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Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital US Interest

For both the United States and China, management of Taiwan—claimed by Beijing yet protected for nearly seventy-five years by Washington—has become a dangerous source of tension and a possible *casus belli* between the two powers. No other potential catalyst of conflict between Beijing and Washington, including the face-off between North and South Korea or China's maritime territorial and other disputes with its neighbors, involves anything approaching the likelihood and severity of an armed Sino-American conflict over Taiwan. This is because only the Taiwan issue presents such high levels of direct, militarized commitments by the United States and China in the defense of what are viewed as vital and potentially clashing national interests.

For Beijing, the eventual return of the island to sovereign Chinese control (after losing it in a war with imperial Japan at the turn of the twentieth century) is inextricably linked to the fundamental legitimacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) regime as the defender of Chinese nationalism. Hence, few if any serious analysts of the Taiwan issue doubt that China would go to war to prevent the island from becoming *de jure* independent, especially if such a development were to occur with US backing. For the United States, ensuring a peaceful, uncoerced resolution of Taiwan's fate is widely viewed in policy circles as inextricably linked to Washington's credibility as a security guarantor and a defender of democracy. Thus, even though Washington pursues a deliberate policy of strategic ambiguity regarding whether and how it might use force if Beijing were to attack Taiwan, few serious observers doubt that the United States would intervene militarily under such a situation, thus posing

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the likelihood of a war with China. Even Donald Trump, who has expressed less support for the island than other presidents, would very likely respond militarily to a Chinese attack, at the very least in order to avoid what he would doubtless regard as a personal challenge to his self-image as a tough, respected leader.

Such ingrained beliefs and intentions present the possibility of a future severe militarized crisis or armed conflict over Taiwan if Beijing sees Washington as clearly attempting to permanently separate the island from China, or if Washington sees Beijing as clearly preparing to gain control over Taiwan by force. Unfortunately, existing trends in both countries, as well as Taiwan itself, are creating just such highly dangerous perceptions in both capitals.

Three sets of trends are particularly critical: (1) the deepening level of strategic rivalry and accompanying distrust which exists between the two nuclear powers, reinforced by domestic political and ideological pressures on both sides; (2) the significant expansion of China's military and economic power across the Western Pacific relative to that of the United States and its main allies; and (3) the growing contrast between a democratic and increasingly independent-minded Taiwan and a non-democratic, increasingly unification-oriented China under Xi Jinping. Such factors are working to draw Taiwan into the center of the overall strategic competition between Beijing and Washington, with the above worst-case suspicions increasingly becoming the norm, thereby significantly heightening the chance of a conflict between the two powers.

Three sets of trends are particularly critical, creating highly dangerous perceptions over Taiwan

However, very few US observers of the Taiwan issue step back and examine the assumptions that underlie the notion that the island represents a truly vital interest for the United States. In particular, existing US Taiwan policy continues to accept the risk of a major war with China over the island without examining in any serious manner the likely costs of such a war and the opposition of the American public toward such a prospect today. According to a 2024 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the majority of Americans would oppose direct US military intervention to defend Taiwan against China.[1] Even more worryingly, a seemingly growing number of analysts and some former US officials are making ever stronger arguments about the supposedly vital importance of Taiwan to the United States in ways that actually increase the risk of war.[2]

A close examination of these assertions of the vital importance of Taiwan to the United States suggests that they rest on very weak foundations, indicating the need for a basic reassessment of US Taiwan policy and its eventual reconfiguration toward a commitment to the island that remains strong but deliberately

avoids the prospect of a direct conflict between US and Chinese forces. Taiwan is, in fact, not a vital interest of the United States that would justify American efforts to defend the island at all costs, or even to treat it as a formal security partner by engaging in joint military exercises or deploying US forces to the island, for example. The United States needs to start transitioning gradually to an explicit policy of conditional but significant support for Taiwan—an "important" but not "vital" US interest—that removes the possibility of going to war with China over the island.

