

## Defending Taiwan: But ... What Are the Costs?

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## Defending Taiwan: But ... What Are the Costs?

A central goal of US foreign policy and defense strategy is to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The US Department of Defense plans for the Chinese invasion as its pacing scenario,<sup>1</sup> and there is bipartisan momentum in Congress toward more hawkish China policy generally and a clear US commitment to defending Taiwan specifically.<sup>2</sup> With this congressional wind at its back, the Biden Administration has stepped from strategic ambiguity toward a more forthright commitment to Taiwan's defense.<sup>3</sup>

This commitment is no academic hypothetical. The US intelligence community estimates that the threat of Chinese invasion of Taiwan is "acute" and could force a US decision with little warning time in the coming years.<sup>4</sup> The United States has telegraphed its willingness to defend Taiwan largely to deter China from invading. But deterrence may fail. Unless the US government is bluffing, a policy committing to Taiwan's defense means that the United States would fight China to protect Taiwan.

The US government's increasing commitment to defend Taiwan against China marks a tremendous shift in US foreign policy. But Congress and the Biden Administration seem to have put the cart before the horse. Decisions as important as going to war with nuclear-armed great powers demand systematic analysis and fulsome public debate about the costs and benefits of action. Thus far, however, the public debate has largely neglected the costs side of the cost-benefits equation, focusing primarily on the benefits.

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Those who advocate that the United States *should* defend the island argue that defending Taiwan would yield important benefits for Taiwan, the region, the United States, and the world. Much of this advocacy assumes that the United

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States *could* successfully defend Taiwan at an acceptable cost if it puts its mind to it. This assumption creates the impression that the US decision is about resolve alone, imbuing the debate with a moralistic tone. If the United States “cares” about its allies and partners ... if the United States cares about democracy ... then it must defend Taiwan. But both deterrence and warfighting are about resolve *and* capability. Military capability is not a yes/no, but rather a sliding scale in which less capability means greater

risks and costs. Public opponents of a US commitment to defend Taiwan tend to focus on rebutting the proposed benefits one by one, rather than critically probing the underlying assumptions of the current debate—including that a US victory, at an acceptable cost, is assured.

Below, we briefly summarize the often-touted benefits of US involvement in Taiwan, explain why such involvement would likely mean a direct war with China, and then elaborate the costs side of such involvement. We emphasize that a direct war between the United States and China over Taiwan—*regardless of who wins*—could have severe consequences for the United States, the American people, and the wider world. Our goal is not to make the case against defending Taiwan. Rather, we aim to equip the American people and American policymakers with a more thorough framework to inform opinion and decision on the highest-stakes foreign policy question of our time.

## **Debating the Benefits Amidst a Unipolar Hangover**

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Thus far, public discussion has focused on debating at least six potential benefits of a US decision to defend Taiwan. First, some argue that defending Taiwan would deter China from further aggression. Observers argue that if China seizes Taiwan, its appetite for resolving its other territorial disputes by force may grow with the taking. Critics counter that this risk is inflated,<sup>5</sup> that Taiwan is a unique case, and that little evidence supports the claim that coercive unification with Taiwan would influence the PRC’s regional ambitions. They warn that similar logic, often connected to the “Munich” appeasement analogy, led

the United States to embark on wars in Korea, Vietnam and the first Iraq War—all of which produced mixed results at best.

Second, some argue that Taiwan's geography is pivotal to the balance of military power in the region. If the PRC gains control of Taiwan, the balance of military capabilities in the Western Pacific would shift in China's favor.<sup>6</sup> Others counter that gaining control of Taiwan would only modestly help the PRC's military position in the region, if at all.<sup>7</sup>

Third, proponents argue that the United States must defend Taiwan to maintain the credibility of its regional and global alliance commitments.<sup>8</sup> Critics warn against assuming that demonstrations of resolve anywhere are vital to maintaining credibility everywhere.<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, some argue the United States must defend Taiwan for economic reasons.<sup>10</sup> The 100 nautical miles of water surrounding Taiwan are some of the most densely trafficked in the world. Mainland control of the island could cement China's ability to dominate these trade routes. Others suggest that the PRC already has the ability to interfere with shipping.<sup>11</sup>

