

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

Deterring a new US war in ‘the most dangerous place on earth’

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August 11, 2021

The Biden administration has proposed a \$750 million weapons sale to Taiwan, predictably earning China’s ire. The Economist previously tagged Taiwan as “the most dangerous place on earth.” It is the most likely trigger to great power conflict, the first war between nuclear powers.

That doesn’t mean the People’s Republic of China wants war. Predictions of an imminent Chinese attack on the island overstate Beijing’s intentions and abilities. However, the regime is becoming more impatient and aggressive. Generational change in Taiwan and brutal repression in Hong Kong have ended any hope of the Taiwanese people choosing to reunite with the mainland. Hence, increasing military activity, violations of Taiwanese air and sea space, and pressure on Taiwan’s vestigial international diplomatic presence.

Unfortunately, the crowded space around the island invites dangerous incidents. The threat extends throughout the surrounding waters. As Washington’s support for a one-China policy erodes, the PRC is likely to further escalate. Imagine a U.S. decision to drop all ambiguity regarding its presumed defense commitment, which has become a matter of some debate, and announce a formal security guarantee for Taiwan. That might encourage China to strike before Washington was ready to act.

Increasing the danger is both sides’ tendency to underestimate the other’s determination. More than a few Americans appear to believe that President Biden merely need say the word and Xi will retreat to Zhongnanhai in humiliating defeat. For instance, Leon Panetta, former defense secretary and CIA director, recently argued: “We’re not going to allow China to invade Taiwan, and to undermine their independence.” He added: “I think frankly if China understands that we’re serious about that, China’s not going to do that. They may be a lot of things, they’re not dumb.”

In turn, the Chinese doubt America’s commitment to Taiwan. Beijing does not see how defending the island could be in America’s interest, especially given the obvious risk of conflict. Even the Pentagon recognizes that the PRC has created a formidable military, which obviously is concentrated in the Pacific. The tyranny of distance works against America. A blockade of Taiwan would be difficult for the U.S. to break. The Chinese military believes that it could complete an invasion of Taiwan before U.S. forces could arrive. Lyle Goldstein of the Naval War College warned that “U.S. Navy and Air Force units would face enormous losses in any attempt to reinforce the beleaguered island.” Ominously, American forces fare poorly in war games.

Then there is the possibility of escalation to nuclear war. Is the U.S. willing to accept that risk, even if small? Long-time diplomat Chas Freeman relates that years ago a Chinese military officer chided him: “In the end you care more about Los Angeles than you do about Taipei.”

Also hampering the U.S. is the reluctance of other nations to fight with Washington on behalf of Taiwan. The Rand Corporation’s Bonny Lin figured that Australia and Japan would be most likely to assist the U.S., while most of the others “may try to stay neutral or provide limited, less conspicuous forms of assistance.”

Even America’s formal allies are not certain to help. They have long treated “mutual” defense treaties as largely one-way agreements, by which the U.S. agrees to defend them and they agree to be defended. They are understandably reluctant to confront the PRC, which would turn them into short-term targets and long-term enemies of a great power with a long memory. Japan demonstrated its distress over the issue when it responded to recent Biden administration pressure with a mélange of contradictory statements.

Nevertheless, there is a largely unspoken consensus in Washington that the U.S. should defend Taiwan. Yet going to war over the island cannot be justified.

The PRC’s interests in Taiwan are much greater than America’s, meaning Beijing will naturally pay and risk more. An autonomous Taipei, which impedes China’s domination of a region thousands of miles from the U.S., offers a modest geopolitical advantage for America. In contrast, Taiwan is an existential issue for Beijing. Regaining Chinese territory torn away by Japan in war is a patriotic priority. The island also is a potential base for hostile military operations.

Even if war started small, it would inevitably escalate. China would use mainland bases, inviting U.S. attacks on the homeland, which would create political pressure for Chinese retaliation, likely against American forces, territories, and bases throughout the region, as well as expanding the target list to everything from satellites to undersea communication cables. Washington might expand the battle zone, by capturing or sinking Chinese shipping worldwide, for instance. Such a conflict would be nothing like the “endless wars” of recent memory.

Moreover, though any U.S. defeat likely would be decisive, a Chinese loss would just be round one. The PRC would soon begin preparing for the next battle, similar to Germany’s reaction to its loss in World War I. Defeat likely would only increase Beijing’s resolve.

Before issuing a formal defense guarantee for Taiwan or intervening sua sponte, the president would have to consult not only Congress but the people. Are Americans prepared for a real war with ships sunk, planes downed, bases bombed, and, unlikely yet possible, nuclear-tipped missiles hitting U.S. cities?

America still should seek to discourage Chinese aggression against people who have made their home and deserve to be free. The Biden administration should expand economic ties with Taipei, including a free trade agreement, while warning Taiwan that its defense is its, not America’s, responsibility. The U.S. should indicate that it will not risk a general, and especially nuclear, war over the island state. For years, Taipei’s defense efforts have been anemic, even irresponsible. As urged by Washington, Taipei should maximize its military buildup and readiness and adopt a “porcupine strategy”— designed to ensure that China pay a high price for aggression.

Washington should provide Taiwan with arms and other assistance for its defense. A recent study from Australia's Lowy Institute by Patrick Porter and Michael Mazarr, of the University of Birmingham and Rand Corporation, respectively, called this “a prudent middle way: the United States should act as armorer, but not guarantor.” As the latest weapons sale demonstrates, this approach would irritate the PRC, but not rupture relations.

Washington also should seek to build a broad coalition to threaten commercial retaliation ranging from targeted economic sanctions to wide-ranging trade embargoes if Beijing initiates force or other coercive measures, such as a blockade, against Taiwan. The collective message should be that China would pay a high price for aggression.

Finally, the Biden administration should seek a modus vivendi to preserve the status quo. The U.S. could pledge to maintain the traditional distinction between official dealings with the PRC and Taiwan, form no military relationship with Taipei, and reduce military operations around Taiwan. The latter could accept its diminished international profile. Beijing could commit to peaceful reunification, drop attempts at military intimidation, and withdraw short-range missiles targeting Taiwan.

Such a result might feel unsatisfactory to all, but it would avoid worse alternatives. An Asian war featuring the U.S. against China would be catastrophic, with reverberations around the globe.

Washington should not guarantee Taiwan's defense, whether ambiguously or otherwise. Instead, policymakers across the political spectrum should back a strategy that supports Taipei short of war. The objective should be to simultaneously preserve Taiwan's freedom and Asia's peace.

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