The "Vital Interest" Argument

For a growing number of observers, Taiwan is now seen as a critical strategic location in the US and allied effort to prevent an openly aggressive China from gaining control over the entire Western Pacific. If the island is brought under Chinese dominance, they argue, Beijing will have broken through the supposed geostrategic barrier of the first island chain extending from the Ryukyu Islands to the Philippines and gained a critical staging area for the subsequent conquest or subordination of Japan and other nearby countries, as part of efforts to eject the United States from the entire region.[3]

Additionally, in recent years, the United States and China have intensified their competition over many advanced technologies, and, as a result, the "vital interest" argument has been buttressed by the idea that Taiwan has great geostrategic value because it fabricates a high percentage of the world's memory and logic microchips. If China were to gain control over such a capability, some argue, it would supposedly be able to coerce other countries by threatening to deny them essential high-technology components for a wide variety of products.[4]

Two other long-standing beliefs also reinforce this argument for the strategic value of Taiwan to US interests. The first, noted above and long held as axiomatic by most US leaders, is that any successful Chinese effort to coerce or militarily force Taiwan into unification with China would deal a likely fatal blow to American credibility as a security ally and guarantor of stability in Asia and possibly beyond. If America cannot prevent China from coercing Taiwan into submission or seizing the island outright, the argument goes, other countries will inevitably lose confidence in the security treaties and assurances the United States has provided to them. As a result, Washington's entire position as a dominant regional and global power would likely collapse, or at least be severely damaged.[5]

The second reinforcing belief is that the United States has an overriding moral and strategic obligation to prevent an authoritarian China from subjugating a long-standing, close, and now democratic friend. From a moral perspective, the "loss" of Taiwan would severely undermine America's reputation as a stalwart

friend of democracies around the world and a leader in the struggle between democratic and authoritarian nations. Moreover, this belief is particularly relevant for many American politicians who, aside from their likely moral stance in support of Taiwan, see the domestic political value of championing a democratic underdog. From a strategic perspective, the defense of democratic Taiwan is seen as a critical part of the defense of democracies worldwide, which is in turn viewed as critical to the preservation of the so-called US-led liberal international order.[6]

Taken together, these four sets of beliefs are used to justify the notion that the United States has a clearly vital national security and moral interest in ensuring that Taiwan remains democratic, uncoerced, and secure. This clearly implies that preventing China from dominating or seizing the island by force would justify the direct deployment of US military forces not merely to deter Beijing, but to engage it in a full-scale conflict if deterrence were to fail. In fact, in direct contradiction to the long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity, former president Biden stated four times that the US would indeed defend Taiwan if attacked by China.[7]

Four sets of beliefs are used to justify the notion that the US has a vital interest in Taiwan

In order to ensure such capabilities in defense of a presumably vital US interest, many proponents now argue, in the face of China's growing military prowess in the Western Pacific, that the United States must greatly increase its military spending while strengthening the Japanese, South Korean, and Philippine commitment to supporting the United States in a Taiwan conflict, in addition to compelling Taiwan to do much more for its own defense. Anything less, they argue, will invite Chinese aggression and risk a humiliating American retreat or, worse yet, defeat.[8]

Beyond all this, an arguably growing number of proponents of the "vital interest" argument believe that the United States needs to jettison its long-standing stance of strategic ambiguity regarding whether and how Washington might intervene militarily to defend Taiwan if attacked by China. In its place, they argue for providing what amounts to an unambiguous US security guarantee to Taipei, similar to that provided to US treaty allies.[9]

How Vital is Vital?

There is no doubt that Taiwan has considerable value to the United States. It is indeed a long-standing democratic friend with close ties to many American

citizens and political leaders, the author included. It is a significant economic and technology player on the world stage. And it stands as an example of a successfully democratized Han Chinese society, thus presumably serving as an inspiration to pro-democracy citizens in the PRC. But although these factors argue in favor of strong US support for Taiwan's continued freedom and well-being—as an "important" US interest—they do not inherently argue for unlimited US support for the island as a "vital" US interest to the extent of risking a major war with China.

