

The American Conservative

A Coming Test On Taiwan

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December 18, 2021

Most discussions about a U.S. security commitment to Taiwan implicitly assume that a military move by the People's Republic of China would take the form of an offensive against Taiwan itself. Very few experts raise the question of what the United States would do if Beijing launched a more limited action—one against Kinmen (Quemoy) and Matsu, small Taiwanese-controlled islands just a few miles off of China's coast, or against other more distant islands that Taipei claims. Yet that is a much more likely scenario than a full-scale war to subjugate Taiwan. It would be a bold yet relatively low-risk way for Beijing to test the extent and reliability of Washington's resolve to defend Taiwan and its interests.

Washington's Taiwan policy has become an especially important topic in recent months. For more than four decades, U.S. administrations, Republican and Democratic, have adopted a stance of "strategic ambiguity" regarding the defense of Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which Congress passed when the U.S. shifted its diplomatic relations from the Republic of China (Taiwan's official name) to the PRC at the beginning of 1979, was the foundation for that murky policy. The TRA declared that the United States would consider any attempt to coerce Taiwan as a serious threat to the peace of East Asia. However, unlike the mutual defense treaty that it replaced, the TRA did not explicitly commit Washington to defend Taiwan militarily. The United States only pledged to continue selling Taipei weapons "of a defensive nature."

There is now a strong effort underway in Congress and influential portions of the American foreign policy community to end that strategic ambiguity. Conservatives especially are pushing for a new policy of "strategic clarity," making it explicit to Beijing that the U.S. military will come to Taiwan's rescue if the PRC launches an attack. In June 2020, Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri introduced the proposed Taiwan Defense Act, which would obligate Washington to "delay, degrade, and ultimately defeat" any PRC attempt to use force against Taiwan.

Although conservatives are at the forefront of the campaign for strategic clarity, that stance is receiving growing bipartisan support. The latest measure that pro-Taiwan senators are pushing is the Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act (TIPA). The objectives of Hawley's earlier bill were incorporated into the new TIPA, which would give the

president virtually a blank check to use U.S. military forces to defend Taiwan from an attack without any additional congressional authorization or even debate. Since Sen. Rick Scott, its principal sponsor, introduced TIPA in February 2021, it has attracted significant bipartisan enthusiasm.

In an October 11 *Washington Post* op-ed, Rep. Elaine Luria of Virginia, a Democrat, praised the legislation as “a good starting point,” indicating that she would like to go even further. The legislative campaign for TIPA would be important even if its proponents were obscure backbenchers, but Scott is a rising star in the Republican Party and a possible presidential candidate in 2024 and Luria is the vice chair of the House Armed Services Committee. Scott accurately reflects the views of GOP hawks, and Luria seems to embody the views of a growing contingent of centrist Democrats.

U.S. policy implicitly has been moving in the direction of strategic clarity since the early stages of former President Donald Trump’s administration. Both the number and scope of U.S. weapons sales to Taipei have increased steadily. One key policy change took place when Congress enacted the Taiwan Travel Act in March 2018. That law not only authorized but explicitly encouraged high-level U.S. national security officials to interact with their Taiwanese counterparts, reversing a four-decades-old policy. The following year, National Security Advisor John Bolton met with David Lee, secretary general of Taiwan’s National Security Council, to discuss regional security issues of mutual concern. Operational military cooperation also became increasingly evident, as became noticeable when the United States invited two senior Taiwanese military officials to participate in a May 2018 gathering at U.S. Pacific Command. High-profile visits by Cabinet members and military officials to Taipei have now become almost routine.

Deployments of U.S. air and naval forces in the South China Sea, as well as other waters near Taiwan, also are more frequent and visible. U.S. warships now transit the Taiwan Strait on a regular basis, and Washington had induced key allies, including France, Britain, and Germany to follow suit. Such shows of force are drawing increasingly pointed, angry protests from Beijing.