Fifth, Taiwan is home to the world's most advanced semiconductor manufacturing. Some US legislators suggest the United States must defend Taiwan both to protect Western access to these chips and to keep them out of Chinese hands.<sup>12</sup> These chips are not only important for the global economy but are also essential for many military applications. Access to advanced chip production will directly affect the military balance. Others contend that because Taiwan imports critical components for chip manufacturing from Japan and the United States, China would be unable to seize chip foundries and make microprocessors without continuing to work with the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, some argue that the United States has a moral duty to defend a vibrantly democratic Taiwan from an aggressive autocracy.<sup>14</sup> While considering moral questions is vital, the moral verdict could also cut the opposite way. All decisions regarding war inevitably require weighing competing moral claims. To defend Taiwan would be to send American servicemembers to their deaths and potentially put American cities in the nuclear crosshairs. Modern great power war would be almost unimaginably destructive. Nevertheless, some moral causes are worth fighting for, even if fighting could cause severe harm to large numbers of people and undermine the combatant's ability to fight for other worthy causes. To make such a moral calculation, however, requires considering those costs carefully.

To date, however, there has been little public—i.e., outside of internal government circles—discussion in the United States about the range of potential costs of defending Taiwan. The dearth of open discussion of the downsides of the policy is perhaps the product of party politics, where there is rare bipartisan consensus that China's rise must be countered in the strongest way possible.<sup>15</sup> Lack of

attention to the costs side of the equation may also stem from what some have called the primacy mindset, the unipolarity hangover, or hegemonic blinders.<sup>16</sup>

During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union tempered US foreign policy. When the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956, many voices—making moral arguments like those for the defense of Taiwan—urged a NATO military response. But the United States and its partners stayed out because of concerns about escalation to a wider, devastating war. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of unipolarity changed the American mindset. For more than 30 years, the United States has not faced a possible conflict with a near-peer nuclear-armed state. The United States could afford to discount the costs and risks of action because no US adversary could impose costs on the United States sufficient to force real caution. In this benign environment, US policymakers and Americans adopted a mindset that ignored the possibility that the US armed forces could be defeated and that Americans could suffer devastating consequences at home.

China's rise means the United States no longer enjoys the luxury of unipolarity. China is an economic and military great power that is increasingly pushing back against the US military presence in its backyard and preparing to thwart US military intervention in Taiwan. The United States can decide how it wants to respond, but its response should be shaped by the reality that China has the military capabilities to challenge US military objectives in the Indo-Pacific and to hit Americans at home.

### **Defending Taiwan Means a Direct—And Costly—War with China**

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A US decision to defend Taiwan against Chinese invasion would mean direct war between the United States and China. The indirect approach the US has employed to defend Ukraine—characterized by economic sanctions and military

**The indirect approach the US has employed to defend Ukraine would not be an option in Taiwan**

assistance without direct combat participation against Russia—would not be an option in Taiwan. This comes down to geography. The United States can support Ukraine without fighting Russia directly because US security assistance can be transported to Ukraine overland through NATO territory. Russia cannot intercept this assistance without taking the first shot against NATO—a step it seeks to avoid because NATO's entrance into the war would hurt Russia's chances of success.

By contrast, the United States would need to transport any substantial security assistance to the island of Taiwan by sea. China has built a large, technologically advanced navy. If China invaded Taiwan, it would almost certainly blockade the island first.<sup>17</sup> Unless the Chinese blockading ships ringing Taiwan stood aside when confronted, they could force a US decision between abandoning the resupply effort or firing the first shot against China.<sup>18</sup> In essence, it would be highly unlikely the United States could provide meaningful weapons to Taiwan in a conflict without entering into direct conflict with China.<sup>19</sup> Defending Taiwan would not be a US-China proxy war fought by Taiwan with US assistance; it would be a direct war between the world's two greatest powers.

If China launches a cross-Strait invasion and the United States decides to defend Taiwan, the best-case scenario is that the defenders prevent the PRC from gaining a beachhead—i.e., a consolidated landing position from which an invader can launch follow-on attacks—on the island in days to weeks of fighting, leading the PRC to discontinue its efforts at coercive unification.<sup>20</sup> In short, the best-case scenario is that the United States wins a short war.

But rapid US victory and Chinese capitulation in a short war is not the most likely scenario. Even if the United States and Taiwan rapidly defeat the initial PRC invasion force, the war could drag on. Chinese strategists are already considering fallback options to continue a conflict, such as a coercive blockade, should an initial invasion fail.<sup>21</sup> Given that Taiwan's status is unfinished business from the Chinese Communist Party's seizure of power and that a failed invasion might mean the end of Xi Jinping's rule, it is unlikely that China would simply give up. Examples of leaders going to war expecting a quick win only to find themselves in a protracted conflict are numerous. They include the American Civil War, World War I, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Even a quick US victory could create severe costs for the United States**

Below, we lay out the plausible military, political, economic and escalation costs and risks of a US war with China to defend Taiwan. Even a quick US victory could create severe costs for the United States. In the more likely scenario of a prolonged war, the costs and escalation risks could be catastrophic. We conclude this section with a discussion of the implications of a potential US defeat.