Taiwan is Not a Critical US Security Node

Recent studies have shown that direct control over Taiwan would give Beijing some specific military advantages it does not currently possess, such as easier access for its submarines and surface ships to the open ocean beyond the first island chain, greater sonar and other intelligence capabilities, and closer proximity of its forces to Japan.[10] However, these and other studies have also shown that none of these capabilities would in any way prove decisive in a crisis or conflict with the United States or give China crucial advantages in an effort to militarily dominate the region.[11]

Moreover, in response to China gaining control over Taiwan, it is almost certain that Washington's defense ties with Japan, South Korea, and probably the Philippines would become tighter and more potent. As a result, Washington and its allies would likely possess the combined air, naval, intelligence, and space-based capabilities to strategically counter any military advantages Beijing might gain from acquiring the island, should the Chinese leadership be foolish enough to attempt to use Taiwan in a larger effort to attack or coerce its neighbors. (In fact, experts have observed that Japan-US combined forces are currently sufficient to deter Chinese aggression against Japan.)[12] Indeed, regardless of whether Beijing were to control Taiwan, some observers believe that any attempt by China to subdue the entire region would prove extremely difficult, especially considering the inherent geographical advantages Japan and the Philippines hold along the first island chain.[13]

Also, one must ask: What is the credible evidence supporting the notion, put forth by some advocates of the "vital interest" argument, that China would actually use Taiwan as a launching pad for attacking or even decisively coercing Japan or other nearby Asian nations into submission? Virtually without exception, those who argue for Beijing's apparently unquenchable thirst for the military conquest or subordination of others employ a simplistic "power maximizing" realpolitik or ideological set of assumptions about Chinese motives. Some see Beijing as so insecure or belligerently aggressive due to its supposedly ruthless, suspicious, and predatory Leninist political system that it would inevitably seek to subjugate

other nations.[14] Others simply assert, as if a uniformly accepted maxim, that China, like any other great power, would naturally seek to dominate its neighbors through military and economic coercion or attack due to a need to protect against the mere possibility that others might attack it.[15]

Such views are largely divorced from any understanding of Beijing's attitude toward the use of force or its historical experience in employing its military. That record shows that in the vast majority of cases occurring since 1979, China has employed military force only to address specific territorial disputes along its borders or to protect itself against what it viewed as a direct military threat to its established territory, not to subjugate other powers for presumably grand geostrategic or ideological reasons.[16]

Since 1979, China has not used military force to subjugate other powers or seize foreign territory

The one notable partial exception was China's attack on Vietnam in 1979, which had geostrategic elements deriving from Vietnam's actions in Cambodia and with the Soviet Union. However, even this use of Chinese force also involved significant border and maritime territorial disputes. Moreover, it is likely that the 1979 conflict ultimately derived from the uniquely antagonistic history of China-Vietnam relations, extending over many decades or even centuries, and thus cannot be taken as a representative of Chinese behavior writ large.[17] In addition, studies have shown that the PRC regime's general historical and conceptual use of force exhibits a very strong tendency to employ it in response to what Beijing views as specific provocations, and usually in a tit-for-tat manner, not simply in a broad brush effort to intimidate or subjugate real and imagined foes or simply to seize foreign territory.[18]

That said, a future stronger China might decide to employ its military capabilities in Asia more aggressively to counter what it views as the heightened containment efforts of the United States and its allies, as well as to reinforce China's growing political and economic influence. But such a dangerous decision would likely take place regardless of whether Beijing controls Taiwan, given the limited military value of the island. Any US efforts to keep Taiwan out of Beijing's hands under any conditions, as some now advocate, would almost certainly add to Chinese insecurity and aggressiveness. In any event, the United States, Japan, and possibly other allies would almost certainly act to counter a significantly more aggressive Beijing and, if wise, would seek to create a stable balance with China across the region. Taiwan would not be central to any such effort.

The High Technology Threat is Overblown

In the realm of high technology, the possibility that Beijing might gain control over Taiwan's dominant semiconductor fabrication capability certainly poses a serious concern, but only if several conditions are met: if Beijing were to gain free and effective control over that capability, were to use it to coerce other high-tech nations, and if such coercion were in fact highly effective and came at a relatively low cost to China. Although such a potential danger cannot be dismissed, the likelihood that all such conditions would occur is not high and can be reduced for two key reasons.

