



## Ready to Go to War? Republicans Beat the War Drums Over Taiwan

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The sun never sets on the American Empire, which is no less extensive than the British Empire. What makes Washington's imperial domain unique is that it regularly expands without conquest.

Now members of the ever-hawkish Republican Party want make Taiwan an official defense client, with Washington promising to defend the island from the People's Republic of China. And the threat is real. Earlier this month Taiwan's Foreign minister Joseph Wu warned that "for China, Taiwan would be an extremely convenient sacrificial lamb." He worried that "The threat is on the rise."

If the U.S. guarantees Taipei's security the danger of war will be great. Barry Posen of MIT observed that "The US commitment to Taiwan is simultaneously the most perilous and least strategically necessary commitment that the United States has today." How many American lives might be sacrificed in another people's fight that could go nuclear?

China is an ancient civilization. Once the world's greatest economic power which dominated Asia, the empire turned inward. The vast land stagnated as Europe flourished. By the mid-1800s European countries were forcibly "opening" China for trade and seizing territory, ranging from Hong Kong to Western "concessions," including in Shanghai, where many original buildings from that time remain on the Bund, or waterfront.

The "century of humiliation" extended into the 20th century. The decrepit Qing dynasty was overthrown in 1911. The Republic of China was established on January 1, 1912, but much of the country fell under the control of warlords. Over time the Kuomintang, led by Chiang Kai-shek, revived the ROC's authority, but still fell short of real control. The Chinese Communist Party emerged, in which Mao Zedong soon gained preeminence. In 1937 Japan began an extended war of conquest against China. Tokyo promiscuously murdered and destroyed but could not control the territory it seized. With Japan's defeat in 1945 came full-scale civil war in China. Chiang lost, allowing Mao to dramatically declare creation of the new revolutionary government in Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949. Two months later Chiang moved what remained of his government to Taiwan.

The island had been part of the spoils gained by the Japanese after their 1895 victory in an earlier war. The territory was returned to China in 1945 but remained an unimportant backwater. However, the land, first called Formosa by the Portuguese, who used it for a trading post, offered

the Nationalists a refuge. The Taiwan Strait was only a modest barrier – 81 miles at the narrowest point – but the revolutionaries lacked amphibious capabilities. When the Korean War exploded Washington used its fleet to shield what continued to call itself the ROC and claim to be the legitimate government of the mainland.

America's support kept other nations behind the ROC. America's UN veto also allowed Taipei to continue representing China in the international body, including as a permanent member of the Security Council. To maintain the pretense of representing all China, the Taipei government retained representatives from the mainland in its own legislature.

However, in 1972 Richard Nixon made his dramatic move to engage the PRC, traveling to Beijing and meeting Mao Zedong. As part of their deal, Taiwan was out of the UN, though still recognized by Washington. On January 1, 1979, the US shifted diplomatic relations to Beijing, though Congress approved the Taiwan Relations Act, which ensured continuing semi-official ties.

Then the PRC promoted an unhurried vision of "one country, two systems." Taiwan could return to the mother country while preserving its separate government. Even then such an offer was not attractive. The mainland remained poor despite the rapid economic growth sparked by reforms under "paramount leader" Deng Xiaoping.

More important, Mao's death in 1976 did not mean the development of democracy: in 1989 the Chinese Communist Party, led by Deng, crushed nationwide protests, highlighted by the massacre in Tiananmen Square, and ousted liberal Zhao Ziyang as CCP general secretary. At that time the ROC was democratizing under Chiang Ching-kuo, who succeeded his father after the latter's death in 1975, and Lee Teng-hui, the native Taiwanese who served as Chiang's vice president and took over on the latter's death in 1988. Lee eliminated martial law, orchestrated the election of a purely Taiwanese assembly, and became the country's first directly elected president in 1996.

Lee also moved the ROC away from its claim to represent all China toward a separate identity for Taiwan. Beijing was outraged at what it denounced as actions to "split the motherland." This triggered a spate of PRC missile tests from mid-1995 into 1996, disrupting commerce at Taiwan's two largest ports, in an effort to intimidate Taiwanese voters.

Washington responded by sending a carrier group, led by the USS Nimitz, through the Taiwan Strait, while another, headed by the USS Independence, tarried nearby. The PRC's humiliation was nearly complete: it had nothing to match America's military might. Even worse for Beijing, however, Taiwanese voters gave Lee a majority rather than the plurality predicted by polls in the multi-candidate field. They were intent on choosing their future, and in doing so selected someone who after leaving office unashamedly promoted Taiwanese independence from the mainland.

