might be tempting but, ultimately, maybe not so attractive to the Chinese, but we're not sure.

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[The] second basic scenario for Chinese assault [is what] we call a quarantine scenario. This is not a scenario in which the Chinese blockade Taiwan to cut off all supplies of food and oil.

This is a quarantine in which the Chinese say, “Taiwan is part of our territory. We see that these foreigners are trying to ship hundreds of missiles, radars and other sensors and things, and military advisers to Taiwan. Well, we're not going to allow the foreigners to ship all these things into our territory. We're going to screen international sea and air traffic that comes into Taiwan. Ships or aircraft that we think are suspect, we're just going to divert them to clear customs at a court or airport in mainland China.”

We point out that the Chinese, last month, changed their national defense laws in order to give their Coast Guard even more powers to declare just such exclusion zones.

We don't think that that's a coincidence.

We set up a scenario of a quarantine in which the Chinese don't attempt to take over Taiwan directly. They simply say, “We're going to control what comes into and goes out of Taiwan. We're not going to interfere with the daily ferries and ordinary shipments that seem innocent, but if we're worried about what some ship or aircraft is carrying, we're going to divert it to a Chinese mainland port for customs clearance, because Taiwan is our territory.”

We raise some issues about how the world would respond to a situation like that.

We think this is a serious scenario, and one to which the American responses are not yet clear to us.

[The] third scenario, of course, is the classic scenario of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

A direct invasion can occur in one of two ways or a mix of them.

One is a decapitation assault that relies a lot on airborne, heliborne assaults [and] special operations assaults to try to decapitate the Taiwan government, seize control of key airfields and harbors, and then ship stuff in that way.

It's a lightning assault that does not require the same kind of siege and amphibious assault of a traditional invasion. There are some military precedents for these assaults, and the Chinese are looking at all [of] this.

We think it's very important for Taiwan to try to make sure that it's not vulnerable to these kinds of attacks.

A second kind of direct assault would be the traditional siege and invasion where you cut off everything, you prepare the way, and then you launch an amphibious assault around different invasion beaches.

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Taiwan has prepared for generations to deal with this, but there are a lot of arguments, pro and con, as to whether they can. There are optimistic analysts, and there are pessimistic analysts, and our report cites to both, and you can read them both. They go into great detail explaining why they are optimistic about Taiwan's chances or pessimistic about Taiwan's chances, and you can figure out where you come down on that.

The second thing I wanted to do in my little part of the presentation is outline the three scenarios.

Now, last, let's talk a little bit about what the United States might do against one of these scenarios.

There are four basic things the United States can do. This is complicated, so if you've got a pen and paper and take notes, [that] might be helpful.

[The] first basic option [is to] help Taiwan defend itself by shipping them arms and so on in peacetime, but, if there is a military conflict, decide that the United States will remain neutral.

Do what you do in peacetime under the Taiwan Relations Act, but, if there's conflict, you determine in advance that the United States will remain neutral for various arguments that you can rehearse about vital interests or military feasibility. That's option one.

That is not the current U.S. policy, but that's a policy one could argue for.

Option two [is] the U.S. can support Taiwan in self-defense [and] sell it arms but decline to share direct responsibility for the direct defense of Taiwan. Yet, at the same time, [the U.S. would] be prepared to defend Taiwan with unclear prospects. In this option, you don't commit to defending Taiwan, yet you prepare to some extent to do it.

The actual U.S. actions in these scenarios that I've outlined are left unclear both to the enemy but also to your friends.

It's unclear what you would do with respect to the direct defense of Taiwan, though you were preparing to some extent to do it.

You leave unclear whether or not the direct defense of Taiwan will extend into attacks on the Chinese mainland.

You imply that they might, but you're not clear about whether they will. You're unclear about whether it's necessary to extend the defense of Taiwan into a war against the Chinese mainland.

This is our description of the status quo, of what the U.S. does now.

This is the posture that some people characterize as strategic ambiguity.

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The advantage of this scenario is since it's really quite unclear what you'll actually do, it's quite unclear what forces you need to do it.

You prepare forces that might be sufficient to offer some defense of Taiwan, yet it's not clear entirely whether or not they can or exactly how they'll do it. You haven't rehearsed anything with your allies in detail, and your allies don't know exactly what you'll do and what they're supposed to do. Things might happen, and there was some discussion of possible plans.