First, if China were to gain Taiwan through war, it is highly likely that the island's fabrication capability would be destroyed in the conflict or even sabotaged to keep it out of Beijing's hands. If such a capability is so critical to all high-tech countries, including China, one might expect that Beijing would seek to avoid such an outcome by not attacking Taiwan. This argues against those who think Beijing is poised to seize Taiwan for strategic reasons.[19]

Second, any effort by Beijing to peacefully gain control over Taiwan and use control over the island's fabrication facilities to coerce other countries would almost certainly backfire. Under such a scenario, those countries that currently provide essential software and other inputs necessary for the ongoing operation of the island's fabrication facilities would almost certainly cut off such inputs, thereby stopping production and damaging China along with everyone else.[20] Although Beijing might be able to replace such inputs, this would likely take considerable time, thereby giving time to the United States and others to accelerate alternatives to its technological reliance on Taiwan.[21]

Indeed, a far better alternative to cutting off software inputs would be to lower the potential threat posed by Chinese control over Taiwan's semiconductor fabrication capabilities by developing similar capabilities in the United States or elsewhere. Such efforts are underway in the United States.[22] While facing considerable obstacles, they are vastly preferable to policies which could compel China to employ force against Taiwan by seeking to keep the island out of Chinese hands under any circumstances due to its near monopoly of semiconductor production facilities.

The Credibility Issue is Eminently Manageable

The notion that China gaining control over Taiwan—however that might occur—would severely damage American credibility as a security guarantor in Asia and beyond is based on poorly examined assumptions regarding America's security commitments, the views of US allies and other nations towards those commitments, and Beijing's attitude toward the use of force against other countries. For both China and the United States, Taiwan presents a unique security challenge.

Unlike its treaty-based security relations with Japan, South Korea, and other allies, the United States is not clearly expected to defend Taiwan if attacked. Although the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) states that the island's security has a bearing on regional peace and stability, and that the United States must maintain a capacity to resist any armed threat to Taiwan, the law does not provide a security guarantee. Instead, it states that if the president determines Taiwan is under a clear security threat from China, he is obligated merely to consult with Congress on how to respond.[23] Presumably, such a response could include the option of doing everything short of deploying US forces to fight Beijing.[24] Although, as stated above, former President Biden asserted several times that the United States would defend Taiwan militarily if China were to attack the island, his statements did not reflect decades of US policy and cannot be taken as determinative for the Trump or any other subsequent administration. In response to queries regarding Biden's statements, US officials asserted that the "one China policy" had not changed, clearly implying that the policy of strategic ambiguity remained in force.[25]

Unlike its treaty-based relations with allies, the law with Taiwan does not provide a security guarantee

Moreover, the threat China potentially poses to Taiwan is in many ways *sui generis*, reflecting its uniquely high level of commitment to preventing the island's permanent separation from mainland China, via force if necessary. Beijing is almost certainly not willing to risk a major war with the United States over disputed territories in the South China Sea and elsewhere, given their much smaller importance to the nationalist legitimacy of the Chinese regime compared to Taiwan. Therefore, there are strong grounds for arguing that the risks that the United States would face in intervening militarily in a Taiwan conflict are uniquely high while, as shown above, the need to militarily intervene directly is low.

All the above factors suggest that US allies would not necessarily view a US refusal to engage in a major war with China over Taiwan (not a treaty-based partner) as a convincing indication of its unwillingness and inability to defend them as formal treaty allies. In fact, Washington's security relationship with Taiwan clearly presents the option of developing a more nuanced, conditional security stance toward the island that falls short of employing US forces directly in its defense, as US treaty allies would expect. This notion is buttressed by research indicating that clearly aligned interests (e.g., between the United States and its formal treaty allies) are far more important in estimating the reliability of an ally (in this case the United States) than any generalized sense of innate or morality-based loyalty that some might apply to the American relationship with Taiwan.[26] Thus, Washington could—and should—make a highly credible

argument to its allies that the measures used to defend Taiwan must be fundamentally different from those used to defend formal security treaty partners.

At the same time, it is certainly possible that circumstances exist in which the "loss" of Taiwan would severely damage US credibility. This would most likely occur if Washington were to treat Taiwan as a vital security node to be kept separate from China, and then be defeated in an effort to defend the island against a Chinese attack. Such a possibility is becoming increasingly likely, as noted above, and hence points to the clear need to develop a US stance toward the island that convincingly conveys Washington's limited commitment. The opposite, an unambiguous US security guarantee to Taiwan, would cause Beijing to conclude, correctly, that Washington had abandoned its one China policy by treating Taiwan as equivalent to a formal treaty ally and sovereign state. The result would be a severe crisis and possibly a war over the island.

