



## Considering a US-Supported Self-Defense Option for Taiwan

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## Considering a US-Supported Self-Defense Option for Taiwan

There is wide agreement that Taiwan is the most dangerous issue dividing the United States and China. China believes Taiwan is part of its homeland, views unification with Taiwan as a core interest, and is determined to gain full control of the island. China continues to prefer peaceful unification, but explicitly retains the option of using military forces to achieve unification and seeks to use the threat of military force to strengthen its negotiating hand. Current US policy includes an ambiguous commitment to defend Taiwan if attacked or severely coerced by China—it leaves open whether and how the United States would respond. In addition, the United States provides Taiwan with weapons to improve its ability to defend itself. The United States is pressing Taiwan to deploy smaller mobile weapons that would increase the survivability and lethality of its forces; these forces would support a “porcupine strategy” that makes Taiwan harder to invade and conquer and would, at a minimum, provide time for US forces to arrive to aid Taiwan’s defense.<sup>1</sup>

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Decades of Chinese military modernization and buildup have greatly changed the balance across the Taiwan Strait. China can reasonably imagine, if not now then in coming decades, that it might win a war against Taiwan, even if the United States comes to the island's defense. China might start the war with a blockade or an invasion. If the former, China would hope to compel Taiwan to accept unification. If the blockade failed to achieve its goals, China might then choose to invade.

If China invades Taiwan and the United States intervenes militarily to protect it, the conventional war would be large, intense, and costly. Although unlikely, the war could escalate to nuclear war along several plausible paths.<sup>2</sup> US-based China experts disagree about the likelihood and timing of a war, but few are confident that one will not occur in the next two or three decades.<sup>3</sup> A 2022 survey by the Center for Strategic and International Studies of sixty-four leading experts on China found that 44 percent “think Beijing has a hard internal deadline to unify Taiwan by 2049.”<sup>4</sup>

Due to the enormous risks of US involvement in a war over Taiwan, policy analysts and foreign policy experts are searching for alternative US strategies. At one end of the spectrum of options is ending the US commitment to defend Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> There is currently very little support for this option among foreign policy experts in Washington. Toward the other end of the spectrum, the United States has a number of options which would deepen its commitment. For example, some foreign policy experts and members of Congress have argued that the United States should make its commitment to come to Taiwan's defense unambiguous, declaring that it would certainly intervene if China attacked Taiwan.<sup>6</sup> The United States could also broaden its political engagement with Taiwan—for example, by increasing visits by US officials or by Taiwanese officials to the United States—thereby adding to the credibility of its commitment to come to Taiwan's aid. The United States has been heading in this direction, starting with the first Trump administration and then under the Biden administration.<sup>7</sup> The United States could, in addition, increase its military engagement, for example by doing more to train Taiwan's military. A still further step would be to regularly deploy US troops to Taiwan to serve as a tripwire or instead to improve the joint US-Taiwanese ability to defend the island. The logic of these deployments would parallel NATO deployments in the Baltics and raise similar questions about a tripwire versus forward defense.<sup>8</sup>

This article proposes a very different option: maintaining a US commitment to Taiwan's security but trimming it significantly. The United States would end its commitment to use force to come to Taiwan's defense if China launched an invasion or blockade, replacing it with a clear public statement that the United States would not use its military forces for this purpose, but that the United States would continue to help Taiwan defend itself by providing arms and training.<sup>9</sup> The

United States would continue to call for Taiwan to shift fully to a porcupine strategy and would support the shift with weapons and financing.

In broad terms, this option would resemble the approach the United States has employed in supporting Ukraine against Russia's invasion. In Ukraine, the core logic is that US and NATO interests are sufficiently large to warrant providing Ukraine with large quantities of military weapons, but insufficiently large to warrant fighting directly with Russia, among other reasons because it is a major nuclear power. In line with this assessment, there has been little support for the United States or NATO to join the fighting in Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

The case for shifting to a Ukraine-style approach to the US commitment to Taiwan is built upon a similar logic. The risk of a war with China over Taiwan exceeds US interests. Although the United States has political, ideological, humanitarian, and economic interests in protecting Taiwan's sovereignty and democracy, Taiwan is not a vital US interest.<sup>11</sup> The economic interest results largely from Taiwan's dominance of the production of advanced semiconductors. US and EU policies are reducing this dependence, with the US projected to produce 20 percent, and possibly almost 30 percent, of the most advanced chips by 2032 compared to zero in 2022, although Taiwan will likely continue to be an important producer of advanced semiconductors for the foreseeable future.<sup>12</sup> Analysts who reach the opposing conclusion about the risk and benefits of the US commitment to Taiwan will oppose the article's policy recommendation. In contrast, analysts who accept this conclusion may seek a middle route in which the United States continues to substantially support Taiwan, but at greatly reduced risk to the United States.