### **The Degradation of the US Armed Forces**

Even if the United States successfully helped Taiwan stop a Chinese invasion in a short war, the losses to US forces could significantly damage American military power for years. China has spent more than two decades building a long-range

strike complex specifically designed to stop the United States from successfully intervening in a conflict in East Asia. American bases in the Western Pacific as far away as Guam are within range of highly accurate land-based Chinese missiles that remain difficult to defend against. These bases would likely come under sustained attack. Beyond any losses to aircraft on the ground or ships in port, these attacks could limit the usefulness of these bases for air operations and undermine the logistics required to sustain forces in combat. The damage could take years to repair, creating lasting effects for the US ability to project power in the Indo-Pacific.

But US naval and air forces themselves would also likely sustain substantial losses. US Navy surface ships and aircraft carriers coming to defend Taiwan or escorting resupply convoys would need to run a 1600-plus nautical mile gauntlet of Chinese land-based weapons. Only later would they face long-range Chinese aircraft and the Chinese Navy, both armed with missiles of their own, many of which out-range the missiles US ships carry.

Estimating US losses in a hypothetical conflict with China over Taiwan with any precision is difficult, but a recent wargame organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies offers a rigorous attempt.<sup>22</sup> The game was run over 24 iterations through multiple scenarios. While all games are imperfect and these games relied exclusively on unclassified information, they offer some ballpark figures. In the most plausible scenario, the United States and its allies stopped the Chinese invasion, but the US and Japan lost almost 400 combat aircraft and more than 40 ships in two weeks of combat. In scenarios designed more favorably to the United States and its allies, they still lost almost 300 combat aircraft and two dozen ships while stopping the invasion. The US military has not faced losses like these since World War II. For comparison, the US only lost 19 ships in the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The losses described above amount to about 7 percent of total US combat aircraft and 12 percent of the US Navy's battle force. While these percentages may seem low, the aircraft and ships available for combat are often well below the total in existence. On average, half of US combat aircraft are unable to fly for maintenance reasons.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, as a rule of thumb the US Navy assumes that after accounting for maintenance and training, only a third of the fleet is usually available for operations. Suddenly, US losses could be a sixth of its available combat aircraft and a third of its deployable battle force ships, all in only two weeks.

Replacing the equipment the US military could lose in the fight for Taiwan would take time. The Department of Defense's Fiscal Year 2024 budget requests just over 100 combat aircraft and starts construction on nine Navy battle force ships. If recent procurement rates for aircraft continue, it would take three to four years to replace the aircraft lost. Nor is it clear that the US could easily increase production. The F-35 program is chronically delayed, and Lockheed-

Martin will miss its F-35 production goal this year.<sup>24</sup> The situation is worse for ships. On average it takes six years from the time Congress funds a ship until it reaches the fleet.<sup>25</sup> The Navy is already projected to shrink and will not regain its current size until 2031 under existing plans.<sup>26</sup> Some ships could likely be repaired, but shipyards are already overcommitted and behind schedule for both repair work and new construction.<sup>27</sup> Even assuming it could increase productivity, if a war occurred this year, the Navy might not be able to make up its losses until the late 2030s.

Beyond these losses to US ships and aircraft, the human toll could be significant: American servicemembers would sail the ships and fly the aircraft. Across the 24 iterations of the CSIS wargame, US casualties averaged almost 7000, of which around 3200 were killed in action. In Iraq and Afghanistan, 5474 Americans died in 20 years of fighting. In other words, in a fight with China over Taiwan, the US could suffer more than half those casualties in weeks.

This analysis applies to the *best-case scenario* of a quick US victory. In other games, the war dragged on.<sup>28</sup> Fighting could continue at its initial furious pace, or it could be characterized by intermittent episodes of intense violence. During World War I and II, lulls in fighting—the winter shell shortage in 1914 and the “Phony War” of late 1939 and 1940—occurred as both sides regrouped. What is certain is that casualties would continue to mount as the war went on, and more likely at the rate of thousands of deaths per week of combat than the single digits per week of recent non-great-power conflicts.