Beyond clearly reaffirming the difference between its security commitments to its allies and to Taiwan, however, Washington would also likely need to strengthen the credibility of its commitments to the former—especially Japan and South Korea—in order to maintain their confidence in the continued effectiveness of efforts to balance against Beijing's growing power in Asia. This would probably require repeated unambiguous assertions of Washington's deployment of military forces to support them if attacked by China or any other nation, as well as greater efforts to strengthen both the capabilities and the interoperability of US and allied forces in a future conflict. The message would need to be crystal clear that the United States is drawing a line between Taiwan and its formal allies in the level and type of defense it would undertake. The underlying assumption here is that the United States has a vital interest in defending its long-standing treaty allies in Northeast Asia, given their huge economic, political, and military influence in the region. Moreover, defending them does not pose the huge risks involved in defending Taiwan, as Beijing does not seek to neutralize their independence and security.

Hence, with the right set of policies, Washington could guard against the possibility that its allies and other nations would regard a conditional, limited US security commitment to Taiwan as a threat to its overall credibility.

The Democracy Argument Doesn't Necessitate War

Presenting the defense of Taiwan at all costs as a moral imperative inextricably linked to America's overall ethical standing in the world as a proponent of democracy hugely exaggerates and distorts the issue. The primary moral imperative—and policy challenge—is to assist Taiwan however possible without risking American engagement in what many analysts believe would be a highly destructive, potentially nuclear war with China over an issue that does not involve the survival or well-being of the United States or its formal allies.

This means that the United States should certainly stand up for Taiwan as a democratic society deserving of the utmost support—short of a resolution to go to war if necessary. Such support, as discussed below, could be very extensive. However, it should make a clear distinction between the US moral obligation that obviously exists to support Taipei in its efforts to avoid or prevent China from coercing or militarily seizing the island, and the undoubtedly *higher* moral obligation on US leaders to avoid placing at risk the lives and livelihood of Americans, given the limited stakes involved.

The US should stand up for Taiwan as a democratic society, short of a resolution to go to war

In addition, the strategic argument that the "loss" of Taiwan to undemocratic China would threaten the US-led liberal international order and hence global stability overall is equally overblown. Such a development would hardly deal a decisive blow to democracies around the world, and much less to the norms of the global order which involve many regime types, from those governing WMD proliferation to a wide variety of international laws unrelated to the political makeup of any particular nation. This argument would be more credible if Taiwan were recognized around the world as a sovereign independent nation key to the defense of other liberal democracies.

Thus, as with the argument regarding America's credibility as a security partner, it is essential for the United States to clearly make these important moral and norm-based distinctions while backing them up with convincing, albeit limited, commitments to Taiwan. Moreover, such a balanced approach would avoid the morally unacceptable policy of simply abandoning Taiwan.

A Clearly Qualified Security Commitment

As indicated above, the most optimal US stance toward Taiwan should involve the continuation (and in some cases the strengthening) of existing US policies of deterrence and reassurance directed at Taiwan, China, and critical US allies, alongside gradual efforts to transition away from the prospect of US military intervention. Although challenging in its implementation, such a stance will better protect America's most vital interests.

Continuity Over the Short to Medium Term

At present, and despite some arguments to the contrary, the likelihood of Beijing opting to seize or coerce Taiwan through military and economic means remains

low, given the huge costs and risks involved and the absence of any pressing need to undertake such actions. Numerous simulations of a Taiwan conflict and a clear-eyed assessment of relative US, Japanese, and Chinese military capabilities indicate that any near-term use of force by Beijing would likely not succeed. Even if it were successful, it would nonetheless generate huge, long-lasting political and economic costs for the PRC regime in the form of Western sanctions and containment efforts as well as severe international opprobrium and disruption.[27]

Equally important, despite the erosion of the US one China policy that has occurred in recent years, that policy almost certainly remains viable enough, at present, to avoid causing Beijing to conclude that Washington is actively seeking Taiwan's de jure independence, a clear red line. This is the case despite the fact that Beijing believes US actions are often facilitating movement toward such an outcome.[28] In other words, the United States has not (yet) taken actions which would challenge the legitimacy of the PRC regime as the defender of China's territorial integrity by backing Taiwan's permanent separation from China, a move that would compel Beijing to react with force, despite the likely costs incurred.