The exact form of a Ukraine-style approach to Taiwan could be—and likely would need to be—different. In Ukraine, the United States is providing weapons during the ongoing conflict with Russia. For Taiwan, there would be an alternative variant: the United States would provide weapons before a conflict started, but probably not during it, because resupplying Taiwan during a major war would likely be more difficult militarily and much riskier than resupplying Ukraine.

Before proceeding, a natural skeptical question deserves mention. Why not bluff—provide Taiwan with this enhanced military assistance and maintain the United States' ambiguous commitment, but plan not to fight to defeat a Chinese invasion or blockade? Ideally, this policy could provide the best of both worlds—enhanced deterrence of war over Taiwan and certainty that the United States would avoid a war over Taiwan. The problem is that in practice effective bluffing would be extremely difficult to implement. The United

**The recommended option would resemble the US approach with Ukraine**

States would have to plan and exercise its forces for a Taiwan contingency, which would lead many Americans—inside and outside the government—to believe it planned to intervene. Because the United States judges China to be the major threat to its national security, sitting out the Taiwan war would run contrary to a wide array of arguments. This inclination to intervene would be reinforced by the United States' long-standing, albeit ambiguous, commitment to Taiwan. Almost no one would know the policy was actually a bluff, and the bluff would have to be passed along from one presidential administration to the next. In short, the problem with bluffing is that the United States might fool itself and end up using military force to protect Taiwan.

This article unfolds as follows. The first section briefly reviews the current US commitment and what is required by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. The second section summarizes the basic military forces and strategy that would constitute the porcupine strategy. The subsequent sections consider the benefits and costs of this change in US policy.

## The US Commitment to Taiwan

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The United States currently has an ambiguous political commitment, not a legal one, to respond to the use of force against Taiwan. The political commitment is intentionally ambiguous, leaving unclear whether and how the United States would respond to the use of force by China. From 1955 to 1979, the United States had a formal Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan. It ended this treaty as the price of normalizing relations with China and replaced it with the

**The US is not legally committed to using force to protect Taiwan from China**

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Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979. The TRA lays out a number of official positions, including that “efforts to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, [are] a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.” US administrations have repeatedly stated that the United States has an “abiding interest” in the peaceful resolution of disputes over Taiwan.

The TRA also specifies policies and actions, including that “the United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability,” and the United States will maintain the capacity “to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security,

or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.” In addition, the TRA directs the President “to inform the Congress promptly of any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people of Taiwan and any danger to the interests of the United States arising therefrom. The President and the Congress shall determine, in accordance with constitutional processes, appropriate action by the United States in response to any such danger.” This formulation makes clear that the United States is not legally committed to using force to protect Taiwan from China. Asia policy expert Richard Bush explains, however, that “the belief in Taiwan, the PRC, and some quarters in the United States, is that the commitment is stronger legally than it is.”<sup>13</sup>

The United States has sold weapons to Taiwan for decades, and changed its policy in 2022 to increase its support of Taiwan. The December 2022 Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act authorized, for the first time, the use of Foreign Military Financing—direct loans and loan guarantees—of up to \$2 billion per year, and made Presidential Drawdown Authority available to Taiwan, “authorizing the drawdown from Department of Defense stocks of up to \$1 billion annually.” In April 2024, Congress approved \$2 billion for military financing programs for Taiwan and other security partners in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>14</sup> Although small in the context of the US defense budget, these amounts are far more significant for Taiwan, which had a total defense budget of roughly \$19 billion in 2023. The United States could further increase the amount of weaponry it provided to Taiwan on favorable terms.

