

EDITED BY

ATT POTTINGER

CHAPTER 3

The Myth of Accidental Wars

MATT POTTINGER AND MATTHEW TURPIN

No wars are unintended or "accidental." What is often unintended is the length and bloodiness of the war. Defeat too is unintended.

-GEOFFREY BLAINEY, THE CAUSES OF WAR (1988)

In this chapter, we challenge some myths about what causes wars, explore neglected variables that may be influencing Xi Jinping's calculus, and argue that some well-intentioned actions by Washington and its partners that are meant to avoid "provoking" Beijing into a war over Taiwan could, paradoxically, make Xi more optimistic about the utility and costs of war.

The Myth of Accidental Wars

"The only thing worse than a war is an unintentional war," Joe Biden told Xi more than a dozen years ago when they were both vice presidents.¹ Biden and members of his cabinet have repeated that phrase numerous times in recent years, including in the context of the Taiwan Strait, where US, Taiwanese, and Chinese warplanes and ships are coming into closer proximity to one another. "We've prioritized crisis communications and risk-reduction measures with Beijing" to help prevent an "unintended" conflict, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a major policy address about China in May 2022.²

Taking care to mitigate the risk of accidents is a reasonable aim. But a military mishap is a good example of something that might serve as a *pretext* for war but not a *cause*. "Wars have been called accidental or unintentional by many political scientists and a few historians," the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey wrote in his seminal book *The Causes of War* after carefully examining the origins of nearly every war from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. "It is difficult however to find a war which on investigation fits this description." 3

Western diplomats and journalists reflexively assume more hotlines and communication channels with Beijing are a key to preventing a mishap from spiraling into war. What they fail to recognize is that if war follows a military mishap, it wouldn't be because of a misunderstanding. Quite the opposite: it would be because Beijing has made a deliberate decision that the time is advantageous to fight a war it has spent decades equipping and rehearsing for. Leaders start wars when they believe war will pay strategic dividends that couldn't be obtained through peaceful means—not because their anger got the better of them on a particular afternoon or because they couldn't find a working phone number for the White House.

Consider previous military mishaps between the United States and China, such as when an American warplane mistakenly bombed China's embassy in Belgrade in 1999, or when a Chinese fighter pilot mistakenly steered his plane through the propellor of a US EP-3 spy plane in 2001. Those incidents resulted in fatalities and sharply increased bilateral tensions. But they produced no serious possibility of war. The exact same incidents, were they to occur today, would in and of themselves be equally unlikely to cause a war. But Beijing might be more inclined to use either incident as an elaborate excuse for a conflict if it had been aiming to launch one anyway.

Beijing understands this better than Washington does and uses Washington's misapprehension to its advantage. That may be why Chinese leaders, in contrast with American ones, rarely mention "accidental" or "unintentional" wars in their official statements, doctrine, and internal propaganda. The only examples we could find of commentators in the People's Republic of China (PRC) using the phrase

"accidental war" were in articles pointing out that US leaders are preoccupied with the concept. In their first call after Biden became president, Xi reportedly reintroduced the theme. "I remember during one of our conversations years ago, you told me your father once said, 'The only thing worse than conflict that one intends is a conflict one does not intend,'" Xi said, according to a recent book about the Biden presidency.⁴ It is a reasonable bet Xi made the remark with a forked tongue, with the aim of stoking, rather than empathizing with, Biden's anxiety.

Moreover, it is conceivable that Washington's fixation on unintentional conflict and hotlines may have emboldened Beijing to undertake more aggressive behavior, such as increasing its tempo of dangerously close intercepts of US ships and planes in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. In orchestrating these close encounters, Beijing enjoys a psychological advantage over Washington: it knows there is no such thing as an unintentional war. Thus, Beijing may have calculated that even a midair or at-sea collision with the US military carries limited downside risk and appreciable upside potential, since it might persuade Washington—ever fearful of that mythic accidental war—to reduce its military operations in the Western Pacific.