It is of course possible that Beijing might conclude that conditions favoring any kind of acceptable resolution of the Taiwan issue, peaceful or otherwise, are disappearing and could therefore attempt to seize Taiwan without any clear provocation by the United States. But there is little evidence that Chinese leaders believe any so-called window of opportunity to reunify with Taiwan is closing, as some analysts think.[29] Instead, the gradual increase in Chinese military, economic, and diplomatic pressure on the island suggests a long-term strategy of strategic patience and flexibility designed to induce Taipei to accept political talks and to deter the United States from intervening.[30] In this regard, it is highly likely that, contrary to the views of some observers, the Ukraine war showed that, rather than encouraging Beijing to use force against Taiwan, Russia's struggles and Ukraine's resiliency have likely taught the Chinese leadership that absorbing the island by force would be more costly and challenging than previously imagined.[31] Hence, as long as Beijing faces huge uncertainties in opting to employ force against Taiwan,[32] and confronts no pressing need to do so by being backed into a corner by US support for an independent Taiwan, it makes sense for the United States to maintain its overall deterrent capabilities, including in the military realm, over at least the near-to-medium term (i.e., five to ten years) to sustain existing stability. Such behavior is particularly compelling because any *precipitous*, unprepared Americane attempt to end the

It makes sense for the US to maintain its deterrent capabilities over the next 5-10 years

possibility of US military intervention in a Taiwan conflict would almost certainly produce severe political blowback in the United States and possibly elsewhere, including among US allies.

Beyond maintaining its own deterrent capabilities, Washington should also continue to provide whatever assistance is deemed necessary to greatly strengthen Taiwan's self-defense capacity and its confidence in countering future Chinese military threats, albeit without treating Taiwan as a formal security partner. Such assistance should include much higher quantities of anti-air and anti-ship missiles, passive defense fortifications to strengthen the resiliency of critical infrastructure and bases, and technologies to protect against Chinese cyber attacks. The United States and other countries should also continue to increase their ability and willingness to level economic sanctions and other punishments against China if necessary, including UN censure and the suspension of diplomatic relations. Those US allies most dependent on China economically should be encouraged to further diversify their supply chains to reduce their resistance to leveling sanctions on Beijing if it were to attack Taiwan. One other possible economic punishment also worth considering is so-called "avalanche decoupling," a long-term strategy designed to apply maximum economic constraints on China without damaging the US or global economies.[33] The basic notion is to put in place the capacity of many states to move fairly rapidly yet safely toward a high level of decoupling from China in the event of a major conflict.

During the short to medium term, it also makes sense for Japan to continue to support US efforts to maintain a deterrent capability regarding Taiwan. But this should not take the form of developing the clear ability and willingness to fight alongside the United States in direct defense of the island. Such a move would very likely face public resistance in Japan, could increase the likelihood of the US intervening militarily in the event of a crisis over the island by increasing US confidence in such an intervention, and unnecessarily provoke Beijing. Instead, Japan should strengthen its own territorial self-defense capabilities regarding China as a form of deterrence vis-à-vis Taiwan. This should include improvements to Tokyo's capacity to defend Japan's southwest island chain and deter a Chinese attempt, however unlikely, to seize the disputed Senkaku Islands by force via enhanced amphibious and other capabilities.

Over the long term, however, as the United States transitions to ending the possibility of direct military intervention to defend Taiwan, such capabilities, and the overall strengthening of US-Japan defense ties, should be oriented toward bolstering deterrence against any possible future military threat that China might level against Japan itself. Such efforts would increase Japanese confidence in the credibility of the US security commitment as well as their ability to resist and repel aggression. At the same time, ending the possibility of a Sino-American conflict over Taiwan would arguably allow Tokyo to concentrate on

pursuing a more inclusive, region-wide security approach in Asia, engaging more deeply with other middle powers to encourage both Beijing and Washington to reduce the intensity of their rivalry.[34]

In addition to such military-centered deterrence actions, US support for Taiwan should take the form of more concerted efforts to expand mutually beneficial trade, investment, and technology exchanges with Taiwanese companies, extensive people-to-people and unofficial government contacts to promote greater levels of friendship and mutual understanding, and overall rhetorical and institutional support for Taiwan's democratic system and civil society. Such moves would confirm Taiwan's value to the United States and its support for Taiwan's democratic freedoms.