**T**housands of deaths would mount per week of combat rather than the single digits of recent conflicts

### Meeting Other Commitments

Beyond the direct human and material costs, strategically these losses would make it more difficult for the United States to meet its other commitments in the Indo-Pacific and around the world. Whether the United States emerges from a fight to defend Taiwan better positioned to defend its Western Pacific allies from China depends on the relative distribution of military power between the two sides after the fight. In the immediate aftermath of a quick US victory, the Chinese threat would be diminished. China would likely have expended much of its conventional missile arsenal, and the CSIS games suggest it would lose many more ships than the United States and its allies (although far fewer aircraft). No American treaty allies share a land border with China, so if the United States sank most of the Chinese Navy, those allies should be safe from Chinese invasion for a time after the conflict.



But within a few years, the regional military balance would depend on which side had rebuilt its armed forces more quickly. Based on shipyard capacity, the US Office of Naval Intelligence estimates that China has 200 times the shipbuilding capacity of the United States.<sup>29</sup> Thus given current manufacturing capacities and military building rates, it seems unlikely that the United States would win the re-arming race.

More immediately, China is not the only threat. While China and the United States lick their wounds, other antagonists could seize the window of opportunity to engage in aggression. Assuming North Korea had not already taken advantage of the war over Taiwan to attack South Korea, it might choose to strike while the United States was weakened. Iran could take the opportunity to assert control in the Strait of Hormuz. Depending on how the Ukraine conflict has progressed, Russia could double down or even directly challenge NATO.

In any of these situations, the United States would be worse positioned to respond after a war to defend Taiwan. Advocates of a strong US commitment to defend Taiwan cite the importance of assuring other allies of the United States' resolve to defend them, but US military weakness in the wake of even a successful defense of Taiwan could give allies good reason to question the US *ability* to maintain its commitments.

### **Economic Disruption**

Even a short war over Taiwan involving the United States would have negative economic effects for the United States and the world that could quickly exceed the damage of a “sanctions only” response. Trade between the United States and China—each other's largest trading partners—would be affected almost immediately. In 2021, 18 percent of US imports and almost 9 percent of US exports came from or went to China.<sup>30</sup> China was the largest source of US imports of textiles, furniture, bedding, lamps, paint and miscellaneous manufactured items.<sup>31</sup> If the United States responded to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan with economic sanctions alone, it would have some flexibility in the trade it targeted—just as Europe continued to import some energy from Russia after the 2022 Ukraine invasion.<sup>32</sup> In such a scenario, the United States could exert some control over the economic disruption. If the United States went to war with China, however, much of its trade with China would be quickly disrupted.

Some broader economic disruption would occur regardless of whether the United States came to Taiwan's defense. The war would likely stop most trade with Taiwan. The waters immediately surrounding the island are also an important global trade route and Taiwan's ports are major container trans-shipment points. The shock of China's invasion could initially cause that shipping to freeze or reroute. This change would create immediate disruptions, but their

length would depend on what happened next. The Taiwanese Navy is tiny compared to China's, and Taiwan's air force would likely focus on defending Taiwan's airspace or harassing the amphibious forces.<sup>33</sup> If the United States stayed out of the fight, naval combat—and the resulting disruptions—would remain close to Taiwan and likely end quickly.

By contrast, if the United States entered the conflict the disruptions would grow; US entry would expand the geographic scope of the war at sea. Battle might occur in the South and East China Seas as American ships and aircraft converged from around the globe. These waters include some of the busiest shipping routes in the world. Unlike transit routes, these sea lanes are heavily trafficked because of the volume of goods shipped to and from their ports; eight of the ten busiest container ports in the world are in China or South Korea.<sup>34</sup> For commerce unable to secure a government guarantee, the price of insurance would skyrocket given the dangers of moving trade through a combat zone. Trade would attempt to reroute, but alternatives would face challenges handling the volume required for some time. Shortages and supply chain issues would multiply quickly and prices would climb. Eventually markets might adjust, but just as we have seen in the long tail of the pandemic's disruption, this would take time. Trade might never return to "normal." These effects would likely occur even if neither government deliberately used blockades and economic warfare to gain advantage—though both would likely do so.