A clue that Beijing assigns low value to hotlines may be the fact that it has suspended military-to-military communication with the United States on several occasions since the turn of the century (Washington, by contrast, has initiated a brief suspension only once during that time, in 2021, as part of an unsuccessful attempt to establish a more senior-level Chinese counterpart for the US secretary of defense). Beijing always restores military talks, typically in return for concessions from the United States, recycling what has become a form of manufactured leverage. If Washington adopted a similarly nonchalant attitude toward these communications channels, Beijing might be less inclined to suspend them in the first place.

An argument could be made that Taipei and Washington should be careful to avoid steps that would give Beijing even a pretext for starting a war. (Ivan Kanapathy explores this question in chapters 5 and 6 with respect to how Taipei should respond to Beijing's military activities near Taiwan.) But without a clear and common baseline understanding

that accidents don't actually cause wars, Taipei and Washington are liable to be so tentative that they signal weakness or otherwise erode deterrence.

The "Provocation" Misconception

A close cousin of the accidental war fallacy is the widespread misconception that Taiwan might "provoke" a war by shoring up its national defenses. Beijing shrewdly weaponizes this misconception to dupe some politicians in Taipei, Tokyo, and Washington into second-guessing the wisdom of strengthening deterrence in the Taiwan Strait.

This playbook has been used before by Russia—and with catastrophic consequences. For years, the United States and its allies were too timid to provide defensive weapons to Ukraine, even after Russia first invaded the country in 2014. Washington eventually began providing such assistance in 2017. But it would periodically "freeze" weapons shipments to Ukraine, such as before a Biden-Putin summit in mid-2021, on the apparent assumption that withholding defensive articles might earn Putin's goodwill.⁶ Judging by his full-on invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin more likely viewed Washington's gestures as signs of weakness.

In a variation on this theme, autocrats in Beijing and Moscow also implicate the mere existence of alliances as "provocative." No doubt Moscow under Putin doesn't like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) any more than his Soviet forebears did. He doesn't like the fact that NATO membership expanded to Russia's doorstep after the Cold War ended three decades ago either. But it would be a stretch to say that NATO, a defensive organization that has gone to war only once in its history (in response to the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001), provoked Russia to invade Ukraine. History suggests something more like the opposite: that NATO's existence helped maintain peace in Europe, exemplified by the fact that Russia has never attacked a NATO member since the alliance was founded in 1949. When Russia and Ukraine eventually transition from war to peace, key NATO countries

will probably guarantee some form of security for Ukraine that ensures that the peace holds.

It is true that nations sometimes choose to go to war to prevent a rival from acquiring military capabilities that could pose a grave offensive threat over time. This dynamic fueled Israel's decision in 1981, and Washington's in 2003, to attack Iraq over its suspected development of nuclear weapons. But this is a less credible casus belli in cases where the aggressor already enjoys an overwhelming military advantage and faces little prospect of being threatened offensively by the country in question.

It is hard to conceive that Taiwan would choose to initiate a war with the PRC in coming decades. It is true that in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War, Chiang Kai-shek and his followers dreamed of returning to the mainland from Taiwan and reversing the Communist victory of 1949. But today, Taiwan lacks anything like a capability to coerce, much less invade, the PRC. Its defense budget is about 10 percent that of China's publicly stated budget, a disparity comparable to that between Finland and Russia. Taiwan no longer harbors an ambition to build nuclear weapons. (Those dreams were definitively squelched decades ago by Washington, before Taiwan was a democracy.)

Granted, Beijing wants assurances from Taipei and Washington that Taiwan will not declare formal independence. But ever since Jimmy Carter and Deng Xiaoping established formal diplomatic relations in 1979, US policy has provided such assurances and balanced them with military deterrence of Beijing. As Xi's quotations in chapter 1 make clear, Beijing's goal—unlike Washington's and Taipei's—isn't to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait but to change it. Secretary Blinken acknowledged as much at a speaking event at Stanford University in October 2022: "There has been a change in the approach from Beijing toward Taiwan in recent years," including "a fundamental decision that the status quo was no longer acceptable and that Beijing was determined to pursue reunification on a much faster timeline." This central fact must be kept front of mind in any serious policy discussion in or about Taiwan.

We must also acknowledge that Beijing's goals are bigger than annexing Taiwan. In much the way Putin has duped some Westerners into believing NATO's mere existence is an act of belligerence, Chinese officials are making a similar case today about US alliances in Asia.