Diplomatically, the United States should revitalize its one China policy by clearly stating at the highest levels that, while greatly supporting Taiwan's self-defense efforts, Washington would oppose any unilateral effort to achieve either independence or unification, remains open to *any* other peaceful and uncoerced resolution of the Taiwan issue, does not regard Taiwan as a strategic node to be kept separate from China, and will more clearly limit contacts with Taiwan to the unofficial realm, meaning for example no self-designated "official" visits to Taiwan by senior US political leaders such as the trip former House majority leader Nancy Pelosi undertook in 2022.[35] Past assurances in all of these areas have become far less credible in recent years and must be revived to prevent Beijing from drawing the kind of worst-case conclusions about US intentions outlined above.[36]

The Transition to a Non-Combat Policy

While these policies make sense over the near to medium term, current and likely ongoing negative military and political trends, as well as the limited nature of US interests regarding Taiwan, indicate the need for the United States to create the conditions which would make it possible for Washington to convincingly put aside the possibility of any direct military intervention in a Taiwan conflict, without affecting overall US or allied interests in Asia and beyond.

The Chinese military's ability to successfully apply force against Taiwan will only grow over time

It is almost certain that the Chinese military's capability to successfully apply force against Taiwan will grow over time and eventually exceed the deterrent capacity of the United States and Japan. This is for a variety of reasons. First, China will continue to be able to support significant and sustained growth in its military spending—this is not only because China's economy is projected to continue to grow substantially despite current difficulties, but because even

under a lower sustained growth rate of, for example, 3 to 4 percent per annum, Beijing will likely be able to at least sustain and probably increase considerably its current low level of allocation to defense spending of approximately 2 percent of GDP.[37] Second, as the Chinese military's inventory of weapon systems, as well as doctrine and training, continue to mature, the US military's ability to operate effectively in the waters and airspace around Taiwan—only 100 miles off the coast of China—will almost certainly continue to erode.[38] It is widely recognized (and uncontroversial) that the US military's ability to operate effectively and successfully to block potential Chinese military aggression against Taiwan has declined markedly over the past several decades—and in particular since China began increasing its rate of defense spending following the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996. It is difficult to see why this trend will not continue in coming years as the Chinese military continues to mature.

Third, there is little evidence to suggest that the US military will be able to develop a game-changing new technology, operational concept, or other capability which would allow it to reverse this long-term trend and restore its capacity to deter China to the levels of even the relatively recent past. If China's military capabilities around Taiwan do indeed continue to grow relative to those of the United States, as seems very likely, and Sino-American relations remain rivalrous, the possibility of US military intervention under the policy of strategic ambiguity—and possible future attempts to double down on political support for Taiwan in ways that further weaken the credibility of the one China policy—will court increasing levels of unacceptable and unjustified military risk to the United States. Such a situation would also present a clear domestic political problem for Washington given the fact that a majority of the American public is extremely disinclined to risk a major war with China over Taiwan.[39]

Finally, one cannot ignore the fact that Beijing enjoys a huge geographical advantage in deploying forces against Taiwan. China is very close to the island, while the United States faces steep logistical and other obstacles confronting the deployment of relatively distant US forces to supplement its limited forces based in Japan or other nearby countries such as South Korea or the Philippines. Moreover, if Beijing were not directly threatening them, it is by no means clear that Seoul and Manila would become embroiled in a conflict over Taiwan by granting the use of US forces based in those places.[40]