President Biden’s own statements have added to the image that the United States is firmly committed to Taiwan’s defense. In just the past few months, the president twice made statements in press interviews asserting flatly that the United States has an obligation to come to Taiwan’s defense if a PRC attack occurs. In one case, he explicitly equated that commitment with U.S. formal treaty obligations to NATO allies, Japan, and South Korea. Although Biden’s advisers tried to walk back his comments, insisting that U.S. policy had not changed and the TRA still governed Washington’s actions, PRC officials and independent observers have reason to suspect otherwise.

Both those who favor continued strategic ambiguity and opponents who advocate strategic clarity focus on a scenario in which the PRC attacks Taiwan directly. There is little question that Beijing’s patience is fraying as Taiwan behaves increasingly as an independent country. Neither the Taiwanese leadership nor the population exhibits

much interest in accepting negotiations for possible unification with the mainland. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders likely would still hesitate before trying to blockade or invade Taiwan. Given the clear trend in U.S. attitudes and policies toward greater, not lesser, support for Taiwan's de facto independence, such an offensive would be a very risky venture indeed.

However, PRC elites clearly believe that they must do *something* to stop Taiwan's accelerating drift away from any consideration of reunification. The harsh warnings coming out of Beijing against "separatism," the growing number of PRC military exercises in or near the Taiwan Strait, and the surging number of incursions by Chinese warplanes into Taipei's declared Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) are all ominous signs of a hardening attitude. Taking military action against small, outlying islands that Taipei claims as its own would be a bold warning to Taipei, and it would test the nature, extent, and reliability of the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan. A top Taiwan security official reportedly told his country's lawmakers that PRC policymakers already had engaged in an internal debate about whether to attack such islands, although there apparently are no plans to do so before 2024, the year Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen's term ends.

Such a move certainly would not be without risks, but the gamble would be far less perilous than a military assault on Taiwan itself. Given the marked growth of pro-Taiwan views in Congress, the U.S. policy community, and the American public, a direct attack almost certainly would provoke a full-scale U.S. military intervention. An August 2021 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that a majority of Americans now favor concluding a formal military alliance between Washington and Taipei. A rising plurality (46 percent) even endorse using the U.S. military to defend the island, if that step becomes necessary.

Washington's willingness to risk war with China because of an attack on small, obscure, in some cases uninhabited islands would be far less likely. There are several candidates that Beijing could target for such a move, although all of them have drawbacks.

One possibility, mentioned earlier, would be a takeover of Kinmen and Matsu. The logistics for such an occupation would be extremely simple and certain of success. Unlike during the Cold War, when large numbers of Taiwanese troops were stationed there, the two islands are virtually demilitarized. One possible drawback is largely psychological. A PRC conquest would produce echoes of the Cold War when the United States and China nearly came to blows twice in the Taiwan Strait over Washington's determination to preserve the status quo. PRC leaders might wish to avoid reviving those memories of a time when at least some U.S. officials assumed that a move against Quemoy and Matsu was the opening stage of a general communist offensive.

Beijing has other options that are free of such Cold War emotional baggage. Taiwan's territorial claims in the South China Sea are nearly as extensive as Beijing's

extraordinarily broad claims in that body of water. Currently, Taipei actually administers two sets of islands, one in the Paracel chain several hundred miles south of Taiwan, the other in the Spratly chain even farther south. The latter holdings include Taiping (Itu Aba), more than 1,000 miles away, an island of 135 acres garrisoned by several hundred Taiwanese coast guard personnel and marines.

For Taiwan to defend such a remote holding from a PRC attack would be extraordinarily difficult. Washington's naval presence in the South China Sea has been growing for years, and U.S. military power would likely be sufficient to expel a small PRC occupation army. But taking that action would trigger an immediate confrontation and crisis with Beijing.

China might be inhibited from employing military force in that setting because it would have to deal with a messy diplomatic problem. Taiping and the surrounding islands are claimed not only by Taiwan and the PRC but also by the Philippines (a U.S. treaty ally) and Vietnam. Manila and Hanoi would be extremely angry if Chinese forces seized the territory; indeed, Manila could invoke its mutual defense treaty with the United States and call on Washington to repel the aggression. Given all the potential adverse circumstances, Beijing has reason to hesitate before targeting Taiping and other nearby islands in the Spratly chain.