American defense pacts have existed with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia dating back to the 1950s. It is a telling clue that Beijing is much more preoccupied with the "threat" posed by these treaties now, when China is strong, than it was in past decades when it was economically and militarily weak. This suggests Beijing views US alliances less as a threat to China's security than as an obstacle to its regional and global ambitions. Beijing's Global Security Initiative, launched in recent years, appears to be an effort to replace US alliances with a China-led security architecture for Asia.

As with Russia, Beijing's campaign to disintegrate US alliances appears to be in the service of building an empire.

The Myth of the Rogue General

Another variant of the "accidental war" shibboleth is the idea that rogue military leaders might initiate an external war for their own purposes, à la the character General Jack D. Ripper in the 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*. Under this popular trope, warmongering military subordinates drag their countries into an overseas conflict against the wishes of their political leadership.

Blainey, in his investigation, found such cases to be rare as a cause of war during the last four centuries. It was true centuries ago that European empires granted generals and admirals a degree of independence in deciding whether to fight when they were far from their capitals. But that was in the days before the telegraph, when communication between a monarch and his squadrons required weeks or months of transit time. A rare exception from the modern era that Blainey cites was the Imperial Japanese Army's decision in September 1931 to capture the city of Mukden (known today as Shenyang), followed by the rest of Manchuria, without receiving authorization from the government in Tokyo. It was a rare case that, in any event, could hardly have been classified an "accidental" war, writes Blainey.

Could Chinese generals today go rogue and launch a war against Taiwan or Japan or the United States against Beijing's wishes? In the PRC, soldiers swear an oath not to a constitution but to the Chinese Communist Party, giving supreme leader Xi ultimate and unambiguous control of the gun. A ubiquitous new slogan chanted by Chinese soldiers goes as follows: "Obey Chairman Xi's commands, be responsible to Chairman Xi, and put Chairman Xi at ease."

Even during periods of domestic turmoil when PRC military chains of command broke down and some units fought one another inside China, such as during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the PRC's brief external conflicts (e.g., border clashes with India in 1967 and with the Soviet Union in 1969) were not the actions of rogue military commanders but campaigns authorized by Chairman Mao Zedong in Beijing.

In short, China has one of the most centralized systems of military command and control in the world—so much so that some foreign analysts view the lack of delegated authority as a liability for China during wartime. It seems improbable, then, that a Chinese general would go off the tracks and launch an external war. (Nor, we suspect, would he be likely to resist a command to fight if so ordered by Xi.)

Western statesmen should, in our view, worry less about potential mishaps or rogue soldiers and concentrate on addressing factors that might increase Xi Jinping's confidence that a war could be quick, relatively low cost, and victorious for Beijing.

Inflated Optimism: The Harbinger of War

World War I, because of its sheer scale and complex origins, is a favorite topic of study for scholars interested in war. Yet an easily overlooked fact about the Great War is that it was preceded by a high degree of *optimism* by so many of the main participants. True, there were some grim premonitions in the summer of 1914 that a collision between Europe's industrial giants would be highly destructive. It is also true that some leaders were influenced by their anxiety about longer-term national decline. But European leader after leader—regardless of what side he was on—expressed optimism that the war would be short and victorious for his respective side.⁹

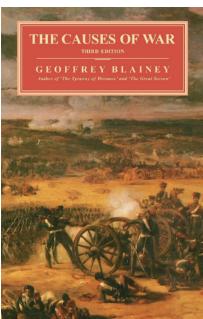
"If the iron dice are now to be rolled, may God help us," said German imperial chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg on August 1, 1914, upon revealing to his federal council that Germany had sent its fateful ultimatum to Russia and France. His use of the phrase "iron dice" signifies he was aware of the ever-present element of chance in war. But he also had conviction that the dice would roll in Germany's favor. He wasn't alone in his optimism. Some German military leaders estimated Germany would mostly or completely defeat France within four to six weeks and have enough forces left over to whip Russia too—regardless of whether Britain entered the war against Germany.