A question raised by this proposal is whether a US decision not to use force to protect Taiwan would be inconsistent with US legal commitments under the TRA. On one hand, it would not be revoking a commitment the United States has already made. On the other hand, declaring that it would not use force could appear to constrain the actions the president and Congress should consider in response to China’s actions. Another possible issue regarding the TRA is whether the United States would still retain the military capabilities required to defend Taiwan against an invasion by China. Retaining such capabilities would seem to be unnecessary if the United States were not going to use its military forces to protect Taiwan, but dropping them would be inconsistent with the text of TRA. Of course, the United States might keep many of these forces for other military reasons. If this shift in US policy would be inconsistent with the TRA, the legislation could be amended.

**Would a porcupine strategy provide Taiwan with good prospects for defending itself?**

At a less technical level, there is little doubt that the United States would be significantly reducing the nature of its commitment to Taiwan, shifting from the

possibility of using force (its ambiguous commitment) to definitely not using force. At the same time, however, the United States would remain committed to the security of Taiwan. Many questions remain: Would a well-implemented porcupine strategy provide Taiwan with good prospects for defending itself? Closely related, could its prospects for success be good enough, or the war costly enough, to deter China from attacking Taiwan? What form would US military support take—would it provide arms during war as well as during peacetime?

## Taiwan's Prospects for Defending Itself

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There is an expert consensus that Taiwan should adopt an asymmetric strategy to defend against, and thereby deter, a Chinese invasion—the “porcupine strategy.” This approach would be built on a “large number of small things”; the goal would be to create a distributed system of mobile and affordable anti-air and anti-ship defenses that is resistant to attack. Key types of forces would include mobile coastal defense cruise missiles, short-range air defenses, small fast missile boats, mine-layers and naval mines, and small drones for surveillance.<sup>15</sup> Individually, these systems are far less expensive than many higher visibility, more capable, conventional systems—for example, advanced fighter aircraft and submarines—some of which Taiwan is continuing to acquire.

The advantage of the porcupine approach is that the majority of Taiwan's forces should be able to survive and remain effective following the type of attack that China is likely to launch.<sup>16</sup> At the outset of an invasion attempt, China would likely launch missile and air strikes against critical targets in Taiwan including its airbases, ports, large naval ships, and air defense sites. Because these constitute a relatively small number of fixed targets, China's initial attacks could greatly reduce the capability of Taiwan's forces. In contrast, large numbers of highly mobile forces that are less dependent on large bases should be better able to survive China's early attacks and remain available to counterattack against China's forces crossing the Taiwan Strait and reaching Taiwan's beaches. China would also likely attack Taiwan's command and information networks, posing a significant challenge to Taiwan's situational awareness. Drones could survive and provide targeting information but might be insufficient; some analyses call for the United States to provide Taiwan with surveillance information—including overhead imagery and signals intelligence—during a conflict.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the systems Taiwan is acquiring, including the *Harpoon* land-based coastal defense cruise missile, the *Stinger* man-portable surface-to-air missile, and Taiwan's mine-laying program, are well suited to a porcupine strategy. But critics believe that many of the other systems that Taiwan is acquiring, including

F-16s and diesel submarines, are a poor investment. Submarines would be survivable once at sea but be vulnerable if China launched a surprise attack. Additionally, because the submarines are expensive, Taiwan would be able to build only a small number. Some proponents of asymmetric defenses therefore oppose them, arguing they would add relatively little to Taiwan's counter-invasion capabilities.<sup>18</sup>

Even if Taiwan effectively implements a porcupine strategy, its prospects for defeating a Chinese invasion on its own are likely to be poor. Given that there are questions about the ability of even the United States' massive and diversified forces to defend the island, Taiwan would clearly have to engage in a massive buildup. Even given the defensive advantages provided by water and asymmetric forces, defeating an invasion by a country that is so much larger than Taiwan and invests so much more on defense—China spends somewhere from twelve to twenty-five times as much on defense as Taiwan<sup>19</sup>—must be considered a herculean task.

Proponents of a porcupine strategy have envisioned it primarily as the best military option for Taiwan in scenarios in which the United States is fighting to protect Taiwan, not when Taiwan is fighting on its own. They hold that a porcupine posture could deter China from attempting an invasion, but have not fully analyzed the range of likely outcomes if Taiwan alone were defending itself from a Chinese invasion. A recent wargame finds China could successfully invade Taiwan if the United States did not join the conflict, but evaluated the force posture Taiwan is currently projected to have in 2026, not a full porcupine posture.<sup>20</sup> Even in this case, however, China suffered large losses, and the conflict lasted over two months. Whether high costs would be sufficient to deter China is an open question. Given the great value that Beijing places on unification with Taiwan, high costs might not deter an invasion if China's leaders believed its forces would succeed.