Since then Taiwanese support for reunification with the PRC has vanished. Younger generations have no direct experience with the mainland and decisively reject its politics. Indeed, there has been no better advocate for an independent Taiwan than Chinese President Xi Jinping, whose policies remind Taiwanese today what the Nationalist remnants were fleeing in 1949: brutal totalitarianism. No rational Taiwan resident could want to ruled by Beijing.

Chinese leaders blame everyone but themselves for the lack of support for a PRC takeover. However, no one living in a free, democratic society is going to support Xi's "China Dream." In fact, the mainland's increasingly brutal embrace of Hong Kong, highlighted by the recent imposition of national security legislation, further radicalized Taiwan's politics.

President Tsai Ing-wen, attacked by PRC officials for failing to affirm the joint "One China consensus" – that there is only one China, though the two governments interpret that separately – was running behind in her reelection campaign due to a moribund economy. However, last year's Hong Kong crackdown, which effectively extinguished the former British colony's "two systems, one country" legacy, destroyed the presidential candidacy of the opposition Kuomintang's Han Kuo-yu, the China-friendly mayor of Kaohsiung and original favorite. Not only did he lose the January presidential vote by 20 percentage points, but in June Kaohsiung voters removed him from office.

Taiwan's relations with the mainland are likely to worsen. Throughout Tsai's first term the XI regime refused to engage with her government, in contrast to Beijing's treatment of previous KMT administration. The PRC worked to strip away countries recognizing the ROC. Especially ominous was China's increased military pressure. The PRC built up forces capable of supporting an invasion; Chinese planes routinely violated Taiwan's airspace and Chinese war games relating to Taiwan multiplied. Moreover, the PLA increased efforts to infiltrate Taiwan. Even if primarily intended to push Taipei into surrender negotiations, these steps created a greater chance of inadvertent conflict.

Beijing failed to intimidate Taiwan. Tsai is unlikely to tempt fate by promoting formal independence, but she made her sentiments known, after her reelection observing that "we don't have a need to declare ourselves an independent state. We are an independent country already and we call ourselves the Republic of China (Taiwan)."

Moreover, her government, recognized by only 14 countries plus the Vatican, is expected to continue pressing for increased international space. Earlier this month Taiwan's legislature voted for resolutions to rename the state-owned China Airlines and rework passports to emphasize their connection with Taiwan. These efforts will be aided by widespread international criticism of the PRC, inflamed by the COVID-19 crisis, for blocking Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization.

In return, Beijing almost certainly will increase its pressure on Taiwan after Tsai's decisive victory. XI's rhetoric suggests that he views Taiwan as a major issue to be resolved while he is in power. Deng Yuwen at the University of Nottingham warned that rising tensions with Washington might cause XI "to speed up the process of reunification."

No doubt, the PRC prefers peaceful submission by Taipei, perhaps procured through the threat of military action. An invasion would be problematic even without US intervention. Lesser military steps, such as closing the strait, imposing an economic blockade, seizing smaller islands, destroying airports and ports, and targeting military sites also would ensure foreign economic if not military retaliation. Ruling over a hostile population of 24 million would be a nightmare.

Nevertheless, throughout history governments have gone to war to preserve their territory and control. In May Chinese Premier Li Keqiang spoke of reunification without the usual qualification of "peaceful." Although Taiwanese officials dismissed the omission, Li's comments

to the opening of the National People's Congress were carefully prepared. He also insisted that the XI regime would "resolutely oppose and deter any separatist activities seeking Taiwan independence." Standing before the body which approved the new Hong Kong national security legislation, he urged the Taiwanese people "to join us in opposing Taiwan independence and promoting China's reunification."

In June the PLA publicly insisted that it had "sufficient capability to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity, protect the common interests of compatriots on both sides of the strait, maintain regional peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and resolutely thwart any attempt to create so-called 'one China, one Taiwan'." Around the same time, the CCP's China Daily warned Taipei against provoking the PRC by pursuing independence: "Beijing will have to intensify crackdowns on the Taiwan secessionists and use non-peaceful means to safeguard national sovereignty and security."