The short-war delusion was hardly unique to Germany. Most British ministers also expected a speedy outcome but with the roles of victors and losers reversed: they were optimistic that Germany would suffer a decisive defeat within months. French leaders were confident that they had learned the lessons of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 and that they could reverse the outcome with even faster mobilization and more élan in the attack. In Russia, the tsar was anxious about how a war might turn out, but his war minister, General Vladimir Soukhomlinov, publicly and privately conveyed his belief that Russia could trounce Germany within a few months. Most Russian ministers agreed. There were recent precedents for short wars that fed the Europeans' prevailing sense of optimism, such as the six-month Franco-Prussian War.

But in 1914, the iron dice would roll quite differently than expected. The Great War would last more than four years and kill an estimated twenty million people, half of them civilians. Another twenty-one million would be wounded.¹³ European leaders had entered the war with deliberate intention. As Blainey's research showed: World War I was no accident, only its consequences were.

Misplaced optimism of a quick and decisive victory precedes wars time and again throughout history. So confident in Russian military superiority was Vladimir Putin in February 2022 that he reportedly didn't inform many of his army commanders that they were being sent into war just days before the invasion began. Russian battalions on Ukraine's border believed they were participating in a mere exercise and carried only a few days' rations.





In *The Causes of War* (third edition, 1988), his pathbreaking study on what causes outbreaks of war and peace, Geoffrey Blainey found that overweening optimism is a recurring prelude to war—and that anything that dampens it is a cause of peace. *Photograph courtesy of the author; book cover courtesy of Simon & Schuster*

Autocracies and democracies alike are prone to such miscalculations. Estimations that "the troops will be home by Christmas" were indulged not only by German and other leaders in 1914, but also by American ones in Korea in 1950 and again in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, as they calmly embarked on what would turn out to be multiyear conflicts.

Overweening optimism isn't merely an ironic footnote of history; *it is an indicator that war is near*—and a sign that deterrence is failing. "Why did nations turn so often to war in the belief that it was a sharp and quick instrument for shaping international affairs when again and again the instrument had proved to be blunt or unpredictable? This recurring optimism is a vital prelude to war," Blainey writes in *The Causes of War*. "Anything which increases that optimism is a cause of war. Anything which dampens that optimism is a cause of peace." ¹⁵

Anger, of course, contributes to tensions in international affairs. Diplomatic slights, wounds to national pride, and other injuries can induce hostility or even hatred. But "rivalry and tension between countries can exist for generations without producing a war," Blainey observes. ¹⁶ It is optimism—specifically the optimism that important political objectives can be gained through war that cannot be gained through peace—that can actually result in a decision to wage war.

It should go without saying that public assessments by American military and intelligence officials that Beijing would *prefer* to achieve its goals peacefully should give us little comfort. In 1940, Adolf Hitler confidently made several peace overtures to London before having to fight the Battle of Britain. In 1941, Hitler also would have preferred it if Tokyo hadn't struck Pearl Harbor when it did. He made clear to adversaries and his inner circle alike that he would have preferred to attain many of his goals peacefully. But if warfare was needed, his goals were a higher priority than peace and, by his reckoning, worth the price of war.

This has been the case with democracies too. The United States has at numerous points in its history stated its preference for peaceful means to secure objectives that it nonetheless resorted to war to achieve. Xi's reported comment to Biden, while discussing Taiwan during their November 2023 summit in San Francisco, that "peace is . . . all well and good but at some point we need to move towards resolution more generally" carries similar overtones.¹⁷

Simply put, statements by or about Xi that he would prefer to annex Taiwan peacefully rather than through war should be regarded as rhetorical diet soda—cheap and calorie free.

Key Influences on a Decision for War

If Xi launches a war over Taiwan, it will be a consummate act of optimism on his part. To deter him, Taiwan and the United States and their friends should focus their efforts on eroding whichever of Xi's assumptions might contribute most to his sanguinity about war.

According to Blainey's study, national leaders, in deciding for war or peace, seemed to be strongly influenced by at least seven factors. We

list those factors here and how they might impact Xi Jinping's calculus on whether to initiate a war.