Modeling Taiwan's prospects for successful defense with a robust force posture designed around porcupine parameters is beyond the scope of this article. That said, we might be able to get a ballpark estimate of the size of the missile force Taiwan would require by considering the number of key Chinese targets and their vulnerability to attack. According to a wargame study, the US air campaign would focus on a few hundred aim points including Chinese ships, ports, and airbases. These targets would be protected by air defenses. Over the course of three to four weeks of conflict, the United States would use around 5,000 long-range precision missiles against these targets.<sup>21</sup> The high ratio of missiles to targets could reflect the impact of missile defenses, the need to attack numerous points on some targets, and the need to reattack targets that can be repaired. Taiwan would have to massively increase its deployment of anti-ship missiles to be able to target this size of an attack. It is deploying an advanced version of its *Hsiung Feng* anti-ship missile, which it can produce at around 200 per year,<sup>22</sup> and is also buying 400 *Harpoon* anti-ship missiles from the United

States.<sup>23</sup> Whether Taiwan could effectively deploy and effectively operate a force of this size is another major question.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the forces designed to destroy Chinese forces before they reach the island, successful defense of Taiwan would depend on effective ground troops.

## Successful defense of Taiwan would depend on effective ground troops

Even facing well-designed US and Taiwanese forces, China is very likely to be able to land some troops on the island. Taiwan's geography—including the limited number of places that Chinese forces could land on the island and mountainous terrain—increases the prospects for successful defensive ground operations. Recent assessments find, however, that Taiwan needs to significantly improve

its ground forces and their training to prepare for this phase of the war.<sup>25</sup>

A potential shortcoming of the porcupine posture is that it would likely leave Taiwan vulnerable to a blockade by China if the United States does not come to Taiwan's defense.<sup>26</sup> The asymmetric capabilities required for a porcupine posture would do little to reduce Taiwan's vulnerability in this scenario.<sup>27</sup> One approach for reducing this vulnerability would be to increase Taiwan's resilience, for example by increasing the size and survivability of its fuel stockpiles, food stocks, water supplies, and electricity generation.<sup>28</sup> Of course, there are limits to how much Taiwan could reasonably store, and therefore questions about whether these stocks could outlast a long blockade. A complementary approach to deter China from launching a blockade without employing US military forces would be for the United States, hopefully joined by its allies, to threaten to end trade with China if Beijing pursues this strategy.<sup>29</sup>

## When Would the United States Provide Military Aid?

There are two key variants of this trimmed US approach to supporting Taiwan. In the first, the United States would provide Taiwan with extensive materiel and training during peacetime, but not once a war started. Given the vast quantities of weapons that have been provided to Ukraine since Russia invaded, it might seem impossible that Taiwan could receive sufficient supplies before a war. However, the weapons required to defeat an invasion across water are quite different than those required on land. A much smaller, although still large, quantity of precision weapons, especially anti-ship weapons, might be sufficient.

In the second variant, the United States would resupply Taiwan once the war started, as it has during the Ukraine war, as well as before the war started. A major question here is whether China would attack US resupply efforts, thereby risking

escalation to war with the United States. If China did try to prevent US resupply, it would likely succeed,<sup>30</sup> reflecting Taiwan's isolation and China's ability to threaten ships and planes as they approach Taiwan.<sup>31</sup> Thus, if Taiwan lacked sufficient weapons at the outset of the war, China did attempt to prevent US resupply, and the United States decided not to fully join the war, Taiwan would likely lose. Therefore, the viability of this option would depend on whether China would attack US resupply efforts and, if it did, whether the United States would use its forces to defend Taiwan. Although these probabilities are hard to estimate, the risk seems quite large. If losing the war due to US resupply of Taiwan, China might well attack US deliveries; the United States would then find not fully joining the war to be quite difficult. Consequently, if feasible, the first variant has clear advantages.