Therefore, it's very difficult to judge what courses are sufficient. You might escalate to the Chinese homeland, and you have some forces that might be doing that. That's unclear, too. Therefore, the Chinese are thinking, "Maybe we need to preempt all these American forces going out into Guam, or even the Japanese territory, or other things." All that is unclear.

The lack of clarity and the mystery surrounding this is regarded as ominous and intimidating, and hopefully the Chinese will be deterred by that uncertainty.

You don't necessarily need to make significant changes in the character and deployment of U.S. and Japanese forces, because you don't really know for sure what the forces need to be able to do, so you don't know exactly what forces you need to buy.

That's option two.

Option three is that the U.S. can plan and prepare to share responsibility for the direct defense of Taiwan.

Whether or not you make a treaty commitment, as a defense matter, you say, "Folks, we're going to plan to do this, for real. We're going to be serious about it. We are going to engage in the direct defense of Taiwan if there is at least one of these Chinese assaults. We've made these judgments about U.S. vital interests, and we've made political [and] military judgments about the credibility and viability of those plans. We think those judgments are shared with Taiwan and Japan."

You then might assume that, therefore, we will plan to attack targets on the Chinese mainland of various kinds.

If you did this, the people who call for this sort of posture do also call for quite significant changes in the character and deployment of both U.S. and Japanese forces.

Some of them also call for putting U.S. troops or military advisors in Taiwan itself. So, that's your third option.

[The] fourth option, which is the one that we propose, is, of course, in peacetime you're continuing to sell arms to Taiwan, but the United States plans to prepare and remain neutral in a China/Taiwan conflict.

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But the United States and Japan will not accept a denial of access to Taiwan.

They prepare plans that could at least offer the choice to challenge such a denial of access and ship vitally needed supplies to Taiwan that Taiwan needs to defend itself in the conflict.

In other words, we plan to do the kind of huge shipments of military supplies in the midst of the conflict that the Chinese did when they helped North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, the kinds of resupplies that both we and the Soviets did to Israel and Egypt during the 1973 War as neutral countries that are, nonetheless, shuttling huge amounts of supplies so that their friends can defend themselves.

If the Chinese proposed to deny access to the United States and Japan to do that, the United States and Japan [would] prepare plans to at least challenge that denial militarily.

Such a plan, if it's executed, would entail a risk of war.

The plans are designed to place the burden on China to decide whether to widen the conflict by attacking the neutral U.S. or Japanese forces that are attempting to ship additional supplies to Taiwan.

The United States isn't automatically committing itself to defend Taiwan, but it prepares plans to help Taiwan defend itself, even if it is under attack from China. If China tries to deny access, the United States could prepare plans with Japan to force China to choose whether it will attack those neutral ships or neutral aircraft carrying those defense supplies to Taiwan.

There are analogies here to various things that happened in the Cold War, including in the West Berlin scenarios. If China did widen the war by attacking those neutral forces, what happens then?

Our proposal in the report is what happens then is not an automatic escalation to general war with China [and] attacking the Chinese homeland, not [an] automatic escalation to general war.

But you would plan that in addition to the local war in which you're trying to help Taiwan defend itself, the United States and Japan would then prepare plans in advance to do what it would do if a war had broken out with China. Because, at this point, the Chinese will have attacked and probably killed numbers of American and Japanese citizens.

That's a war.

At that point, the United States would break all economic and financial relations with China.

It would seize or freeze all Chinese assets.

It would seize or prohibit all dollar transactions to China, including servicing Chinese Treasury bonds held by China.

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In other words, it would disrupt trillions of dollars of relevant investments, because this is what America does when it goes to war with another country, even a limited war. It cuts off all of its economic transactions overnight.

The world, and if Japan was joining in this, it would join too, would instantly see a colossal economic fracture, which would immediately plunge the world into an international economic crisis.

In addition to that, the United States and China would plan credibly to hugely build up their armed forces: a remilitarization of Japan on a scale not seen in generations and [the] mobilization of the United States in order to prepare for the possibility of a general war without having yet gone there.

In other words, folks who talk casually about Cold War 2.0 would see what that really looks like.

You develop these plans in advance of the Taiwan crisis, not after the crisis has already happened, so that the Chinese leadership can see, “If we initiate a conflict with Taiwan, we may face this kind of challenge with neutral shipping trying to supply the Taiwanese so that they can defend themselves. If we choose to attack American and Japanese shipping or aircraft, we can see visibly that the Americans and Japanese are making plans to rupture the global economy and remilitarize.”

