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Are Americans Willing to Die for Taiwan?

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China is spewing threats as Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen crosses the U.S. and meets with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Even though war rages in Europe, most American policymakers believe the People's Republic of China poses a greater military challenge than does Russia. Indeed, the prospect of conflict with the PRC over Taiwan has become an increasingly popular topic in Washington.

There is overwhelming support for risking war with China, a rising, nuclear-armed power and potential peer competitor to the U.S. The only serious disagreement within the foreign policy blob is over secondary issues—for instance, should America make its commitment to Taipei unambiguous? With little thought, most policymakers are prepared to risk national suicide to protect Taiwan.

In a just world, the Taiwanese people would be free to decide their own future. However, it should surprise no one that the PRC government and public alike support reclaiming the island. Virtually every state in human history has resisted people's efforts to secede and rule themselves. Including the U.S. For reasons of both history and nationalism, Americans famously waged war on their neighbors to preserve a continental union, resulting in some 750,000 deaths, the equivalent of about eight million today.

Beijing is not going to be dissuaded by words. Nor will it likely be deterred from pressing reunification by military threats. If Washington policymakers are determined to defend Taiwan, they must be prepared to back their promises with Americans' lives.

In 1895, Tokyo defeated the increasingly decrepit Chinese Empire, and seized the island then known as Formosa. After Japan's defeat in 1945, the Nationalist government regained Taiwan, to which Chiang Kai-shek's defeated forces retreated in 1949. The continuing separation is essentially the final battle of the Chinese Civil War.

President Jimmy Carter completed a process begun by Richard Nixon in 1972, switching diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. The U.S. and PRC agree that there is only "one China," but their interpretations differ. Washington maintains unofficial relations

with what is officially named the Republic of China. Moreover, the Taiwan Relations Act mandates the sale of weapons for Taipei's defense. This complex, confusing tri-party relationship will determine Asia's future.

Alas, Taiwan, China, and America are heading toward a dangerous confrontation. They are sleepwalking, or, perhaps more accurately, staggering towards war. Any conflict would be terrible at best and most likely catastrophic, setting East Asia aflame, triggering decades of strife, roiling the global economy, and endangering the U.S. homeland.

Virtually no one in the ROC wants to be ruled by Beijing. Ever fewer Taiwanese have any historical, family, or cultural ties with the mainland. Only a minuscule number of young Taiwanese view themselves as Chinese. The population of 24 million would be but a middling province submerged in a nation of 1.4 billion. And China's Xi Jinping is creating an increasingly totalitarian regime, squeezing out any space for independent action and even thought. The PRC's crackdown in Hong Kong forever destroyed the so-called "one country, two systems" model.

But Taiwan's international space continues to shrink. The most recent flip in official recognition to the PRC came only last week from Honduras, leaving Taipei with just thirteen diplomatic partners, along with the Holy See. Unfortunately, Beijing sees the ROC's ostentatious effort to maintain formal acceptance of its separate identity—reflected in Tsai's Latin American trip—as aiding the island's quest for independence, encouraging the PRC to continue increasing pressure on Taiwan.

At the same time, Taipei refuses to seriously invest in its military. With Taiwan reluctant to join the armed forces, the island looks like easy prey, its people unwilling to fight, let alone fight hard, to maintain their de facto independence. That might not be the case in a crisis—Russia's Vladimir Putin made a similar assumption about Ukraine, with disastrous results—but that is no way to deter a Chinese invasion or other coercive action.

Fearful of "losing" Taiwan, the PRC is preparing for war. Any conflict likely would draw in other Asian nations and could go global. Combat would extend well beyond the island state and include the Chinese and American homelands. Never before have two major conventional powers with nuclear weapons fought a full-scale war.

The collateral damage also would be enormous, disrupting Asia's trade with the rest of the world. However the conflict ended, hostility, instability, and discord would persist for years if not decades. A Chinese victory would leave widespread devastation and fear in its wake. The PRC's defeat likely would deliver an even more nationalist and hardline regime. Indeed, given Taiwan's importance, Beijing, like Germany after World War I, almost certainly would respond to a loss by preparing for a second military round.

