



Washington Is Writing Security Checks to Taiwan the US Can't Pay

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A geostrategic time bomb is ticking ever louder in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing's determination to compel a recalcitrant Taiwan to accept political unification with the People's Republic of China (PRC) is becoming noticeably more insistent. At the same time, Washington's previously vague commitment to defend Taiwan has morphed over the past four years into the functional equivalent of a full-blown military alliance. Those policy changes put China and the United States on a collision course with horrific potential consequences.

Beijing exhibits no willingness whatsoever to back away from its demand that Taiwan renounce all aspirations for independence and instead agree to commence negotiations for reunification with the mainland. Xi Jinping's government is exerting pressure in several ways. One tactic is to poach the handful of remaining countries that still maintain diplomatic relations with Taipei. Another is to block Taiwanese membership in all international institutions except in a few cases (like the Olympics) where Taiwan is willing to participate under the humiliating appellation "Chinese Taipei."

Far more worrisome than such examples of diplomatic sharp elbows, though, is Beijing's militant rhetoric and surging displays of military power toward Taiwan. In a speech on May 21, 2020, Premier Li Keqiang noticeably left out the word "peaceful" in referring to Beijing's intention to "reunify" with Taiwan. That omission signaled an ominous policy shift. PRC military exercises in and near the Taiwan Strait have become larger and more frequent over the past four years, and 2020 has witnessed a marked increase in the scope and pace of such exercises. Even more worrisome, PRC combat aircraft now routinely approach and even cross the de facto line of control in the middle of the Strait in an effort to intimidate Taipei as well as test Taiwan's air defenses. Taipei sends up its own fighters to intercept and challenge the Chinese planes. There have been dozens of PRC aerial intrusions in recent months, and the potential for a lethal miscalculation by either side is obvious.

The United States has responded to Beijing's increasingly abrasive posture toward Taiwan by taking multiple steps to forge tighter security ties between Washington and Taipei. In November 2020, reports leaked to the Taiwanese press about a secretive visit by a US official. Apparently, the individual in question was a two-star admiral who was in Taiwan to develop plans for

coordinated joint operations between US and Taiwanese military forces in the event of a crisis. There also were indications that this was not the first such meeting between high-ranking military figures from the two governments.

Several new milestones in Washington's support for Taiwan have been reached during Donald Trump's presidency, and the pace is accelerating. In mid-August 2020, the Trump administration approved an \$8 billion sale of 66 advanced F-16v fighters to Taiwan – the largest weapons sale in many years – to help Taipei's concerted effort to strengthen its own military capabilities. In October, the administration informed Congress that it intended to sell Taiwan MQ-9 drones and a coastal defensive missile system. Washington also pressed Taipei to make a dramatically enhanced defense capability of its own a high priority. National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien urged Taiwan to "fortify itself" against an invasion, blockade, or comprehensive economic embargo.

In addition to such expanded diplomatic and logistical backing for Taipei, the US military presence near Taiwan is now visible and robust. The transit of US warships through the Taiwan Strait has become noticeably more frequent, even routine, despite the PRC's vehement protests. A Beijing think tank closely affiliated with the government charged that in September 2020 alone, the United States had sent 60 spy planes to probe China's coastal defenses.

Washington's ability to prevail against a concerted PRC offensive against Taiwan, though, is increasingly problematic. US military leaders have watched with growing unease for years as the PRC's military budget ballooned and funds were directed disproportionately to the development of sophisticated anti-ship missiles and other anti-access, area denial systems. The purpose of such programs is to raise the cost severely to the United States in both treasure and blood if Washington sends its air and naval forces to defend Taiwan or otherwise interfere with PRC strategic goals in waters near China.

The cost-benefit calculations for the United States are turning highly negative with respect to defending Taiwan. Various Pentagon combat simulations during the past four years indicate that the United States would lose a war with China over Taiwan. Worse, simulations by both the Pentagon and the RAND Corporation based on the scenario of a broader conflict in the Western Pacific reach similar results.

Under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the United States has an implicit commitment to help defend Taiwan. Undertaking that obligation was a dubious move at the time, even though China was weak militarily, but now that obligation is extremely perilous. Not only is it increasingly unlikely that Washington can deter Beijing from using force to achieve reunification, the various war games simulations indicate that the United States would lose the resulting military conflict. No rational US policymaker should want to risk a war with China under such circumstances.

One can readily understand why the people of Taiwan do not want to be absorbed into a highly repressive, one-party state. But the US government is maintaining a security promise to Taiwan that the United States is in no position to fulfill. Not only is that policy likely to lead the Taiwanese down the primrose path to catastrophe, but it risks catastrophe for the American

people. Washington's Taiwan policy is bankrupt and US leaders must accept that reality and adopt a strategy for disengagement as promptly as possible.

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