

*U.S. Military Signals to China in the Asia-Pacific, 2015–2022**

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Abstract

Recently, U.S.-China relations have witnessed a strategic transition from engagement to containment. However, the mixed signals between the two sides, ranging from appeasement to provocation, make it difficult at this critical crossroads to forecast the future of bilateral relations. What are the deep-seated reasons for the U.S.'s military presence in Asia and China's responses? By comparing such U.S. signals as FONOPs, B-52 bomber action, and U.S. media coverage from 2015 to 2022, we find that the U.S.'s motives may be to deter a potential challenger and to sustain domestic support. The cost of signals relates positively to the reliability of commitment. Therefore, the U.S.'s choice of different military signals is mainly affected by U.S. perceptions of threat and signaling costs. Signals incurring high sunk costs are primarily intended to deter China in the South China Sea, while signals at high audience cost are usually employed to maintain domestic support. The U.S.'s selection of frontstage or offstage signals can hence be explained by both domestic considerations and external threat perceptions.

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* The authors thank Chen Dingding, the two anonymous reviewers, and the editorial team for their very helpful comments on previous versions of the manuscript. All remaining errors are ours.