A longer war would exacerbate all these effects. It would almost certainly cause sustained trade disruptions between China and the United States.<sup>35</sup> A longer war would also raise the probability of accidental damage to Taiwan's semiconductor foundries, or that either side might adopt a "scorched earth" strategy and destroy the chip foundries to keep them from enemy control. While deterring a mainland attack on Taiwan may help keep semiconductors flowing, if it comes to war, access to these critical components would likely be jeopardized for the duration of the fighting.

Equally as important, in a long war both sides would need to mobilize their industrial bases to manufacture weapons to sustain the fight. The last time the United States fought a "hot" war with another great power (World War II), it dedicated more than 40 percent of its GDP to the war effort, compared to the roughly 3 percent of GDP the United States spent on defense for most of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Such a shift would inevitably affect domestic standards of living. Even though the US economy grew dramatically during World War II, household consumption lost more than a year of gains after the war started in 1941.<sup>36</sup> The standard of living did not fully recover until after the war ended.

A more practical way to consider what this level of effort would mean is to examine income tax rates. In 1940, before the war, the median American

household sat in the lowest income tax bracket and paid 4 percent of their income to the Federal Government.<sup>37</sup> By 1942, that household, still in the lowest tax bracket, saw its tax rate almost *quintuple* to 19 percent. Meanwhile, the richest Americans had a marginal tax rate of 88 *percent*. Even with those sky-high rates, taxes covered slightly less than half of what the Federal Government spent to fund the war.<sup>38</sup> It borrowed the rest, mostly from Americans, through war bonds. The scale of expected losses and the difficulty of supplying a war against China across the vast Pacific Ocean means a long conflict could require a similar commitment from American taxpayers.

**The economic effects would make the worst disruptions of Ukraine look like a rounding error**

In sum, the economic effects of a US-China war over Taiwan would likely make the worst disruptions of the Ukraine War look like a rounding error. They would affect standards of living around the world. The shortage of consumer goods during the COVID-19 pandemic would pale in comparison to those a major war in East Asia would generate. Americans would likely see the price of basic goods like furniture and bedding rise. Shortages of advanced semiconductors would affect a host of products, and not just those

we think of as high technology—like weapons systems, computers, cell phones and televisions—but also washing machines, cars and refrigerators. And it is not only Americans who would be affected. These trade disruptions would reverberate around the world.

### **Escalation Risks: The Possibility China Targets Americans at Home**

Whether a battle for Taiwan would be long or short, the more successful the US armed forces are in blunting an invasion, the more likely China may be to attack American territory. If the Chinese Communist Party attempted to retake Taiwan by force, and incurred considerable conventional losses, it could escalate in search of advantage. Additionally, if the United States struck the Chinese mainland as part of its defense of Taiwan, China could seek to respond in kind.

China has multiple options for escalation. For almost 50 years, the United States and the Soviet Union kept the Cold War cold precisely because they feared direct conflict would end in the destruction of their homelands. Today, China has a rapidly growing nuclear arsenal and intercontinental ballistic missiles that can carry nuclear weapons to the continental United States. In July 2021, China tested a “fractional orbital launch of an ICBM with an [hypersonic glide-vehicle],”<sup>39</sup> an exceedingly difficult system to defend against.<sup>40</sup> While this

was a test system and missed its target,<sup>41</sup> other Chinese hypersonic tests have landed within “meters” of their targets.<sup>42</sup>

But nuclear weapons are not Beijing’s only option. China has worked to develop cyber weapons that create physical destruction too.<sup>43</sup> China may also be developing the capability to strike the continental United States with conventional weapons. Beijing has developed anti-ship and land-attack cruise missile launchers disguised as shipping containers;<sup>44</sup> China could sneak these missiles into US ports for a surprise attack.<sup>45</sup> The Department of Defense has also reported China may be developing conventionally armed intercontinental ballistic missiles, which could strike the continental United States from China.<sup>46</sup> Conventional strikes against American territory would certainly do less damage than nuclear strikes, but in part for that very reason, China may be less hesitant to reach for the tool. To fight China over Taiwan means to risk direct attack—nuclear or conventional—on the continental United States.<sup>47</sup>

The risk of significant PRC escalation—including nuclear use against the continental United States—should not be dismissed. Taiwan represents a core interest of the CCP, which considers it an integral part of China. A failed attempt to take Taiwan could threaten Xi Jinping’s position (or even his life), and potentially the CCP’s hold on power. With such existential stakes, the Chinese leadership might be willing to risk significant escalation if it sees no conventional path to victory, because the consequences of not doing so could seem at least as severe as any potential US response.

