

1945

Are Americans Prepared To Fight A Nuclear War Over Taiwan?

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The consequences of a U.S.-China war over Taiwan need to be understood: A president suffering from an occasional case of verbal diarrhea about political infighting is an embarrassment. A president repeating loose comments about international affairs is dangerous.

For the third time, President Joe Biden declared a new U.S. policy toward Taiwan, only to have his officials insist that nothing has changed. That might mollify the public, but other nations, especially the People's Republic of China, aren't fooled.

On his trip to East Asia, intended to convince friends and allies that Uncle Sam can walk and chew gum at the same time, the president's statement roiled the region. When asked if he would defend Taiwan, he responded "yes," adding that "it's a commitment we made." His words circled the globe at warp speed, appearing to yet again repudiate the policy of "strategic ambiguity," by which Washington refused to clarify its position toward a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

Since the Carter administration dropped diplomatic ties with Taiwan, legally the Republic of China, and recognized the PRC, America's defense ties with Taipei have been ambiguous. Washington retains unofficial diplomatic ties with the island state and is committed by law to sell the latter defensive weapons. However, Taiwan enjoys neither a defense treaty, as possessed by Japan and South Korea, nor any other formal military commitment. Making U.S. policy a straightforward "maybe."

In theory, the uncertainty and possibility of forfeiting U.S. support are supposed to deter Taipei from recklessly challenging Beijing. At the same time, the PRC is supposed to avoid taking military action, lest Washington decides to intervene. Voila, America achieves the best of both worlds. However, the opposite result also is possible. The Taiwanese might believe eight decades of cooperation in war and peace mean the U.S. would intervene on the former's behalf. And the Chinese might decide that no rational American president would risk Los Angeles for Taipei.

In fact, strategic ambiguity looks like an excuse to avoid deciding. As long as policymakers need not give a clear yes or no, they need not clearly decide yes or no. And they can simply hope the contingency never arises.

China is Not Ambiguous About Reunification

However, this strategy is becoming increasingly untenable. There is no sign of an imminent Chinese military action, but noted by the Quincy Institute's Michael Swaine: "this possibility cannot be discounted over the longer term if present trends continue." Beijing's patience appears to be diminishing: Chinese President Xi Jinping has inveighed against the issue being "passed on from generation to generation." The PRC has increased diplomatic and military pressure on Taiwan, while the brutal crackdown in Hong Kong suggests the Xi government has given up citing the special administrative region as an example to negotiate voluntary reunification.

Moreover, time may not be on China's side. The PRC faces serious demographic, economic, and political problems, which are being increasingly aggravated by the Xi regime's zero COVID policy. Beijing officials are aware that pro-PRC sentiment in Taiwan is vanishingly small, especially among the young. Finally, of the many possible lessons of Russia's attack on Ukraine, the most important for Xi might be the importance of a quick victory.

Time for the U.S. to Take a Position?

As a result, U.S. policymakers should know their mind. If China acts, they need to be ready to respond. That could mean marshaling diplomatic and economic power around the globe against Beijing. That could mean indirectly striking Chinese interests – for instance, interdicting trade with and air travel to the PRC. Most seriously, that could mean directly intervening against Chinese military forces. Whatever the case, Washington should be ready to act, or not act, and not be caught unprepared if Beijing strikes.

Most importantly, the issue should be discussed now. The largely unstated consensus within the Beltway appears to be that of course, Washington should intervene. To most foreign policy professionals it is inconceivable that America would not respond militarily. The main disagreement of late is over whether strategic ambiguity should be replaced with strategic clarity – by stating a firm military commitment, as the president seemed to do.

Is America Ready for Strategic Clarity?

However, the American people should be consulted, starting now, Admitted Rep. Michael McCaul, ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "I don't know how many Americans would want to go to war over a tiny island they know nothing about," he said. And if they fully understood the cost of defending Taiwan from China – the possibility of conventional defeat and nuclear disaster – they might firmly oppose doing so.

If a crisis explodes, the president should be prepared to act and Congress should be prepared to vote. Most importantly, the latter should fulfill its constitutional responsibility and debate a declaration of war, necessary for a presidential decision to intervene militarily. Such a momentous decision requires an informed citizenry.

Taiwan is China's most important strategic objective, outside of protecting the mainland. Beijing leadership, along with most Chinese including younger generations – which I have found to be profoundly nationalistic even when otherwise liberal – believe Taiwan to be part of China. The

island was stripped from the decrepit Chinese empire by Japan in 1895 and returned after the latter's defeat in 1945. In 1949 the Chinese Communist Party overthrew the ROC and ousted the Nationalist Party government, which fled to Taiwan. Backed by the U.S. military, the ROC maintained a separate existence but gradually lost the diplomatic game as most of the world, including America, formally accepted only "one China" and recognized the PRC.

