

Why Is China Sending Mixed Signals?

By

Alexis Littlefield

In the People's Republic of China's (PRC) long quest to be a global economic leader, the communist nation has consistently argued for developing nation status at the World Trade Organization (WTO), because China needs more assistance to reach the same status as the United States and the West. For the PRC's domestic audience, however, the Chinese Communist Party leadership portrays strength—in stark contrast to the internal weakness proffered to international audiences. It is possible that this mixed message is all part of a strategy Deng Xiaoping described as [“Hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead.”](#)

In the case of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), it seems China is sending both signals of strength and weakness to foreign audiences. What is the rationale behind these mixed signals?

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) faced some real setbacks this year, such as the August 2023 catastrophic loss of a nuclear submarine. A Type 093 Chinese [107m nuclear submarine hit a chain and anchor trap](#) intended to snare Western vessels lurking off China's Shandong province, with the entire crew of 55 submariners reportedly suffocated after a failure in the oxygen system. With the PRC expecting any fight with the United States to take the primary form of naval warfare, demonstrations of Chinese naval successes are important.

Then, in November, what some netizens refer to as “Chinese tofu dreg military equipment,” the PLAN's most advanced 980 hull number Type 071 landing ship, the Longhushan, was [seen with multiple fires on deck](#). Chinese sources claimed that the smoke was simply part of a screening exercise, but the reality is likely very different. Again, the failure gives the impression that the PLAN is not quite ready for the combined naval operations that are certain to take place in a conflict with the United States should China decide to attempt a Taiwan seizure.

To mollify American angst of China's military buildup, the most recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* has several articles that explain Chinese action as a result of American aggression and strength. M. Taylor Fravel, Henrik Stålhane Hiim, and Magnus Langset Trøan's [China's Misunderstood Nuclear Expansion: How US Strategy Is Fueling Beijing's Growing Arsenal](#) suggests that China's nuclear buildup is the result of its own perception of weakness. Whether this perspective is accurate is debatable, but it makes the case for Chinese weakness as an explanation for the military buildup. The implication is that the United States can change Chinese military efforts by demonstrating less strength.

Jisi Wang's [America and China Are Not Yet in a Cold War](#) offers advice on how the two countries can avoid a Soviet-American style cold war that is precipitated by American fear of Chinese strength. In his article, Wang, a member of China's foreign policy establishment, suggests that, in the case of Taiwan, China is capable of taking the country by force if the United States and Taiwan do not begin movement toward unification. The US would fail in any attempts to prevent China from “liberating” Taiwan. Wang's recommendations for preventing a new cold war all require the United States to weaken its position *vis-à-vis* the PRC.

Given China's investment in advanced technologies like [hypersonic maneuverable reentry vehicles and multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles](#), which represent a significant evolution in its nuclear capabilities and strategy, no such approach to China should

ever receive consideration. These developments also suggest a more complex and potentially assertive nuclear posture, moving beyond the traditional confines of minimal deterrence. This shift has major implications for global and regional security architectures, arms control, and the future of strategic stability.

Rather than responding with weakness, the United States should send an unmistakable message to Xi Jinping: the United States is ready and willing to counter Chinese aggression. The simple fact is authoritarian leaders of every stripe respect strength. Despite Xi's efforts to hide his strength and bide his time, the United States must accelerate its effort to prepare Taiwan and other allies in the region to defend themselves against growing Chinese aggression.

Although the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs* seems to suggest, through its articles, that Chinese aggression is somehow the fault of the United States and that it is up President Biden and future presidents to take a less assertive path toward China, the fact remains that weakness is provocative. Giving up on Taiwan because China is too strong is not an option. Giving up on American nuclear modernization because China is too weak is also not an option.

Alexis Littlefield, PhD, spent two decades in Taiwan and China before returning to the United States as a COVID-19 refugee. He currently lives in Washington, DC, and taught at the University of Nottingham's School of International Studies in Ningbo, China.