Then we, the Chinese leadership, can ask ourselves: “Do we think we are better off in that world? Do we think the long-term prospects for the Chinese Communist Party's leadership are actually better off in that world over time?”

We give them the chance to come to that conclusion.

In this scenario, we're actually doing things and making threats that we think are relatively realistic and relatively credible.

If you compare this option to the option of simply taking over the direct defense of Taiwan with possible escalation to the Chinese homeland, which could extend into war in the American homeland [or] in the Japanese homeland, you can ask yourself whether those plans are politically or militarily more realistic.

My fear is that the adoption of the confrontational posture could produce paralysis, as we're confronted with plans we don't want to execute.

At the same time, [it could] combine that danger of paralysis with the provocations that could make war more likely yet make it less likely that we'll be able to respond effectively to deal with it.

If you review these four options, I think you can see that this is a very, very hard problem. There are pros and cons for each.

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If you look [at] the option we proposed, the fourth one, you can see that it's complex, and requires some time to explain, and is difficult to develop, but it can be developed with the forces we have now, not the forces that we may wishfully hope to have sometime in the future. We think it's more realistic and less provocative than the alternatives.

Bob, over to you.

ROBERT BLACKWILL: I suggest we go directly to the questions. Given the time constraints, I'll skip my last comments. Let's go to the questions.

JAMES SCHMELING: Thank you for those remarks and for your willingness to take questions. I have several from the audience already.

From a team member at NDU: "The report says little about the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in deterring or controlling escalation in a conflict over Taiwan. Is that intentional?"

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Well, there was an issue of, of course, length. The report is already 30,000 words. We do mention at the end of the report the danger of nuclear escalation. I think conceptually one can consider this not very differently than we thought about it for many decades.

Once you would enter into direct military confrontation between the United States and China, especially if the United States is attacking the bases and missile sites on the Chinese homeland, then, of course, you begin to worry about vertical escalation toward nuclear options. One would try to manage that in the classic way, but it would still have the perplexities of the leadership, as we saw during the Cuban Missile Crisis, on each side, miscalculating what the other might do. The question was very much on our minds, and it's exactly the right way to think about that particular development.

PHILIP ZELIKOW: I'll add, though, that I think actually the role of nuclear weapons can be overstated here. In the Korean War in 1951, the United States did not use nuclear weapons against China in a situation where the temptation to do so was vastly greater than it would be in this case. China, at that time, had no nuclear weapons of its own at all [and] was not close to having them.

Our forces were enormously embroiled in an extremely difficult war, yet we did not use them. We might have been tempted to consider using them if we had not broken the log jam and gotten the armistice in 1953; there's controversy over that. I think the notion that we didn't use nuclear weapons under those extreme circumstances of American advantage and American bloodshed in the early fifties, yet we would be strongly tempted to use them now in this scenario, seems very unlikely.

JAMES SCHMELING: Thank you.

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I have a question from an audience member you all may know. James Clapper asked, “Let’s assume we opt for your option four. How will the PRC know that’s our strategy, or will they?”

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Oh, yes, they will know. That’s the point: they will know! They’ll know because we [would have] discussed it thoroughly with both Taiwan and Japan. Here’s the way I would think about it: just to elaborate on what Phillip said earlier, we now have a policy which seeks to deter China from military action against Taiwan almost solely for reasons of what the United States might do militarily in response.

We could be sure that, as Don Rumsfeld said, “the PLA has been going to school for decades on us,” on our capability to respond militarily. What option four adds, crucially, is the Chinese would know whatever the PLA said in that decision-making meeting with the Chinese leadership about their estimate of how they might confront U.S. forces.

Let’s imagine they would say, “We think that we will quickly conquer the island,” or “We think that they won’t respond to quarantine,” and so forth. In addition, however, deterrence in our scenario four would be strengthened by the economic measures that China would know would be taken by the United States, Japan, and probably many other democratic countries. Thus, deterrence would be strengthened; that’s the notion.

As Philip said earlier, in a model of deterrence during the Cold War in Europe, we would want the Chinese leadership to know this, absolutely, because we would want it to be a factor in the deliberations and decisions they would make in this situation.

JAMES SCHMELING: Next question: “What do you think Taiwan’s response would be to us adopting option four from General Fig Newton?”