For the mainland leadership, reuniting the two – meaning subordinating Taiwan to the PRC – is the final step to end "the Century of Humiliation" in which China suffered foreign invasion and occupation. The only comparable U.S. experience in terms of nationalism at its most raw is the American Civil War, in which northerners refused to allow secession. After the eleven southern states seceded over slavery, the national government fought over the union, and some 750,000 Americans, roughly eight million in today's terms, died in the process.

U.S. policymakers want to believe that America would triumph. Some, such as former defense secretary and CIA director Leon Panetta, simply assume that the threat to intervene would suffice to protect Taipei and that the PRC would back down. All the US must do is declare its willingness to act, and the Chinese leadership will retreat to Zhongnanhai, heads hung low, and accept American suzerainty forevermore.

Others either believe that America would win, or they just ignore the possibility of losing. Believing it imperative that Washington act, they ignore the likely consequences. Everything simply must turn outright.

Alas, fighting the PRC over Taiwan would be nothing like America's recent military experience. Iraq and Afghanistan were cakewalks compared to high-intensity war against the well-armed and highly motivated People's Liberation Army, generously stocked with missiles and an expanding nuclear arsenal. At its worst, air and naval combat between the U.S. and PRC would take Americans back to World War II's Pacific war, which surely no one wants to relive, with a possible nuclear twist if such weapons were used against America.

And Beijing appears ready for war, if necessary, though that certainly is not its preference. The PRC desires a negotiated surrender by Taiwan. If it comes to war, some PRC officials don't believe the U.S. would fight, leading to the infamous taunt that America would not risk Los Angeles for Taipei. And that is a fair assumption based on any normal balancing of interests. Taiwan matters far more to China than America. Imagine the PRC announcing that it was prepared to defend Cuba from U.S. aggression. That would seem equally ludicrous to Washington, especially having seen the Soviet Union retreat in a comparable situation six decades ago.

However, most Chinese leaders appear to be more realistic, preparing for U.S. intervention. Beijing benefits from the tyranny of distance – Taiwan is about 100 miles from the mainland, roughly as far as Cuba from the U.S. In contrast, Taiwan is more than 7,000 miles from the American mainland and about 1,700 miles from Guam, the closest U.S. possession. Washington is at a significant disadvantage since it is easier and less costly to deter than project power. Ominously, the U.S. usually loses war games of a Taiwan conflict.

Although Washington is developing strategies to overcome the PRC's anti-access/area-denial capabilities, it would be difficult for the U.S. to prevail even with access to allied bases in the region. Ground facilities and naval forces would be vulnerable to missile attacks. Moreover,

despite Tokyo's tougher attitude toward China and Seoul's new conservative government, there is no guarantee that if war loomed either would join the U.S. Doing so would turn them into military targets and guarantee enduring enmity from the PRC. The allies would be especially reluctant to act if they believed Washington was at least partially responsible for igniting the crisis.

Escalation seems inevitable. China could scarcely avoid hitting Guam, a U.S. possession loaded with military facilities, and Okinawa, a Japanese island filled with American bases and personnel. The U.S. would inevitably target mainland installations, a couple of scores of which could be used to support an invasion of Taiwan. Both sides would face strong pressure to retaliate in turn. A recent wargame suggested that Beijing likely would brandish nuclear weapons early in any conflict, with potentially disastrous results.

Ultimately, the U.S. could find itself devoting much of its military budget – at a time of rapidly increasing deficits as America's population ages – to combatting a rising, distant adversary in its own neighborhood over interests it considers to be vital. And in doing so Americans would be courting a greater chance of nuclear conflict than even during the Cold War. In short, the American people could find themselves risking national bankruptcy and destruction to confront this one contingency: defending Taiwan from China.

The more than 23 million people of Taiwan deserve to set their own destinies. They have created a democratic policy, market economy, and vibrant society. However, risking their homeland is a high price for Americans to pay, too high. War with China means personnel killed, planes downed, ships sunk, and bases bombed. War with China also means the possibility of nuclear-tipped missiles hitting American cities. And even a U.S. victory likely would be transitory, as China could retreat and prepare for another round, rather like Germany between World Wars I and II.

Better to seek a regional *modus vivendi*, which ensures that Taipei eschews claims of independence and military relationships with other nations, while Beijing reduces military threats and affirms peaceful reunification.

Washington also should consider the lessons of Ukraine: arming and training Taiwanese forces, preparing global sanctions in response to an attack, and developing asymmetric military responses. The goal should be to put the greatest responsibility on Taiwan while raising the price more for China than for America.

The president's inability to control his mouth is dangerous. Failing to consider the full consequences of war with China over Taiwan is worse. And expecting Americans to accept without debate the costs and risks of full-scale combat with the PRC is a political crime. The Biden administration should address all three issues before the Taiwan Strait becomes the world's latest crisis.

A 1945 Contributing Editor, Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry. He writes regularly for leading publications such as Fortune magazine, National Interest, the Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Times. Bandow speaks frequently at academic conferences, on college campuses, and to business

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