

## Taiwan Boosts Its Defenses Against Chinese ‘Strangulation’

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May 23, 2018

Washington’s implicit defense commitment to Taiwan, enshrined in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, may soon be put to the test. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has embarked on a two-pronged strategy to erode the island’s de facto independence. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen’s pro-independence government is responding with defiance and a determination to boost defense capabilities. Those opposing policies may well produce a military collision in the next few years, with America caught in the middle because of its implicit obligations to protect Taiwan’s security. A change in U.S. policy is increasingly urgent to encourage a self-reliant Taiwan regarding defense.

One prong of China’s strategy to compel Taiwan to acquiesce in eventual reunification with the mainland is to increase Taipei’s international diplomatic isolation. The Chinese government steadily pursued that strategy over the decades since the Communist takeover of the mainland in 1949. Beijing’s position was clear. No country could maintain diplomatic ties with both the PRC and the Republic of China—the remnant of the old Nationalist Chinese government based in Taiwan. As the mainland’s economic and military clout grew, all except a few small countries (mainly in Latin America and Africa) that Taipei could successfully bribe, accepted Beijing’s terms.

During the tenure of Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou from 2008 to 2016, though, Beijing paused its attempt to lure away Taiwan’s handful of remaining diplomatic partners. Cross-strait relations were warming, economic ties were expanding rapidly, and Chinese leaders believed that such links would soon undermine sentiment for independence among the Taiwanese people. The landslide victory of Tsai’s pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in the January 2016 elections exposed the faulty nature of that strategy.

Beijing responded with a new, even more robust, campaign to poach Taipei’s remaining allies. That effort clearly is paying off. In late December 2016, Sao Tome broke relations with Taipei, and in June 2017, Panama did so. On May 1, 2018, the Dominican Republic switched its recognition to Beijing following the offer of an extraordinarily generous financial package. Other nations, including Paraguay, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, as well as the Vatican, are on Beijing’s target list. Taipei’s dwindling roster of diplomatic partners is now down to 19 governments.

Chinese leaders seek to isolate Taiwan in other ways. In contrast to Beijing’s stance during Ma’s administration, there is no longer any inclination to soften objections to Taiwanese participation in even the most innocuous international organizations or forums. That is true even when Taiwanese officials are willing to avoid using the terms Taiwan or the island’s official name, the

Republic of China. The recent Winter Olympics constituted one of the few cases where Beijing still allowed participation even under the humiliating label “Chinese Taipei.”

The other prong in China’s strategy is ever more menacing military deployments. The PRC’s military drills in the Taiwan Strait during 2017 occurred at double the pace of 2016, which itself was an increase over 2015, the last year of Ma’s rule. The PRC’s menacing maneuvers continued and even escalated in 2018, including exercises for the first time in decades near the small offshore islands of Kinmen (Quemoy) and Matsu. PRC officials stated flatly that such military power should make it clear to Taiwan that there is “no way out” that includes independence.

Taiwan shows no signs of being intimidated, however. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of its high-tech economy to the United States, Japan, the European Union, and other players around the world. The significance of Taiwan as a supplier of key components in multiple industries is not lost on those governments. The ties they maintain with Taipei may be one-dimensional and informal, but that does not make them any less vital or enduring.

Moreover, Taiwan’s actions are not confined to the economic arena. Taipei even asserts its own territorial claims in the South China Sea, and seeks to position itself as a constructive mediator in that multi-nation dispute. After years of relying heavily on the United States for its security, Taiwan now shows greater initiative in creating a robust national defense. The island’s indigenous defense industry continues to grow larger and more sophisticated, now producing both jet fighters and submarines. Tsai’s government also presses the United States to approve sales of front-line weaponry, most notably the F-35 fighter. The stated objective of Taiwanese leaders for such purchases and other measures is to move the island toward greater defense self-sufficiency.

Such a goal implicitly reflects declining confidence in the willingness of the United States, despite the Taiwan Relations Act, to intervene militarily if the PRC opts to use force in an effort to compel reunification. That is a realistic concern. As China’s economic and military power grows, the costs and risks to America of such an intervention escalate steadily.

U.S. leaders should encourage Taiwanese steps toward maximum reliance on their own military resources and efforts. Moves by Taipei to take the island’s security needs more seriously benefits both countries. A robust defense capability is the foundation for the “porcupine” strategy that is the island’s best option for maintaining its de facto independence. Given the disparities in the size of territory, population, and economic resources, Taiwan cannot hope to prevail militarily against the mainland over the long-term, if Beijing is determined to launch a war of conquest. But Taiwan can, and should, raise the potential cost in blood and treasure to Beijing of adopting that course to the most painful level possible. That would likely deter all but the most reckless PRC leadership from venturing down that path. Invading and conquering an island poses uniquely difficult challenges in any case, and focusing Taiwanese resources on air and naval power can multiply those difficulties.

That is a better approach than relying on an implicit U.S. defense pledge that has declining credibility because of rising costs and risks to the guarantor power. Instead of adopting measures like the recent Taiwan Travel Act, ending the longtime informal ban on meetings between high-level U.S. and Taiwanese officials, a largely symbolic move that needlessly antagonized Beijing, the Trump administration should take a different tack. Washington should approve the sale of F-35s and other sophisticated weapons systems to Taiwan, and U.S. leaders should make it clear to

both Taiwan and the PRC that the new focus of U.S. policy is to orchestrate a transition to Taipei's self-reliance in defense. It is then up to the Taiwanese to decide how far to incur the potential costs and risks of maintaining their de facto independence in light of Beijing's pursuit of a strangulation strategy.

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