

CHINA US Focus

Would the U.S. Really Risk Los Angeles for Taipei?

Doug Bandow

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Taiwan long has been one of the globe's most dangerous tripwires. Other than a brief period after World War II the island has not been ruled by the mainland for more than a century. The 23 million people living on what was once called Formosa have made a nation.

However, the People's Republic of China views Taiwan as part of the PRC. (In turn, the Republic of China once claimed to rule the mainland, but no longer.) Popular consent plays little role in Chinese politics, so it should surprise no one that the desires of the Taiwanese people are irrelevant to Beijing. As the PRC has grown wealthier it has created a military increasingly capable of defeating Taiwan.

At the same time economic ties between the two peoples have grown, along with Taiwanese disquiet at the risk of essentially being swallowed. Despite (or in part because of) China's pressure for unification the Taiwanese population has steadily identified more with Taiwan than the PRC. The election of Tsai Ing-wen of the traditional pro-independence Democratic Progress Party as president in January greatly discomfited Beijing, which recently cut back on official contacts begun during the previous administration.

As Chinese patience wanes, U.S. policy based on ambiguity grows riskier. Washington's commitment to Taiwan developed out of the World War II alliance with the ROC. President Harry S. Truman even interposed the U.S. fleet between the newly established PRC and ROC remnants which fled to Taiwan. The two Chinas maintained a hostile relationship for decades.

However, Washington loosened its commitment to Taipei with President Richard Nixon's opening to China. President Jimmy Carter furthered the process when the U.S. shifted official recognition to the PRC. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act ensuring continued U.S. assistance to Taiwan. But the American military commitment has become steadily less certain. Would the U.S. really risk Los Angeles for Taipei, as one Chinese general famously asked?

Washington officials hope never to have to answer that question, but the recent Taiwanese missile misfire offers a dramatic reminder of the danger of guaranteeing other nations' security. A Taiwanese vessel mistakenly shot an anti-ship missile toward China, destroying a Taiwanese fishing boat, killing the captain and injuring several other crewmen. Beijing took note, calling it "a serious matter."

Taipei has lost some of its moral high ground in criticizing Chinese missile deployments. China is likely to find other ways to use the incident for its advantage. After all, preventing similar mishaps offers a good excuse to press additional measures leading toward unification.

However, a strike on a *Chinese* vessel would have been a genuine disaster. While nothing today suggests that the PRC is planning war, at some point Beijing might find a *casus belli* to be convenient. And then America would be in the middle.

Of course, U.S. officials want to believe that the mere mention of America would be enough to thwart Chinese ambitions. However, history is full of cases when deterrence fails. In some cases the threat simply is not believed: why, for instance, would another nation risk conflict for interests so distant? In other cases a government believes that it has local if not global military superiority and could win quickly, forcing the other party to agree to peace. Yet as Japan learned in World War II, only at great peril does one underestimate America's willingness to go to war, especially if national credibility and honor are believed to be at stake.

Moreover, security guarantees tend to make their recipients more irresponsible. President Chen Shui-bian, the first DPP president, lost few opportunities to poke the great dragon across the strait, feeling secure with the U.S. seemingly on his side. In the event of a crisis his government doubted that Washington really would abandon an ally, even one at fault, knowing the damage that would be done to the former's credibility.

Worse, security guarantees effectively transfer the power to choose war to other states. In 1914 a royal assassination involving Austro-Hungary and Serbia ended up dragging most of the leading powers of Europe and a number of other countries, including the U.S. and Japan, into the horrors of World War I. The alliances acted as transmission belts of war.

Americans must decide just how committed they are to Taiwan's independence, and do so now, rather than in the midst of a crisis. Such as after an errant Taiwanese missile sinks a Chinese ship, followed by an ultimatum from an increasingly well-armed Beijing to Taipei to begin reunification talks.

Taiwan is a good friend and the Taiwanese people are entitled to decide their own future. Unfortunately, however, the island abides in a bad neighborhood. And it is hard to imagine a greater catastrophe than war between America and the PRC. It would be virtually impossible to justify Washington not only threatening but actually following through on its military threats against China if the latter moved against Taiwan.

In which case the U.S. needs to have a serious conversation with Taipei now, well in advance of the moment when the latter was expecting the American cavalry to arrive in a crisis. Moreover, Washington should consider how to use a plan to back away militarily in seeking a Chinese commitment to an unhurried peaceful resolution of the issue. And to encourage an economically-

embattled PRC to trim a military build-up made less necessary without the challenge of facing Taiwan backed by America.

U.S. officials tend to assume that Washington's commitments will never be challenged so long as the nation demonstrates sufficient determination and establishes adequate credibility. But the Taiwanese mishap reminds us of the inevitable unexpected in international relations, and the terrible costs which often result.

Is America really prepared to risk Los Angeles for Taipei? If not, Washington must decide what price it is willing to pay to assist Taiwan. And then configure its diplomatic and military policy accordingly.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.