To reduce the risks of a dangerous transition from its current policy, the United States could, and probably should, provide Taiwan with the full transfer of military materiel before ending its current commitment. This would eliminate a window during which Taiwan would be less capable, which might have tempted China to attack before Taiwan received the full US transfer. This timing, however, could raise dangers of its own because the combined capability of Taiwan and the United States would increase during this transition, which could increase China's fears that the United States was encouraging Taiwan to declare independence. To offset this danger, the United States would need to avoid policies that appear to be drawing the United States increasingly close to Taiwan, such as high visibility visits to Taiwan by leading US officials. The United States would also need to eschew positions that suggest it might reject the peaceful unification of China and Taiwan—for example, statements about the military value of Taiwan for protecting other US interests in East Asia.<sup>32</sup>

## **Benefits of the Self-Defense Option for Taiwan**

The first and key benefit of the self-defense option for Taiwan would be a reduction in the probability of war between the United States and China. Given current US policy, a war over Taiwan is by far the most likely scenario in which a large war between the United States and China occurs. Although the United States has left unclear how it would respond to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the likelihood is that the United States would join the conflict. Former president Biden publicly stated four times that the United States would come to Taiwan's defense, although his statements were quickly walked back by administration officials. President Trump's position is more uncertain.

A couple of important qualifications must be raised, however. There is always some possibility that the United States would join the war, even after shifting its

official policy precluded this possibility. Due to this possibility, the Taiwan self-defense option could actually increase the probability of a US-China war. Expecting the United States was not going to join the war (or even just believing the United States was less likely than under its current policy), China would be less likely to be deterred from attacking Taiwan, all else being equal. If the probability of the United States intervening remained high enough (albeit less than with its current policy), the probability of a US-China war would increase. (However, I note below that all else would not be equal, so the negative effect might be smaller.)

One might wonder why we should worry about this possibility given that the United States has recently demonstrated restraint in joining a parallel type of conflict. The Biden administration made clear that United States would not send forces to fight in Ukraine and got little pushback. Taiwan, however, could be different for a variety of reasons. The United States did not have any type of commitment to use force to protect Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the United States has long had a highly visible commitment to Taiwan (albeit an ambiguous one). In the face of Taiwan losing a war, this historical commitment could increase the likelihood that the United States would reverse policy and intervene. In addition, although the United States would have trimmed its commitment, the United States would remain quite involved in contributing to Taiwan's security via its extensive support for Taiwan's ability to defend itself. This continuation of security involvement could blur the fact that the United States had ended its ambiguous commitment to employ force to protect Taiwan, thereby further increasing the probability of US intervention. Finally, the United States believes China poses a much greater threat to its own security than does Russia. Therefore, not fighting to prevent China from invading Taiwan could appear much riskier because the United States could worry that not defending Taiwan would embolden China to pursue other regional ambitions. To reduce this downside, the United States would need to deeply internalize its policy of not intervening, even if China were successfully invading Taiwan. Reducing the US forces necessary to succeed in a Taiwan contingency could both reflect the internalization and cushion US leaders from the temptation to intervene.

Another qualification is that if US support for Taiwan would include sending weapons during the war as well as during peacetime, then as described above, there is some danger that China would attack US weapons deliveries, which could bring the United States fully into the war. In the Ukraine conflict, Russia has chosen not to attack resupply hubs in Poland, at least partly out of fear of bringing NATO into the war. China might make a different decision if US resupply of Taiwan was proving effective in helping Taiwan defeat an invasion. China might reason that attacks on military transports at sea and in the air were different than attacking targets on land, for example because only military

personnel would be targeted and there would not be collateral damage. The United States might disagree. At a minimum, the United States would have to defend its planes and ships. It could limit this effort to Chinese forces that were attacking US forces, but might well see advantages in attacking facilities on the Chinese mainland. China would face large incentives to attack US resupply efforts because doing so would likely be highly effective. China might also attack US satellites if they were providing critical targeting information to Taiwan's mobile forces.

A second possible benefit of the self-defense option is that ending the US commitment to Taiwan could improve US-China relations. Although China would certainly object to US efforts to enhance Taiwan's ability to defend itself, China should also understand that the United States had significantly reduced the nature of its commitment, and that this improves China's prospects for achieving unification with Taiwan.

A third and related possible benefit is that China would have greater confidence that Taiwan would not declare independence or move unacceptably close. Without the possibility of the United States coming to its defense, Taiwan would likely be more cautious and China less worried that Taiwan would move toward independence. Therefore, although China's military prospects against Taiwan would improve, the net result of the changed US policy could be a reduction in the probability of China attempting to invade Taiwan.