Even more threatening were the remarks of Li Zuocheng, Joint Staff Department chief and Central Military Commission member on the anniversary of the Anti-Secession Law: "If the possibility for peaceful reunification is lost, the people's armed forces will, with the whole nation, including the people of Taiwan, take all necessary steps to resolutely smash any separatist plots or actions." However, at this stage the only potential for genuinely peaceful reunification is the radical transformation and democratization of the mainland, and even then, why would a nation of 24 million want to submerge itself in a colossus of 1.4 billion? Otherwise "peaceful" reunification requires Taiwan's de facto surrender to avoid war. Li's warning looks like a tragic prediction for the future.

Enter proposals for Americans to guard the island from the PRC.

Throughout the Cold War before the U.S.-PRC rapprochement, it was widely assumed that Washington would defend Taiwan against Chinese attack, despite the lack of a formal treaty. As America's relations with China improved, the guarantee for Taipei became less certain, leading to chatter about "strategic ambiguity." When asked in 1995 by Chinese military officers how the US would respond to an attack on Taiwan, Joseph Nye, an assistant secretary of defense, said: "We don't know and you don't know; it would depend on the circumstances." US policymakers claimed this approach was an advantage, since Beijing, uncertain of America's policy, would act with restraint. The opposite possibility, that the PRC would not take Washington's implicit threats seriously, didn't seem to bother Taiwan's advocates at the time.

Shortly after taking office President George W. Bush promised to do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan, but his aides immediately denied that was policy and he eventually walked back the statement. Indeed, the crisis caused by 9/11 appeared to pull the administration away from confrontation with the PRC, after the crisis involving the collision of America's EP-3 spy plane with a Chinese fighter. Later administrations avoided making any firm military commitment to Taiwan.

However, urged on by Republican super-hawks, Congress recently approved laws requiring greater support for Taiwan – such as encouraging official contacts and promoting its diplomatic status. Now legislators are pressing the administration to formalize defense ties with Taipei. For instance, Rep. Mike Gallagher and Sen. Josh Hawley introduced the Taiwan Defense Act, which requires the government to report on its ability to fulfill its defense obligations to the island under the Taiwan Relations Act – selling defensive weapons to Taipei and preparing to defend

the island, if necessary. Most extraordinary, mad, really, the bill mandates that DOD include "an assessment of the role of the nuclear forces of the United States," suggesting the territory's inclusion under America's nuclear umbrella, that is, to treat Taiwan as a de facto US state.

Gallagher also suggested executive action. He argued that "Taiwan's liberty is a vital national security interest of the United States," without explaining why that is so. Moreover, he asserted, "the Chinese military threat to Taiwan ... is a dangerous course of action that gets more likely the less we stand up to CCP aggression." So he declared: "Now is the time for a declaratory statement of policy committing the United States to the defense of Taiwan."

Former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley endorsed this approach, declaring that it is "time for US leaders to publicly recommit to our promise to defend Taiwan." In her view, "China's leaders will continue to test the limits of American resolve unless the United States makes it clear that Chinese aggression would come at too high a price." Slightly less provocative was Michael Mazza of the American Enterprise Institute, who observed: "Even absent a clear commitment to defend Taiwan, the United States can telegraph that commitment by making the choices required to ensure it can defend Taiwan successfully."

However, Rep. Ted Yoho would go further, having introduced the Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act, which, he explained: is "going to lay very clear what our intent is. In fact, it'll go to the point where it authorizes an AUMF (Authorization for Use of Military Force) if China invades Taiwan." More surprising was the response of Sen. Bernie Sanders who, when running for president in 2020, was asked what to do if Beijing used military force against Taiwan: "I think we have got to make it clear to countries around the world that we will not sit by and allow invasions to take place, absolutely."

These ideas sound a lot like the "mutual" defense treaties with Japan and South Korea, in which the US commits itself to the defense of other nations. In fact, Washington's "mutual" defense treaty with Taipei was abandoned in 1979 after diplomatic relations were established with Beijing. The main difference is that a simple declaratory statement would not impose any reciprocal responsibilities on the other country. The Taiwanese have made clear they would like to be a treaty ally. Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu recently argued that an alliance with America is critical for its survival.

While Taipei understandably would like to be protected by Washington, doing so would be bad for Americans. It is not their responsibility to risk war for the island state.

War is not a video game: it is something to be feared, not played. Despite the assumption that America always wins, the consequences of combat are ever uncertain. And even victory can be too dearly bought. War should always be a last resort, reserved to protect vital interests, most importantly America's survival – protection of its territory, population, and liberties. Washington should sacrifice lives and wealth only to protect the American political community itself. Making Americans die on behalf of others reflects arrogance, not compassion.