The most probable target would be the tiny Pratas (Dongsha) cluster some 300 miles south and west of Taiwan, slightly closer to Hong Kong than Taipei. That site consists of one island that is 1.7 miles long, a very thin atoll, and a couple of spits of land that are barely above sea level. The location of Pratas has some strategic value, but the primary incentive for Beijing to make a military move is that a successful takeover would humiliate Tsai Ing-wen and her pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party. Possession of Pratas and the other island holdings are a source of national pride for Taiwan. Notably, most of the surging number of incursions by PRC warplanes into Taiwan's asserted ADIZ over the past 18 months have taken place in the extreme southwestern portion of that zone, close to Pratas/Dongsha.

A peripheral military challenge to Taiwan over Pratas would put U.S. leaders in a terrible bind. Congressional and public sentiment does appear to support the United States defending Taiwan militarily, despite the serious risks entailed. But would such sentiment translate into a willingness to risk a war with China—and the possible nuclear implications—over a few islets?

Another potential factor inhibiting a U.S. military response to such a peripheral attack on Taiwanese interests would be how much the United States could count on its allies in East Asia to join the fray. It is not even clear they would incur that risk in response to a PRC offensive against Taiwan itself. There are mixed signs. Australia insists that it is fully on board. It would be “inconceivable” for Australia not to join the United States in defending Taiwan, Australian defense minister Peter Dutton stated in mid-November 2021. However, his reaction implicitly assumes that Washington would be

mounting a defense against an assault on Taiwan itself. It is not at all clear if Canberra would consider an attack on outlying islands in the same light.

Japan's reaction would be even more uncertain. A recent public opinion survey found that a majority of Taiwanese were confident Japan would join with the United States to repel a PRC assault on the island, but the Japanese public was less sure. Japanese leaders have made Taiwan a high-profile issue in their security calculations, but Tokyo still has refrained from making a firm commitment. Given such continuing caution about joining the United States to deter a PRC attack on Taiwan, Japan's willingness to incur that level of risk over other, lesser islands is improbable.

Members of the U.S. foreign policy establishment finally appear to realize that a test of the U.S. commitment to Taiwan's defense in the form of a strike against Taipei's disputed island claims could be coming, and they are not at all confident about a favorable outcome. The hawkish Center for a New American Security published a report on October 26, 2021, based on a scenario in which PRC forces invade the Pratas/Dongsha islands, capture the 500 Taiwanese troops based there, and establish a military outpost. During the CNAS war game, both the U.S. and Taiwanese teams found it difficult to formulate an effective military response, lest that move triggers a full-scale war with vast negative consequences.

Predictably, the lesson CNAS hawks took away from the exercise was that Washington must gain a firm commitment from Japan and other allies regarding Taiwan's defense, as well as strengthen America's own forces in the region to deter Beijing from even contemplating aggression against the smaller territories. But that is little more than wishful thinking—it certainly is not a viable strategy in the next year or two.

PRC leaders have legitimate reasons to be skeptical that the United States would be willing to risk a horribly destructive war with China over small islands that are merely claimed by Taipei. The Biden administration would encounter considerable difficulty securing the support of the American people or U.S. allies for a war over such meager stakes, and Chinese officials likely understand that. Seizing Pratas/Dongsha would be a bold move, and certainly not without risks, but it also would put the onus of any subsequent, dangerous escalation totally on the United States, while sending an emphatic message of China's determination and fraying patience about the overall Taiwan issue.

Washington needs to pay more attention to this scenario before being blindsided by a major crisis. U.S. leaders need to decide if they are willing to have their country incur the risks and costs—the latter measured in both treasure and blood—of thwarting a PRC military move against Pratas or a similar target. It is reasonable to make the case that Taiwan is an extremely important strategic and economic prize to the United States. The island is acquiring ever-greater relevance because of its dominant role in the production of the most advanced semiconductor chips and other components that are central to the smooth functioning of America's economy. Even in that case, however, there is a serious question about whether preserving Taiwan's de facto

political independence is worth the consequences to the United States of a major war with China. It is vastly harder to make the case that keeping some remote islets under Taipei's control is worth such a risk. Yet U.S. leaders—and the American people—may have to make that decision soon.

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