1. Military Strength and the Ability to Apply That Strength Efficiently in the Likely Theater of War

This is probably a source of growing confidence for Xi Jinping. Beijing has been engaged in the most comprehensive peacetime military buildup of any nation since World War II, accumulating quantitative and qualitative advantages in traditional weapons like missiles, bombers, and warships, as well as advanced capabilities in space, electronic, information, and cyber warfare. Its nuclear weapons and missile expansion programs, despite reported setbacks, are growing so rapidly that China is expected to double its number of operational nuclear warheads to one thousand by the end of the decade.¹⁸

2. Predictions of How Outside Nations Will Behave If War Should Occur

The possibility that Washington enters a war over Taiwan is, in our view, Beijing's single greatest cause for hesitation. Beijing's main consideration in deciding whether to invade is probably its perception of (1) whether Washington would come to Taiwan's defense and (2) whether Washington could do so quickly enough to prevent Taiwan's fall. President Biden's public remarks—on four occasions—that the United States would defend Taiwan against a Chinese attack appear to be a calculated effort to strengthen deterrence. Future US presidents should at least match Biden's commitments or risk signaling a weakening in resolve to Beijing.

3. Perceptions of Whether There Is Internal Unity or Discord at Home and in the Lands of Their Enemies

Blainey's investigation shows that governments suffering from serious civil unrest preferred to avoid war if at all possible. Even for countries already at war, serious disunity at home was a powerful incentive to sue for peace. Think of Russia in 1905 and 1917, Germany in 1918, and the United States in the early 1970s. Even though China's economy is slowing, youth unemployment is high, Xi's handling of COVID was

lackluster, and people are frustrated, there are few signs of the sort of social turmoil that make nations reluctant to pursue expeditionary wars. With the exception of a brief period in the fall of 2022, when street protests erupted in numerous Chinese cities against Xi Jinping's "zero-COVID" lockdowns, China appears to be socially stable. The United States, on the other hand, is facing its gravest political divisions since the Vietnam War and Watergate in the early 1970s. Leaders in Beijing are aware of these divisions (in fact, they expend significant resources to exacerbate them through disinformation operations on social media platforms). American disunity may encourage China's leaders to conclude that US politics are too fraught to forge a consensus to intervene in a Taiwan crisis. Beijing's activities to foment disunity within Taiwan, Japan, Australia, and Europe could similarly embolden Beijing and fuel its optimism about war.

4. Knowledge or Forgetfulness of the Realities and Sufferings of War

The Chinese People's Liberation Army hasn't seen significant combat since its costly punitive war against Vietnam in 1979. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this lack of recent combat experience could make a new generation of military officers more inclined to fight because they lack any visceral connection to the agony and unpredictability of war.

5. Nationalism and Ideology

Ideology in the era of Xi Jinping is laced with fatalism about the inevitability of struggle and confrontation. "Our struggle and contest with Western countries is irreconcilable, so it will inevitably be long, complicated, and sometimes even very sharp," Xi is quoted as saying in an internal military textbook. 19 Xi frequently states his confidence—overconfidence, we would argue—in the idea that Western democracies are in irrevocable decline. Xi, as mentioned in chapter 1, gave a major address in November 2021 in Beijing in which he said "no matter how strong the enemy is, how difficult the road, or how severe the challenge, the Party is always completely without fear, never retreats, does not fear sacrifice, and is undeterrable." He also glorified a chilling quotation by the late chairman Mao Zedong: "Do not hesitate to ruin the country internally

in order to build it anew." On the other hand, Xi's paragons—Mao and Stalin—weren't reckless in their use of military force during the Cold War. Stalin carefully read the odds and refrained from committing land troops to the war on the Korean Peninsula (1950–53). Mao sacrificed huge numbers of troops in that war after estimating (overoptimistically) that the United States could be pushed off the peninsula. But neither the Soviet nor Chinese communist parties directly fought the United States again for the duration of the Cold War.