Many Taiwan hawks discount the possibility of war. They assume that all the president need do is tell Beijing no to force its retreat. However, China's claim to Taiwan is no passing fancy. The latter is widely seen as the last territory awaiting return after the century of humiliation. Similar raw nationalism has motivated nations around the globe, including 19th century America, to violently oppose secession. Chinese exhibit similar sentiments, with little sympathy for

permitting Taiwanese to choose their future. Chinese students with whom I've dealt, no less than their elders, believe that the island (or, more properly, islands) is properly part of the PRC.

Moreover, in contrast to the US Beijing would be motivated by defense – the possibility of American military deployments on an island just a few score miles off its coast is a nightmare. Indeed, in June China's semiofficial *Global Times* reported on footage of joint U.S.-Taiwanese military training and commented: "This could even be a crucial reason for the mainland to increase military deployments or even launch military operations against the island of Taiwan."

As a result, explained Charles Glaser of George Washington University: "China considers Taiwan a core interest – an essential part of its homeland that it is determined to bring under full sovereign control." This means the Chinese people care far more about controlling Taiwan than the American people care about preserving the island's independence. A Chinese president could far more easily explain to his people why the PRC was going to war over Taiwan with America than could a US president explain the reverse to Americans. It doesn't matter if American analysts don't believe the PRC should be willing to go to war. Revanchist sentiments are great and growing.

The obvious difference in the seriousness and intensity of interest means China would more likely see the threat of US intervention as a bluff. In 1996 a Chinese general, thought to be Xiong Guangkai, asked the Pentagon's Charles Freeman whether America was prepared to risk Los Angeles to save Taipei. This sentiment was reinforced in 2005 by Gen. Zhu Chenghu, who observed: "If the Americans draw their missiles and precision-guided ammunition on to the target zone on China's territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons."

Of course, the PRC, with a smaller and less capable armed services, does not want war with the US. However, the military balance is shifting as Beijing improves its anti-access/area denial capabilities. Moreover, while Washington remains determined to run the entire world, China would concentrate its more limited resources on Taiwan. Reliance on mainland bases also would multiply Chinese power. And deterrence remains far less expensive than power projection. Beijing need not be able to defeat America; the PRC need only create the likelihood that the price for US intervention would be too high.

Ultimately, the US no longer can count on a quick or easy victory. Noted the Rand Corporation in 2015: "a Taiwan [conflict] scenario will be extremely competitive by 2017, with China able to challenge US capabilities in a wide range of areas." Irrespective of the result, human casualties and equipment losses would be well above anything suffered in its recent wars against such military nonentities as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Moreover, the escalatory spiral would be unpredictable and could reach nuclear weapons. For instance, US strikes on mainland military sites almost certainly would expand the conflict, since the Chinese government could not allow attacks on the homeland without responding. With less sophisticated and extensive conventional capabilities, Beijing would be tempted to turn to missiles and nuclear weapons.

What could justify war under such circumstances?

The fact that Taiwan is a worthy friend is no cause for America to go to war, even though the Taiwanese have made what deserves to be an independent nation. For but four of the last 125 years, Taiwan has been separated from the mainland. For the last 71 years the island has been

ruled by its own government. Since the emergence of democracy Taipei officials have been accountable to their people, in sharp contrast to the PRC.

Last year Rep. Michael McCaul advocated support for Taiwan since "they stand for freedom and democracy in the region." The Hudson Institute's John Lee argued: "Taiwan terrifies China because the small island represents a magnificent vision of what the mainland could be and what the [Chinese] Communist Party is not. This should be a reason to reaffirm that defending democracy in Taiwan is important to America and the region."

Making a similar point in a slightly unhinged screed was Azeem Ibrahim of the Center for Global Policy, who wrote that China should be told that attacking Taiwan would be "waging war against democracy, and if you do so, you will find yourself at war with all democracies, from all over the world." Of course, only one democracy would be likely to go to war for Taiwan, and that is America. No other would put its citizens at risks for "democracy" in the abstract.

Nor should the United States. Democracy is the best political system, despite its endless imperfections, because it represents the people rather than the rulers. This a good reason to affirm the right of the Taiwanese to determine their own political destiny. However, abstract appreciation for democracy is no reason to go to war with a nuclear power absent serious threats against America. The casualties in any war, especially a large one, like a conflict with China, would not be abstract. Rather, they would be real people with real families, friends, and communities. Their lives should not be needlessly forfeited in ideological crusades.