A fourth benefit is that a policy designed to enable Taiwan to defend itself might enable the United States to reduce its military spending. Protecting Taiwan is by far the most militarily demanding military mission the United States faces in East Asia. It is also the most likely large-war scenario. If not planning for this scenario, the United States should be able to spend less on defense. Relatedly, the United States might feel more secure because its military forces would have better prospects of succeeding in their remaining assigned military missions.

A final benefit of a policy dedicated to supporting Taiwan's self-defense is that the United States could feel and believe it was meeting its commitment to protecting democracy and human rights, which is often identified as a key reason for protecting Taiwan. Of course, whether the policy is resulting in costs or benefits along this dimension depends upon the alternatives to which it is being compared. Compared to current US policy, the United States would be doing less to protect these values and norms; the shift in policy would result in costs. However, compared to fully ending its commitment to Taiwan, the United States would be doing a great deal; the policy would provide benefits. Given

**A change in US policy could reduce the probability of China attempting to invade Taiwan**

the risks of current US policy, providing extensive support to Taiwan's pursuit of self-defense strikes a better balance between US interests and the risks it is running.

## **Costs of the Self-Defense Option for Taiwan**

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The key cost of a Ukraine-like strategy is that China would be less likely to be deterred from attacking Taiwan. No matter how effectively it implements a porcupine strategy, Taiwan would be less able to defend itself than if the United States actively came to its defense. Taiwan cannot fully compensate for the loss of the massive US conventional capabilities. In addition, with the United States not involved in the fighting, China would no longer face the possibility that an invasion could escalate to nuclear war.

Whether this reduction in deterrence would be large would depend on the potential of the porcupine approach and how effectively Taiwan implements it. If a porcupine defense can convince China that its prospects for successfully invading Taiwan are low (or even that the costs of success would be extremely high), then the reduction in deterrence could be relatively small. Deterrence does not necessarily require convincing China that it has no chance of victory; raising the costs high enough or lowering the probability of successful invasion sufficiently could convince China's leaders that war is not their best option. Of course, judging the threshold of either victory or costs that would deter China is extremely difficult.

Additionally, the impact on deterrence would also depend on how likely China believed Taiwan was to declare independence. A more restrained Taiwan and therefore a less worried China could reduce China's felt need to invade to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence. This reduction could offset the reduction in Taiwan's deterrent capabilities; the probability of war along this path might then not increase and could even decrease. China, however, has other reasons for attacking Taiwan, most importantly the likely infeasibility of peaceful unification and China's unwillingness to wait forever. For these reasons, Taiwan's reduced deterrent would likely result in some increase in the probability of war across the Taiwan Strait. The overall impact on the probability of war would depend on the relative importance of these different motives for a Chinese attack.

A second cost is the possibility that declaring that the United States would not intervene could increase the probability of a US-China war if the United States, faced with a successful Chinese invasion, ultimately decided to intervene anyway. This outcome would be doubly bad because waiting to intervene would increase the costs of fighting and possibly reduce the United States' prospects for defeating

China.<sup>34</sup> If the United States is going to use force to defend Taiwan, better to make this clear and intervene early.

In addition to the deterrence and security costs, the United States could suffer a variety of political costs. Taiwan is certain to be deeply distressed by a shift in US policy that leaves it relying entirely on its own defenses, which would strain the US-Taiwan relationship. But Taiwan would nevertheless appreciate the US support for its self-defense capability. There is little reason to expect that US trade with Taiwan would suffer.

The possibly more important political costs could be with America's regional allies. In light of the shift in the US commitment to Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines might increasingly question whether the United States is planning to weaken, or even terminate, its alliance commitments and come to doubt US credibility for protecting them if attacked. These allies might see the United States as less committed to preserving the status quo in East Asia because it was unwilling to risk war over Taiwan. This is among the most common arguments offered against ending the US commitment to Taiwan.

The dissolution, or even weakening, of US alliances is unlikely, however, because the United States would be able to pursue a variety of policies to make clear that its credibility for meeting its commitments to its treaty allies had not declined.<sup>35</sup> It could increase the forces committed to their defense and deployed in the region, could increase joint exercises and information sharing, and could work to tighten the connections between its allies.