6. The State of the Economy and Also Its Ability to Sustain the Kind of War Envisaged

China's economic dynamism is waning for reasons that are deeper than Xi's since-abandoned zero-COVID policy. Headwinds in the form of debt, unfavorable demographics, and a recentralization of economic decision making under Xi should, at first glance, auger stability in the Taiwan Strait over the long run. But first you have to make it to the long run. These economic headwinds could persuade Beijing to use its accumulated military advantages in the near term while it still enjoys them.²¹ One of China's greatest advantages is its industrial capacity, which grew from half that of the United States at the turn of the century to twice America's just two decades later. China's shipbuilding capacity is more than two hundred times greater than that of the United States.²² "Despite the economy, they are delivering significant warfighting capability," a senior US military officer told us in early 2024. The Ukraine war, meanwhile, has served to highlight the shortfalls in US weapons and munitions-manufacturing capacity.²³ Xi, as also mentioned in chapter 1, is also assembling the means to mobilize China for a major war.²⁴ Many of the steps his government is undertaking, including stockpiling food and other supplies and calling on individual families to do the same, might be a sign of preparation for a conflict.

7. The Personality and Experience of Those Who Shared in the Decision

Xi, who secured a third five-year term in power at the October 2022 Party Congress, is a paramount leader in the mold of Lenin, Stalin, and

Mao. He controls what he explicitly calls "the tools of dictatorship" to a degree his immediate predecessors rarely did. There is little question that Xi has the personal authority to decide whether and when to fight a war over Taiwan. But would he? Many of the seven factors discussed here lean unmistakably toward that possibility. But there are also important aspects of his personality that suggest he wouldn't wage war unless he was supremely confident of the outcome. For decades, Xi has shown he has a preternatural capability for strategic patience. He climbed the ladder of power carefully without revealing to his factional power brokers the extent of his political ambition and ruthlessness. Xi is someone who rarely makes U-turns (his COVID policy is the most notable exception). But he also proceeds cautiously—zou yi bu, kan yi bu (taking a step and observing before taking another step). He is a leader who has been careful to refrain from playing a card when he might lose, though he is willing to play one when he might not win. Xi's speeches consistently reveal that he relishes hardship and struggle in a ruling party that "forged vigor and qualities of not fearing strong enemies, daring to struggle, and daring to be victorious." But whereas Putin rolled the iron dice and may yet lose in Ukraine, Xi is probably weighing those dice more carefully.

Conclusion

One of Blainey's keenest insights in *The Causes of War* was that a true "balance of power" between rival nations is, contrary to the soothing image the phrase conjures, often a prelude to war. A lopsided balance of power, conversely, often promotes peace. In other words, it is when nations disagree about their relative power—something they're more likely to do when they are closely matched—that conflict often erupts, with war itself serving as the instrument of measurement for deciding which side really was more powerful. That peace has prevailed for so long in the Taiwan Strait owes much to the fact that China was militarily weak through the end of the twentieth century, while the United States enjoyed disproportionate strength in the Western Pacific.

Signs abound now that the People's Republic of China and the United States are more closely matched than ever before. Tabletop

exercises that, fifteen years ago, produced overwhelming US victories over Chinese forces now display results that are more ambiguous. The path to shoring up deterrence in the Taiwan Strait, then, would be for the United States and its partners to *reclaim* decisive means to prevail in war, and to advertise those means to Beijing.

This is the recipe Washington employed to keep the peace during the Cold War. When the conventional forces of the Soviet Union achieved numerical superiority over NATO in the 1950s, Washington doubled down on its advantage in nuclear weapons to "offset" Soviet strength in Europe. In the 1970s, when Soviet nuclear capabilities achieved parity with the United States, Washington embarked on what became known as the "second offset strategy"—this time striving for dominance in conventional arms by leveraging superior technology. The capabilities that resulted—from precision-guided bombs and stealth aircraft to advanced sensors and "Star Wars" antiballistic-missile programs—gave the US military an unambiguous advantage over the Soviets despite NATO's numerical inferiority.

Geography affords Taiwan and its defenders an advantage that precludes the need to match the People's Liberation Army ship for ship, warplane for warplane, and rocket for rocket. Taiwan's relative lack of suitable landing beaches, its mountainous coastline, and the hundred-mile-wide Taiwan Strait (something Ukrainians can only envy) are favorable ingredients for cooking up another Cold War–style "offset." Provided that Taiwan and the United States—together with its allies—have the means to turn the Taiwan Strait into a "boiling moat," deterrence can prevail. The chapters that follow explain how.

NOTES

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