Taiwan advocates also wax eloquent about the island's importance. Argued Sen. Josh Hawley: "Taiwan is the lynchpin of a free and open Indo-Pacific." With growing hysteria, he added: "If the Chinese Communist party is allowed to seize control of Taiwan, it will stand ready to dominate the region. This would pose an unacceptable threat to the lives and livelihoods not just of our Asian allies and partners, but of working Americans here at home."

That is beyond hyperbole. The island is not a lynchpin for anything. Taiwan has little to do with the security of the US, which is 7600 miles away. It is not vital terrain worth war.

Occupied by American forces the island would inhibit Chinese military operations but also would be a vulnerable target. Gallagher contended that "By taking Taiwan, the People's Liberation Army Navy would have a foothold to turn Japan's flank and break out of the first island chain." Occupied by the PRC Taiwan would ensure Chinese control of the Taiwan Strait and ease Chinese operations against the other island nations – Japan, Philippines, Australia, Indonesia. However, Beijing has demonstrated its ability to deploy naval forces without access to Taiwan. The added advantage of Taiwan is no casus belli.

Some Taiwan hawks apparently imagine that a little nyah-nyah rhetoric is enough to make Beijing turn tail. Last week former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley claimed that "Protecting Taiwan from Chinese aggression is essential to preventing an outright conflict with Communist China." In her mind threatening war will prevent war.

However, threatening war requires that one be prepared for war, since deterrence often fails. And Haley proposed nothing to better prepare for a war with China, instead suggesting that Washington proceed with arms sales to Taipei, ink a free trade agreement, welcome Taiwanese "students, researchers, and scientists," and "greater collaboration between our lawmakers,

diplomats, and military." None of these steps, however worthy, would help fight the war that might result from taking her advice to promise to defend Taiwan.

Unfortunately, swaggering exhibitions of Washington's military might are more likely to inflame than deter. For instance, sending an American carrier through the Taiwan Strait in 1996 highlighted Beijing's impotence, accelerating the PRC's naval armament program. The George W. Bush administration similarly sent a carrier through the waterway in 2007. Joseph Bosco, a former Defense Department official, recently suggested another visit on what he called "a deterrent mission," perhaps by the USS Ronald Reagan. However, Beijing already knows the US possesses a gaggle of carriers. Highlighting Washington's naval superiority would goad the XI regime to do more, not frighten it into doing less.

Moreover, Washington's promise to intervene on an issue that the Chinese people as well as government consider to be an internal matter would similarly inflame nationalist sentiments. Which the regime would harness for its political and military advantage. One consequence almost certainly would be to accelerate the PRC's ongoing military transformation and buildup. As noted earlier, Beijing would not need the ability to defeat America in a global conflict. Rather, China's objective would be to credibly threaten imposing sufficient costs to forestall US intervention. The countervailing threat of US action against the mainland offers a powerful incentive for China to continue expanding its military.

To maintain the ability to impose their will so far from home American policymakers would have to initiate and maintain a counter buildup. Yet finding the money to construct larger armed forces will be increasingly difficult. The US entered 2020 with a \$1 trillion deficit, and predictions from the Congressional Budget Office that the red ink would worsen in coming years as the Baby-Boom generation continued to retire.

Then came COVID-19, which resulted in a deficit of \$864 billion in June alone. The deficit this year will exceed \$4 trillion and could go much higher once Congress approves another bailout/stimulus package. The inflated borrowing and interest payments will be incorporated in the structural deficit. Uncle Sam will find it impossible to both police the globe and care for an older population. Popular sentiment is likely to force reductions, not increases, in the military.

At the same time, the Taiwanese have not taken their own security needs seriously. This is a long-standing problem. In 2007 Cato Institute scholars Justin Logan and Ted Galen Carpenter warned: "Taiwan spends far too little on its own defense, in large part because the Taiwanese believe the United States is their ultimate protector. The Taiwan legislature's six-year delay and severe downsizing of a budget to pay for weapons systems that Washington has offered the island since 2001 is only one piece of evidence of Taiwan's free riding. ... Taiwan's overall investment in defense – approximately 2.6 percent of GDP – is woefully inadequate, given the ongoing tensions with mainland China. America is now in the unenviable position of having an implicit commitment to defend a fellow democracy that seems largely uninterested in defending itself."