Miscalculation and misinterpretation could also cause escalation. For instance, there is considerable debate about whether the United States would need to strike targets in mainland China to successfully defend Taiwan.<sup>48</sup> If such attacks occurred, Beijing could view strikes on the continental United States as retaliation in kind rather than escalation.<sup>49</sup> Washington would almost certainly see it differently and act accordingly. Similarly, there is also the risk of inadvertent escalation through conventional US steps that threaten Chinese nuclear forces.<sup>50</sup> For example, if the United States sank Chinese nuclear-missile submarines, China might believe the United States was seeking to preemptively destroy the Chinese nuclear arsenal.<sup>51</sup> In this situation, Beijing could decide it should use its nuclear weapons before it lost the ability to do so.

To be clear, the need to manage and deter a nuclear armed adversary is not new. Scholars and strategists in the Cold War produced reams of analysis on the subject. But a central conclusion of that analysis was that in a crisis, and even more so in conflict, incentives can change, the risk of miscalculation

**To fight China over Taiwan means to risk direct attack on the continental United States**

increases, and accidents and miscommunication can have uncontrollable consequences.<sup>52</sup> For precisely this reason, Soviet and American leaders worked hard to avoid overt direct combat between their forces. This rule continues to hold in the Ukraine war. A war between the United States and China over Taiwan would break this rule and put the world in uncharted territory. We would test mostly untested theories concerning whether nuclear powers at war with each other would refrain from using their most powerful weapons.

*And all that is if the United States wins.*

### **The United States Could Lose the War**

While the CSIS game found the United States could probably stop a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, it did not explore if China would accept this defeat and abandon its ambitions of coercive unification, or whether it would dig in for a long war. In other wargames, the United States “gets its ass handed to it.”<sup>53</sup> The bottom line is that there is too much complexity and uncertainty in war between great powers to predict the outcome with high confidence.<sup>54</sup>

If the United States lost the war, it would fail to reap the benefits it hoped to gain, and would incur all of the costs outlined above. In addition, outright loss to China in a war for Taiwan would come with yet more costs. Hans Morgenthau defined international “prestige” as a reputation for power.<sup>55</sup> If the United States lost, whether after a short war or after a drawn-out conflict, its reputation for power could plummet. The United States would almost certainly lose its pre-eminent place in the Western Pacific, if not in other regions. Those who argue that the United States must defend Taiwan to assure its other allies in the region must apply the same logic to the possibility of a loss. The credibility of American resolve to defend its allies would count for little if its armed forces failed a test against the greatest threat in the region. Present allies might abandon the United States, fearing their association was more a liability than a benefit.

In sum, the United States’ influence over world affairs—political, military and economic—could wane. The world after a US loss to China would be a profoundly different place.

### **Eyes Wide Open**

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How the United States should respond if the People’s Republic of China invades Taiwan is a central question of American foreign policy today. There is increasing consensus that the United States will commit to fighting China to defend Taiwan. This momentum has outpaced public debate about the potential costs of such a momentous decision.

We have laid out the costs side of the ledger for the United States. A war with the United States would also generate catastrophic military, economic and political costs for China. The prospect of such high costs for both sides may improve deterrence, but cannot guarantee Beijing would not attack. A direct war with China—an economic and military great power—would look very different from others in America’s recent memory. For more than 30 years, the United States has enjoyed the luxury of operating in a world where its armed forces enjoyed unquestioned superiority over other states’ conventional forces anywhere in the world. That is no longer the case.

**P**ublic discussion seems stuck in the unipolar moment

Without a doubt, many within the US government understand these challenges and are hard at work on policy and investment options that could potentially reduce the costs for the United States or increase its ability to impose costs on China. Public discussion, however, seems stuck in the unipolar moment. It has generally assumed the United States can win the war at acceptable cost without seriously considering what those costs might be.

As it stands, however, regardless of the war’s length or ultimate outcome, a war between the United States and China would have serious—and plausibly catastrophic—consequences for the United States. China could inflict substantial losses on the US armed forces and impair the US ability (and potentially its willingness) to fulfill its existing commitments for a decade. The global economy could experience disruptions unlike any in almost a century. The longer the war—and there is little reason for high confidence the war would be short—the steeper these costs would climb. The more successful the United States, the more likely China might be to bring the war to Americans at home. If the United States were to lose—a real possibility—the post-World War II, US-led international system could come to an end.

Some causes are worth great costs, but in deciding if Taiwan is one of them, the American people and American policymakers must weigh US policy toward Taiwan with eyes wide open.

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