

Taiwan and Great Power Competition with China

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My first Aspen Strategy Group meeting in 2006 was on China. The conference materials were bound in a cover with bright Maoist propaganda art depicting the Long March. The articles and essays inside conveyed the certainty that China would soon become the most ambitious and consequential player in world affairs. Participants concurred on the need for a comprehensive U.S. strategy to shape China's choices and stabilize relations but diverged sharply on what to do about the issue of greatest proximate danger—Taiwan. For many participants, the Taiwan problem seemed to be an anachronistic Cold War irritant and a distraction from the growing agenda the United States would have to manage with a rising China.

This past year ASG briefly returned to the problem of Taiwan. There was much broader consensus that the danger to Taiwan had increased significantly and that Taiwan mattered to U.S. security interests in the new context of strategic competition with China. Despite a spirited and respectful debate, however, there was still no convergence on the right strategy for Taiwan among some of the best minds on national security in the country. Perhaps in the backdrop was a recognition that while the consequences of failure on Taiwan were now greater, so too were the consequences of war with China.

As John Lewis Gaddis notes in his recent book, *On Grand Strategy*, one of the most difficult challenges in national security policy is deciding when and where to draw a defensive line against expanding hegemonic adversaries. Once you draw that line, he warns, you must “be able to watch smoke rise on the horizons you once controlled without losing your self-confidence or shaking that of allies.”¹ At the same time, as Steve Hadley used to remind us on the National Security Council (NSC) staff in the midst of our debates about North Korea and Taiwan, you have to be prepared to defend that line once drawn because “if you keep redrawing your redlines, you eventually create a red carpet.” The dynamic is further complicated by the three-player game across the Taiwan Strait and the requirement for the United States to find a formula that deters China without emboldening Taipei to pursue independence and create a *casus belli* contrary to U.S. interests.

The United States has studiously avoided drawing redlines on Taiwan over multiple administrations, instead articulating a policy of “strategic ambiguity” about the U.S. response to Chinese aggression against Taiwan but “tactical clarity” that the United States would have the ability and willpower to respond decisively if Chinese actions put larger U.S. interests in the Western Pacific at risk. The core of the current debate is whether the United States should be drawing a clearer redline as Beijing expands its military pressure on Taiwan and demonstrates a far greater willingness to use coercion and force in other parts of Asia. The starkest call for a new redline was the September 2 essay in *Foreign Affairs* by Richard Haass and David Sacks in which the authors advocate replacing strategic ambiguity with an unambiguous U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan.²

Haass and Sacks are right that the United States must take steps to enhance deteriorating deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. If that deterrence rested entirely on declaratory policy, then erasing doubts about the American commitment to defend Taiwan would appear to be a logical choice. However, the security of Taiwan rests on many other factors, including the capabilities of the United States, Taiwan, and Japan; the resilience of Taiwan against non-kinetic grey zone coercion; Beijing's perception of international support for Taiwan; and Taipei's own discipline in cross-Strait relations. A sudden and unilateral change in U.S. declaratory policy could bring more complications than clarity to

each of these factors. It may be time to move beyond “strategic ambiguity”—but only in a calibrated way consistent with a comprehensive strategy to reinforce Taiwan’s security across multiple dimensions of statecraft.

The Growing Challenge

The credibility of “strategic ambiguity” until now has rested on the clarity of the United States’ ability to deter or defeat aggression against Taiwan. As long as the United States was certain to prevail in a conflict, there was greater latitude to avoid drawing a clear redline. That latitude has diminished because of growing Chinese capabilities and willingness to employ coercive force.

In terms of capabilities, the numbers are stunning. Over the past twenty-five years Beijing has steadily expanded its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy to shift the cross-Strait balance in favor of the mainland. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has deployed over 1,250 ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles capable of striking Taiwan and has put to sea 350 surface combatants (larger in quantity if not quality than the entire U.S. Navy); the PLA Air Force is now four to five times larger than the Republic of China (ROC) Air Force and has an integrated air defense system that extends over the entirety of the Taiwan Strait; PLA combined arms interoperability and readiness is approaching world-class levels; and the PLA has expanded its power projection beyond Taiwan with militarized artificial islands in the South China Sea and submarine operations in the Indian Ocean, South Pacific, and Second Island Chain (Guam).³

After two decades of intensive operations in the Middle East, the Pentagon is finally beginning to send more resources to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) to counter this threat in terms of munitions, readiness, and overall lethality pursuant to the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC). Congress expressed support for this effort on a bipartisan basis under the “Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative” introduced in the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Allies have also stepped up, particularly Japan, which revised the interpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution in 2015 to allow formal planning for joint regional operations with the United States under the United Nations Charter right of “collective self-defense.”⁴