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Phillip, [do] you want to take that one?

PHILIP ZELIKOW: I think their response would be ambivalent and uncertain. The Taiwanese are in a difficult situation. They will be uneasy about anything but the most unequivocal assurances, as the Biden administration put it in a recent press release, “rock solid commitment.” They will be uneasy about anything that seems to imply less than rock solid commitment.

At the same time, they don’t want the United States to do anything provocative. President Tsai has actually tried quite hard and responsibly not to be unduly provocative. She’s walking a very difficult line politically, within her party and within Taiwan politics. I think there will be some Taiwan leaders who will say the American approach, by committing to support us in this different yet more realistic way, is actually more credible and strengthens deterrence. Yet anything that implies something short of absolute American commitment will also be inspiring unease, even if the absolute commitment might be unrealistic.

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At the symbolic level, in other words, they may be uneasy, while intellectually, they may be reassured that the Americans are actually taking this seriously and behaving realistically. They will be conflicted, therefore, between, in a way, their head and their heart.

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Can I just add to that? It's a broader point. I think that's a terrific question. One would not go to the Taiwan government and say, "We have decided to do option four. You can either say yay or nay, but that's what we're going to do."

No, we would say, "We think that we can strengthen deterrence through option four, but we want you to tell us what you think about it." Because, as we've said in different ways during this presentation, we need a coordinated strategy, which the United States, Taiwan, and Japan, at a minimum, have all signed up to.

This is not a fait accompli in which we say to either Taiwan or Japan, "Well, we in our wisdom, along the Potomac, have figured this out, so raise your hand in agreement." That's a broader point, by the way, which the question implies about U.S. consultation across Asia.

JAMES SCHMELING: Thank you.

Another question from our audience: "The U.S. is challenged already on the semiconductor front. Were this to come about, what would the U.S. do for chips without Taiwan?"

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Oh, we need Taiwan. If you have a chance to look at the report, there are nineteen policy prescriptions in the report. One of them has to do with that subject and further encouraging and supporting Taiwan's production of those chips, and so forth.

We haven't had a chance to get into it here, but there's a very strong set of recommendations about helping Taiwan strengthen its democracy, strengthen its economy, and strengthen its role in the world.

PHILIP ZELIKOW: You can then also have an argument, if you think that you have to take on the direct defense of Taiwan in order to defend its semiconductor industry from Chinese interference or attack, take a little bit of time and work through the Chinese options in that scenario.

JAMES SCHMELING: Thank you.

"We've seen a little bit of an extension of the recent Trump administration freedom of navigation operations. They are still continuing at a higher pace than they had been, including two days ago. What do you think that telegraphs to China and Taiwan?"

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Well, not much in a crisis. We both, of course, support that, but it would be fascinating, would it not, to read the internal Chinese debate about what the United States would do in the various contingencies available to China. We want them to believe that they would pay a very high price in a variety of ways for taking any of those actions that are laid

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out in the report. We want them to believe that before they make the decision to initiate these actions, not to discover it after they've already initiated them.

In this case, of course, part of that strategy would be the frequent deployment of the U.S. Naval assets and exercises, and so forth, in that region. Of course, because we want them to believe, we don't want to send them a signal, inadvertently, that this would produce minimum U.S. response and thus minimum pain.

You'll see the development in the report of the argument that a disruption of the Chinese economy, as we've seen now discussed in China, in different non-U.S. scenarios would be regarded as a great threat by the Chinese Communist Party, which would then have to try to manage such domestic economic disruption. Again, we seek to encourage them to worry about that so that they won't act in the first place against Taiwan.

PHILIP ZELIKOW: By the way, someone could come back and say, "Well, you don't need to do the military challenge to Chinese denial of access, that could raise the risk of war. You could just threaten economic sanctions." What we're talking about is not coercive diplomacy; we're actually preparing for the world that has fractured and letting them see that.

We don't think it is credible to threaten economic sanctions on this enormous scale unless Americans have actually been involved in kill or be killed shooting. I just don't think we will launch economic sanctions on this scale, credibly, unless some kind of war has broken.

JAMES SCHMELING: To expand on that, we have a question from someone as they registered: "How willing is the American public to go to bat for Taiwan? This was an assumed article of faith in the Joint Staff in the mid-1990s. How would you gauge it today?"

I think you partially answered that already.