Little has changed, despite the PRC's increasing political demands and military expenditures. Cato's Eric Gomez noted in 2016 that "Taiwan's investment in its own defense has languished." Military outlays ran about \$11 billion in both 2018 and 2019, less than two percent of GDP. That is shockingly little to spend if Taipei genuinely fears Chinese military action as the PRC continues to increase its military outlays.



In mid-July Grant Newsham of the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies observed: "consider successive Democratic Progressive Party and Kuomintang administrations' mystifying but steadfast refusal to properly fund defense – even though Taiwan is a wealthy nation and facing a serious threat from mainland China. Exact figures are elusive, but one estimate has it that during the 12 years from 2008 to 2020 defense spending increased only about 8% overall. Another assessment claims that between 1995 and now the increase is only 4% when adjusted for inflation."

Money is not the only issue. Taiwan needs to focus on the simple but critical objective of deterring China, not larger political objectives. Explained Gomez: "The most immediate roadblocks to change are the equipment and mindset of Taiwan's military. The upper echelons of the military have resisted implementing changes that could improve their ability to fight a war against the modern PLA." Most importantly, Taipei needs to think in terms of deterring the much larger and increasingly sophisticated military deployed by China.

Taiwan does not need a military that can defeat the PRC, which no longer is a realistic objective. Taipei needs to create a stubborn defense that would raise the price of military action. This is well within Taiwan's abilities. For instance, it has developed the Yun Feng, a long-range, supersonic cruise missile, which could hit both Shanghai and Beijing. Observed columnist David Axe: "In fielding Yun Feng missiles, Taiwan conveys to Beijing that a war would not be confined to the island and surrounding waters."

In short, Taipei has the wherewithal to deter China. There is no reason for America to act, especially if the Taiwanese aren't willing to do what is necessary to defend themselves.

Promising to defend Taiwan would be a serious, even potentially deadly, decision for America. And the risks of doing so will only grow. The PRC is steadily increasing its pressure on Taiwan. The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission warned: "With the world distracted by COVID-19, China also intensified its multi-faceted pressure campaign against Taiwan. Chinese military aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait three times in the early months of 2020, after only one such incursion in 2019. Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) forces participated in a joint air and maritime drill over two days in February involving back-to-back circumnavigating flights around the island, while a Chinese aircraft carrier and attached group of warships sailed near Taiwan in April."

When Gallagher urged the administration to commit to Taiwan's defense, he admitted that "this approach is not without risk," though he went on to argue that "we have learned painfully from decades of failed policy toward the CCP, the greatest risk of all comes from complacency." Actually, no one is complacent about the threat posed by China to Taiwan. But the greatest risk to America comes from fantasy that a mere declaration can forestall a great and rising power from attempting to reclaim territory which it believes was wrongly taken from it.

Wu worried: "If international society does not give China a sufficiently clear signal, I believe China will take it that international society will not impede it in doing other thing." However, to not defend Taiwan does not mean disinterest. Washington should allow Taipei to purchase weapons for its defense. Of course, the PRC reflexively complains about such sales, but that highlights their effectiveness.

A free trade agreement between the US and Taipei is long overdue. Such a pact would benefit both sides economically as well as strengthen Taiwan's international stature. A shared approach by the US, Europe, and Asian democratic states threatening economic isolation if China employed military means, would help constrain Beijing. For instance, Chinese military strategist Qiao Liang acknowledged the danger posed by sanctions: "the Taiwan issue cannot be completely resolved unless the rivalry between Beijing and Washington is resolved."

Moreover, there are diplomatic options to forestall conflict. Washington should suggest a mutual stand-down: the US could drop efforts to expand Taiwan's international stature, end military cooperation, and assure the PRC that no US forces will ever be stationed in Taiwan, backed by Taipei's pledge of the same. China could end aggressive military challenges to Taiwan's airspace, reiterate a commitment for peaceful resolution of the dispute, and remove missiles placed to intimidate the island. What matters most is maintaining peace today and pushing demands for resolution into the future.

US foreign policy should focus on protecting the American people. Which is the most important reason to reject proposals to lend the US armed services to Taiwan. Maybe everything would work out peacefully. Alas, history is filled with examples of fate cruelly dashing the hysterically optimistic predictions of those threatening or employing military force.

Any war with China certainly would be serious and likely would be horrendous. And even victory over the PRC likely would be temporary, just an armistice for a generation or two, like in Europe after World War I. Beijing would not supinely yield to greater American firepower. Washington should not go to war over Taiwan.

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