Finally, the U.S. is also talking of war, but without counting the cost. Many policymakers appear to believe that Washington's threat to intervene, perhaps accompanied by a flexing of the pinky finger, is sufficient to deter China from intervening—talk tough now and Xi will be left crying in his Baiju, giving America a costless victory. Alas, Taiwan matters far more to the PRC than to America for reasons of nationalism and security, so Beijing will risk and spend far more to achieve victory. Remember 1962, when the U.S. risked Armageddon with the Soviet Union over the latter's attempt to turn Cuba into a military base.

If war occurs, much of the Blob appears to assume an American victory. They seem to propose, to paraphrase Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II, once Beijing is defeated, “may the name America be affirmed...in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at an American!” Although the U.S. has not fared well in its recent wars, Russia's bungled invasion of Ukraine has increased the arrogance of Washington's policy-making elite.

However, the PRC has been building up its military for a Taiwan contingency and enjoys major geographic advantages, with the island lying barely 100 miles off China's coast. Nor is there any guarantee that Washington's allies will join an anti-PRC coalition. The prospect of meaningful European involvement is a fantasy. For more than seventy years the Europeans have refused to do much to protect *themselves*. Even now, after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, they are backing away from promises made only last year to take defense seriously, preferring to rely, as always, on Washington. They aren't going to rally to Taiwan's defense.

What about America's Asian defense dependents, also beneficiaries of decades of military welfare? Their rhetoric has toughened, but in a crisis are they—and, more important, their populations—willing to turn their nations into missile targets and permanent PRC enemies? South Korea, vulnerable to a North Korean attack, is especially unlikely to do so, whatever it says today. Even Japan, despite promising a big increase in military outlays, has done nothing to indicate that it would do more than defend *itself*, if necessary. Australia appears more committed to the U.S., but would be further from any military action.

Most important, are the American people ready to fight for the island? Proudly possessing America's “superb military,” as Madeleine Albright infamously remarked, U.S. policymakers have increasingly treated the armed forces as a first resort. However, the human and financial consequences of Washington's comparatively modest recent campaigns have been catastrophic. A Sino-American war would be vastly worse.

Polls find a popular majority prepared to send the Navy to break a blockade against Taiwan, with a large minority ready to send troops. Do Americans understand what war between the PRC and U.S. would mean in practice? Large-scale conventional combat.

Aircraft carriers and other ships sunk, scores, or perhaps hundreds, of aircraft shot down, and thousands, or even tens of thousands, of military personnel killed. And the potential of nuclear escalation, with untold horror to follow. Most war-games involving Taiwan have resulted in an American loss. Victories have come at a terrible cost.

Which highlights the importance of a serious debate over whether it is *in America's interest* to go to war on Taiwan's behalf. Taipei's cause is worthy, and the Taiwanese should be able to control their own destiny. However, these are not reasons for Americans to risk war with a nuclear power. Neither is the island republic's status as a democracy. Washington's love of democracy is overstated—watch the shameful parade of multiple American presidents to Riyadh to consort with the Saudi royals. In any case, preserving a foreign democracy is not a sufficient reason to endanger *this* democracy and its people.

The U.S. should risk war with another state, with potential heavy casualties and materiel loss, and possible destruction of the homeland, only for an interest of the most serious, even vital nature. Taiwan, more than 7,000 miles from the U.S., is not such an essential security concern. The island is irrelevant for America's direct defense. China's possession of Taiwan would not make the U.S. homeland more vulnerable to attack.

The PRC's control of the island would enhance Beijing's Pacific reach, strengthening China's ability to back its aggressive territorial claims in the region. But Beijing has shown neither the will nor the ability to stage a blitzkrieg across the Pacific. Washington's allies would be discomfited, to be sure, but this wouldn't warrant *America* going to war. Their best response to potential Chinese expansion would be greater military effort and cooperation. Just as China can limit America's offensive possibilities with anti-access/area-denial strategies, so can friendly states blunt Beijing's threats. Indeed, the most common Asian response to Chinese pressure has been resistance, balancing against the PRC while looking to both Japan and India as security partners. A war over Taiwan would be a cure worse than the disease, especially for the U.S.

The people of Taiwan are entitled to live their lives as they wish. But they cannot escape geopolitical reality. The best outcome today would be mutual forbearance, a concerted decision by Washington, Taipei, and Beijing to calm rising rhetoric, abandon escalating threats, and eschew looming confrontation. The price of conflict would be incalculable, destroying Taiwan, ruining America's and China's futures, and spreading catastrophe around the globe.

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