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Well, there's polling, of course. We don't know exactly how the U.S. public would respond, and we get surprised from time to time, from decade to decade, but there has been some polling with some surprising results. The polling, by the way, is not consistent across various polls but in some of the results. Here's one that will surprise those who don't follow this closely: in a recent poll, the American public, at least as it was answered, was more willing to defend Taiwan than Australia.

That would be an issue deeply dependent on a variety of issues, such as the strength of the American economy, the popularity of the American President, and so forth. Would he lead, would she lead, if it's an imminent crisis? But it's a crucial question, because it would matter a lot. What we argue in the report, as Phillip has just said, is mobilizing the U.S. public to dislocate not just the Chinese economy, but the American economy further, would require the death of Americans in combat, we believe, at a minimum, to get the support of the American people.

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JAMES SCHMELING: “How do you believe the defense budget needs to react to this threat with the potential of cuts? Are there things that we should be doing to preserve certain aspects of our ability or strengthen certain aspects of our military?”

PHILIP ZELIKOW: I think the questions and the proposals we make can be addressed effectively regardless of the posture on the budget, to put it very simply. The whole question of the structure of the defense budget, and what's driving the cost, and what actual fraction of that budget is useably related to things that would have strategic impact on these scenarios, that's a very complex and big question. I'll just simply state my conclusion from some of that work. You could adopt the recommendations we propose in any of the relevant scenarios on the future of the defense budget by making various kinds of choices. I think if you decide to do the direct defense of Taiwan and decide to make that credible, it's possible you'll conclude that that won't work in all the different budget scenarios. I haven't done the analysis to give a good answer to that one way or the other. I am pretty sure you can do our option in any of the budget scenarios.

JAMES SCHMELING: Thank you.

I appreciate your being willing to respond to so many questions from the audience.

I will recommend to folks that when you take a look at this, while the history is fascinating, and it was to me, because I didn't know some of it, the policy prescriptions are incredibly useful and thoughtful. I would highly recommend taking a good look at those. They are across many areas, and I think they will be very enlightening to many of you.

Given all of that, what would you say are the most important things we can do today, now, and who will have responsibility for those?

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Well, the most important is first for the United States, so the Biden administration, in this case, to develop a strategy which strengthens deterrence against Chinese various actions, which could be escalatory with respect to Taiwan. First, we need a strategy ourselves and [to] make some of the basic decisions we've been talking about here, first and foremost. Then, we need to discuss our proposed approach, our strategic approach, with Taiwan and with the Japanese, and we need to reach an agreement with them on this approach. Of course, there is a major Congressional dimension of this.

We need to discuss it with the Congress in detail as we're developing it and not, again, produce a fait accompli for the Congress. At the moment, Philip and I, as you'll see there--I guessed more than 200 footnotes in this report--we've read everything we could find on this subject that's in the public domain. We're just quite concerned that if those are steps one and two, neither one of them is now in place. We don't have a tough minded, fully analyzed strategy ourselves, and we haven't discussed and agreed with the Taiwanese, the Japanese, and others, perhaps, on that strategy. That's absolutely crucial, and it's crucial to do it now and before the crisis occurs, lest we fail with all those consequences.

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JAMES SCHMELING: Thank you.

We have about two minutes left. Any last parting comments from either or both of you?

PHILIP ZELIKOW: I am content to rest with the case made by my colleague.

ROBERT BLACKWILL: Just to say thank you so much for having us, because this is just the kind of discussion that ought to be taking place. We did not develop the Old Testament here or the Code of Hammurabi. We developed a set of proposals which we think need to be debated, and maybe the debate will produce better ideas about the strategy and its implementation.

This is just the kind of forum that we think should be central to the further discussion of this, and we're very grateful you've made it available to us.

JAMES SCHMELING: Well, thank you both for participating. I appreciate it very much. I appreciate the paper and all of the educational aspects of this. We will be archiving this on our website. People can refer back to it, listen to it, and have links to our speakers and their previous work and their bios, and so on. You'll be able to take a look at this, along with a transcript, in the next couple of days. It will be on our website tomorrow. The transcript will take a couple more days after that but thank you very much for this. I appreciate it. Thank you again to our sponsors, Leidos and ViON; I appreciate that very much. Thank you to NDU for sharing this with all of our students and alumni, because I think this is precisely the kind of educational content that can expand their knowledge of the world in which they are living.

Again, thank you, everyone. With that, we conclude our national security briefing. Have a wonderful rest of your day.