In fact, the United States has already done much of this. It could also explain why its regional allies are different from Taiwan—China does not believe they are part of China, which makes the risks of the US commitment to them much smaller. In addition, the US treaty allies are easier to defend than Taiwan. The distance across water from China to Japan is greater than to Taiwan, which favors defense, and Japan is a larger and more militarily capable state. These arguments are logically strong and should be convincing. However, given the complexity of domestic politics, there may be some unavoidable alliance risks if the United States adopts a Ukraine-style approach to Taiwan.

Other factors also suggest that US alliances would survive the shock of this change in US policy.<sup>36</sup> US allies, especially Japan, are unlikely to “bandwagon,” or ally, with China because they see China posing serious threats to their security. The United States remains far and away their best alliance option, which is reflected in the large contribution it already makes to their defense.

**The US could pursue other policies to make clear its commitments to treaty allies had not declined**

Of course, these arguments do not take into account President Trump's apparently low regard for US allies. His policies and pronouncements are creating deep concerns about US alliance commitments and the future of US alliances. In this context, shifting to a Taiwan self-defense policy would generate still greater concerns among US allies. My argument here assumes that the United States values its alliances and that its policies are designed to preserve them, not weaken them. These policies could be reinforced as the United States makes clear that it will not use force to defend Taiwan. Properly handled, the United States could maintain the confidence of its allies. This is not the trajectory the United States is currently on.

In addition to potential alliance management concerns, it is also important to examine the potential political implications for the US-China relationship itself. China would likely object to large US arms transfers to Taiwan which significantly increase Taiwan's ability to defend itself. China has long complained about US arms sales to Taiwan and the new US policy would provide larger quantities of more effective weapons. Still, the shift in US policy would leave China more capable of invading Taiwan, not less. Nevertheless, China could see two downsides. If sufficiently effective, a porcupine capability might increase Taiwan's willingness to declare independence and risk a war with China. Under current conditions, the United States has leverage over Taiwan—it could refuse to intervene if Taiwan provokes an attack by declaring (or moving too close) to independence. The ability to defend itself without US aid during a war would eliminate this leverage. In addition, China would likely continue to fear that the United States would come to Taiwan's defense in a crisis no matter what it says. The combination of a more capable Taiwan that would be joined by the United States in a war would reduce China's prospects of successful invasion. As noted above, however, if the United States could reduce its forces that were necessary to succeed against a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, this objection could be reduced or eliminated. Whether these reductions

**C**hina's reaction to a US shift to a self-defense policy for Taiwan could be quite mixed

would be compatible with US commitments to its treaty allies and its efforts to convince them of the depth of the US commitment to them would require thorough analysis.

Consequently, China's reaction to a US shift to a self-defense policy for Taiwan could be quite mixed. On one hand, China's ability to invade Taiwan would increase if the United States does not intervene, which would be made more likely by the shift in

US policy. But there are the other possibilities that China could find worrisome. Thus, even though the US shift to a Ukraine-like approach would constitute a

weakening of the US commitment to Taiwan, it could strain US-China relations instead of improving them.

## Shifting US Policy to Unambiguous Taiwan Self-Defense

Ending the US commitment to use force to defend Taiwan while increasing US efforts to enable Taiwan to defend itself strikes a good balance between US interests and the risks it would be running. This change in US policy should appeal to, or at least be intriguing to, policymakers who believe that the United States has large, but not vital, interests in Taiwan. The option would reduce the probability of a large war between the United States and China while demonstrating the US interest in protecting democracy in Taiwan.

The Taiwan self-defense option raises a variety of political issues, including how US allies and China would respond. US allies would be concerned about whether the change in US Taiwan policy indicates a declining willingness to protect them. However, the United States can pursue a variety of policies which should allay these fears. China should welcome the US policy, but may nevertheless fear that, once further armed with an effective porcupine defense, it would embolden Taiwan to declare independence and that the United States would, in the end, fight to defend Taiwan in a crisis anyway.

A key question about this policy is how effective a well-designed, stand-alone Taiwanese porcupine posture would be in defeating a Chinese invasion and thereby deterring it. This question deserves thorough military-technical analysis. Some possible proponents of this trimmed US commitment to Taiwan may favor it only if Taiwan's prospects against a Chinese invasion are quite good. Other proponents may conclude that, even if Taiwan's prospects for self-defense are not good, the option still strikes an appropriate balance among US interests and the risks of fighting a large war against China.

## Notes

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