Pathways to a US Taiwan Policy Transition

While seeking to keep in place strategic ambiguity and a credible balance between deterrence and reassurance toward Beijing over the near to medium

term, Washington should begin to take actions that would eventually make it possible for the United States to end the prospect of direct military intervention in a future Taiwan conflict without abandoning the island. In sum, these actions should include: (1) clear, repeated presidential reaffirmations regarding the critical importance of maintaining regional peace and stability for US and regional interests, and the importance of peace across the Taiwan Strait in sustaining such stability; (2) unambiguous presidential statements of support for Taiwan—short of the direct deployment of combat forces in a conflict with China over the island—alongside efforts to encourage mutual accommodation between Beijing and Taipei in the search for a stable modus vivendi; (3) continued increased US arms sales, intelligence support, and training for Taiwan, but made conditional on Taipei achieving certain clearly defined milestones in upping its independent self-defense capability;[41] (4) concerted efforts to strengthen US political, economic, and military ties with formal US treaty allies, including substantive improvements in military interoperability and greater (albeit limited) military deployments to the region, as part of an overall defense-oriented, "active denial" force posture;[42] (5) strengthened efforts to ensure the ability to impose severe political, diplomatic, and economic punishments on China by the United States and other allies and partners, if Beijing were to attack Taiwan; and (6) continuous efforts to strengthen the credibility of Washington's one China policy, through the actions outlined above.

Washington should begin to take actions to eventually end the prospect of direct military intervention

Taken together, such actions would simultaneously serve to reinforce many forms of deterrence against a Chinese use of force, reassure allies, and facilitate Taiwan's own efforts to maximize its defense and maintain its morale. They would also arguably increase incentives in both Taipei and Beijing to undertake actions which reduce tensions across the Taiwan Strait and hopefully open the door to eventual political talks over the long term.

Some observers will doubtless argue that a US decision not to engage its combat forces in a future Taiwan conflict would precipitate a Chinese attack on Taiwan. One can never predict with certainty how Beijing might react to the policy shift proposed herein. However, the likely continued short- and long-term domestic and international political, economic, and military costs resulting from any use of force, alongside the potential benefits of pursuing what would likely emerge as an improved environment for opening political talks, argue in favor of Beijing remaining fixed on reaching a peaceful resolution of the issue. This would be especially likely if Washington were to increase the

credibility of its one China policy as part of this policy shift. Another concern that opponents of this proposal might make is that Taiwan might become so panicked by the prospect of losing its American protector that it decides to attempt to acquire nuclear weapons as a reliable deterrent against a future Chinese military attack. Taiwan attempted to acquire such weapons in the past and was dissuaded or blocked by Washington from doing so.[43] It would clearly serve the interests of the United States to take the same action, especially since Beijing would almost certainly detect any serious effort by Taipei to acquire nuclear weapons and act to prevent such a development through force if necessary. In other words, Taipei's attempt to "go nuclear" would itself likely generate a conflict.

Finally, the period of time required to undertake an eventual shift in US policy away from strategic ambiguity to strong yet limited support for Taiwan would be uncertain, and ultimately depend greatly on the level of success achieved in gaining acceptance (or at least overcoming hesitations) among US political leaders, allies, and other supporters. Indeed, the resistance to such a shift will be considerable, including strong political opposition by some members of Congress and various defense analysts and strategists.

Moreover, to reduce such resistance, the shift proposed herein should not involve a clear public declaration of US non-intervention early on. Initially, the transition process should focus on bolstering Taiwan's self-defense capabilities and the confidence and capabilities of nearby US allies (most importantly Japan), to ensure their own security. It should also focus on developing the range of non-military deterrence actions toward Beijing outlined above. Washington should refrain from an explicit movement away from the possibility of direct US armed intervention in support of Taiwan until these actions are completed.

As suggested above, many voices will argue for maintaining existing policies and major increases in US deterrence capabilities to prevent a Sino-American conflict over Taiwan. Others will argue for a radical increase in US support for Taiwan and a clear defense commitment to the island for the reasons given above. And still others could argue for a complete and near-term abrogation of support for Taiwan to eliminate any possibility of even a severe crisis between Washington and Beijing over the island.

None of these alternative approaches would strike the right balance in defending America's important—yet limited—interest in supporting Taiwan while avoiding the huge unjustified threat to the United States that would inevitably result from a war with China over the island. It is high time for the United States to take a long, hard look at its current policy regarding Taiwan, and adjust the level and type of its commitment to reflect its actual interests.

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