The trend lines are problematic nonetheless. In 1996 the United States responded to unprecedented Chinese missile and naval exercises around Taiwan by deploying two carrier battle groups to the immediate region. While the Navy recently sent two carrier battle groups through the South China Sea on Taiwan’s southern flank, the reality is that in an active crisis the Pentagon would hesitate to deploy carriers inside of China’s expanded missile, submarine, and fighter envelope. When the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) asked over 100 national security experts in August 2020 who would prevail in a U.S.-China conflict in the Western Pacific, three-quarters answered the United States, but when asked to project that question out ten years, only half answered that the United States would prevail. Responses from U.S. allies and partners showed similar results, and while these were impressions rather than scientific predictions, those perceptions matter in real terms.⁵

Chinese intentions are more difficult to measure but also troubling. In some respects, Beijing’s intentions toward Taiwan have changed little for fifty years. One of the greatest frustrations in U.S. policy toward China since Richard Nixon met Mao Zedong in 1972 has been the inability to convince Beijing to renounce the use of force against Taiwan. Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan each tried and failed during negotiations for the three communiques with China.⁶ The conditions under which Beijing has stated it would use force have varied slightly, with China preserving something of its own “strategic ambiguity.” Before 2000, Beijing stated it would only use force in the event of foreign invasion or occupation of Taiwan, but in 2000 officials under Jiang Zemin published an 11,000-word Taiwan White Paper that threatened to use force if Taipei refused “indefinitely” to enter negotiations on unification. Chinese officials later claimed these conditions were not new.⁷ Beijing’s 2005 Anti-Secession Law then detailed the military options that could be used against Taiwan, but emphasized the condition of Taiwan seeking independence as the trigger.⁸ In January 2019, Xi Jinping declared that Taiwan “must and will” be reunited under his “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and declared his intention to use military force if necessary. His speech was backed by a wave of propaganda

videos on state media professing brotherhood with the people of Taiwan followed by violent images of PLA bombers destroying notional Taiwanese targets—all evocative of King George III’s line in the musical *Hamilton*: “I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love...”⁹

Beijing’s actual use of coercive tools and military force in recent years presents stronger evidence of increased willingness to use military coercion or force against Taiwan. Since Tsai Ing-wen’s reelection in 2020, the PLA Air Force has repeatedly circumnavigated Taiwan and sent fighters and bombers across the median line in the Taiwan Strait that both sides had maintained for decades.¹⁰ Evidence of Xi’s higher risk tolerance is abundant elsewhere in the region as well, including the violent attacks on Indian troops in the disputed Galwan River Valley, the passage of the Hong Kong National Security Law with its application of extraterritoriality against third countries, the mercantilist embargo on South Korea for accepting U.S. missile defense deployments, and a sharp increase in fighter incursions into Japan’s air defense identification zone.¹¹

Intentions are the most opaque dimension of international security to measure, but it would be difficult to argue against the proposition that Beijing is becoming more confident in its ability to use force in Asia—and Taiwan remains Beijing’s most important “core interest.” This growing confidence in coercive measures may also be considered the flipside of Beijing’s rapidly diminishing confidence in the prospects for peaceful reunification. Despite massive cyber interference by the mainland, Tsai, the Democratic Progressive Party presidential candidate, easily won reelection this year on the back of Taiwanese citizens’ growing alarm at what they saw happening in Hong Kong. Xi’s adamant demand that Taiwan be unified under the same “one country, two system” model applied to Hong Kong is not entirely new, but it is now far more menacing.

What Is at Stake for the United States?

Xi’s growing risk tolerance raises the same question for the United States: How much risk should we be prepared to take to defend Taiwan? When CSIS asked this question in our survey of over 400 thought leaders across different sectors in the United States, the mean answer (on a scale of 1-10 with 10 meaning “significant risk”) was 7.93 (for the public it was 6.69).¹² Congressional legislation shows similar bipartisan support for defending Taiwan based on the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which states that the United States will “consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.”¹³

Taiwan is arguably even more important to U.S. interests today than it was when the Aspen Strategy Group met to discuss China in 2006. Beijing’s revisionist strategy toward the Indo-Pacific has intensified since Xi came to power and particularly since his 2014 Shanghai speech calling for Asians not to rely on “foreign blocs” (i.e., alliances with the United States).¹⁴ Successful coercion or invasion of Taiwan would cut the First Island Chain in half, flank Japan, isolate Australia, and deal a potentially mortal blow to the credibility of U.S. security treaty commitments and the network of U.S. alliances that have preserved regional and global order for seven decades. PRC control of Taiwan’s economy would give Beijing monopolistic control over Taiwan’s world-class semiconductor industry and allow firms like Huawei to leapfrog the ten- to twenty-year lag in semiconductor fabrication that now prevents Chinese dominance of 5G technology. Suppression of Taiwan’s vibrant democracy through force or coercion would represent the greatest blow to freedom in a region that has seen a steady expansion of democratic norms in the past three decades.

An Integrated Strategy

While the urgency of Taiwan’s situation might suggest the need for a radical reformulation of U.S. policy, it is important to remember that Beijing also faces a vexing and high-risk situation. The goal of U.S. policy should be what it has always been: to prevent any unilateral attempt to change the *status quo*. This will require an integrated strategy that includes adjustments to declaratory policy, but only as a supplement to policies that increase the cost of coercion and give Taiwan the resilience to resist that coercion.

Deterrence: The blueprint for complicating Chinese planning is clear in the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, but Congress and the next administration will have to support appropriating the funds to implement that initiative. Since the threat is now along the entire First Island Chain and not just the narrow lane of attack in the Taiwan Strait, the United States will need to enhance capacity-building among allies: for Japan, cyber and space capabilities will be critical, while the Philippines will require greater maritime domain awareness. Beijing’s attempt to draw U.S. and allied forces away from the First Island Chain should be countered with greater military coordination among the Quad members (U.S., Japan, Australia, and India) to hold China’s new dual-use bases and sea lanes at risk, leveraging the enormous advantage of these maritime democracies in undersea warfare. INDOPACOM will also have to align command-and-control relationships better with Japan to be prepared to conduct a fight within the First Island Chain (Japanese consideration of an Australian-style Joint Operational Command would help). Finally, the United States will have to press Taiwan to put more resources behind its new asymmetrical defense concept, with an emphasis on survivability and lethality over platforms that make sense only in terms of industrial policy.¹⁵

Diplomacy: The United States will need to coordinate closely with other democracies to counter Beijing’s efforts to close Taiwan’s “international space.” Taiwan’s robust response to COVID-19 and early warnings about Wuhan demonstrated that Taipei deserves observer and liaison status within international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO). However, this means that the United States will have to be fully engaged in these organizations to support Taiwan’s access. The Trump administration’s unilateral withdrawal from the WHO hurt Taipei far more than Beijing. More broadly, the United States together with Japan and other close friends of Taiwan should increase coordination with the European Union to ensure that Chinese coercive moves against Taiwan are met by as much of a united front among democracies as possible (recognizing that few will actually have military tools to contribute). This will be critical because the Central Military Commission in Beijing will be more likely to authorize force against Taiwan if the international community seems divided on the fate of the island.

Economic Resilience: Before the Tsai government came to office, Taiwan grew overly dependent on China for manufacturing and economic growth. There is clearly a reconsideration underway in Taipei in light of Beijing’s demonstrable willingness to use mercantilist tools against its trading partners. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) is currently considering locating a major plant in the United States, and Taiwanese manufacturers are beginning to diversify their supply chains away from China to Southeast Asia in a pattern established by Japan and Korea earlier.¹⁶ Complete Taiwanese decoupling from the Chinese economy is unlikely, but the United States can help Taiwan further diversify with a more active and multilateral approach to trade policy in the Asia Pacific. U.S. leadership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (now the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) would pave the way for Taiwan’s eventual membership in a rule-making coalition over twice the size of China’s economy. If the politics of trade remain difficult in the United States for the foreseeable future, Taiwan would be a logical participant in narrower agreements on establishing a “clean network” for 5G technologies or a regional digital trade agreement that builds on these chapters in the revised 2018 U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement and the 2019 U.S.-Japan Free Trade Agreement.

Declaratory Policy: There are many ways the United States can calibrate declaratory policy to demonstrate willingness and intent to respond to coercion or aggression against Taiwan without giving a permanent blank check that future administrations in Taipei—potentially less careful than Tsai’s—might abuse. Careful calibration will also be critical because the United States will need allies to take on more risk themselves and will not want to upset efforts at international alignment with declaratory policies that force Japan or others to visibly backtrack. Perhaps the most useful signal can come from Congress, which best reflects the determination of the American people that CSIS found in its surveys. Changes in administration declaratory policy should also be calibrated in ways that signal that it is Beijing’s specific actions toward Taiwan that are prompting the more robust language rather than unrelated problems with China or domestic U.S. politics.

The Taiwan Relations Act itself offers a useful starting point. As necessary, U.S. government principals would do well to note specific Chinese actions that would represent “a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area” and be “of grave concern to the United States,” to use the precise language of the Taiwan Relations Act. Invoking existing U.S. law and longstanding U.S. national security interests would bring the greatest credibility and have the most enduring impact in terms of dissuasion and deterrence.

Finally, while the United States should maintain its commitment under the 1982 Six Assurances not to negotiate any aspect of Taiwan's future with Beijing, an integrated strategy must include reassurance and dialogue with Beijing. U.S. intentions should never be conveyed through public declaratory policy alone. The lack of any such channel with Beijing in recent years is problematic beyond just the Taiwan issue and should be addressed.

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- ⁷ Elisabeth Rosenthal, "China Dismisses Furor Over Its Taiwan Policy," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/01/world/china-dismisses-furor-over-its-taiwan-policy.html>.
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- ⁹ "Xi Jinping Says Taiwan 'Must and Will Be' Reunited with China," *BBC News*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-46733174#:~:text=Chinese%20President%20Xi%20Jinping%20has%20urged%20the%20people,that%20China%20reserved%20the%20right%20to%20use%20force>.
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