

## Taiwan Is Not Afghanistan

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The abrupt, chaotic U.S. departure has led to growing speculation throughout the world about the durability and reliability of Washington's other foreign policy commitments. There is much hand-wringing in the United States and some allied countries that U.S. credibility may have suffered a fatal blow. Countries that Washington regards as adversaries, including Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are expressing similar conclusions, with a distinct undertone of gloating.

One increasingly common theme, both in the PRC and among Taiwan's partisans in the United States, is that Washington's implied commitment to defend Taiwan is now in grave doubt. Taipei's American friends warn that the Afghanistan debacle will embolden Beijing to increase its already considerable diplomatic and military pressure on the island. The PRC's goal of compelling Taiwanese leaders to abandon their quest for independence and instead commence serious negotiations for reunification with the mainland, so the argument goes, is now within reach, thanks to the Biden administration's fecklessness in Afghanistan. American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Rubin even asserted that Taiwan has no choice but to acquire nuclear weapons if it wishes to preserve its freedom, since Taipei can no longer count on U.S. protection.

China's state-run media are adopting a similar take about the messy U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. They warn Taipei that it cannot count on continued U.S. backing in a crisis, and that striking a reasonable reunification agreement with Beijing is the island's best (indeed, only viable) option. An editorial in the state-run Global Times directed barbs at Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party "From what happened in Afghanistan, [the DPP] should perceive that once a war breaks out in the Straits, the island's defense will collapse in hours and the US military won't come to help," "After the fall of the Kabul regime, the Taiwan authorities must be trembling," Global Times editor-in-chief Hu Xijin Hu wrote in another setting. Such analyses openly assert that the Taiwanese government lacks popular support, just as the U.S.-backed Afghan government did. Such an illegitimate regime, those accounts insist, would fold as quickly and thoroughly as Ashraf Ghani's government, if Beijing applies enough pressure.

Comparing Taiwan to Afghanistan not only is misplaced, it is potentially very dangerous. PRC leaders especially must avoid succumbing to such illusions. The situations are different in two crucial respects, and a PRC miscalculation on either point could lead to tragedy.

First, the United States regards Taiwan as much more important than Afghanistan. The notion that the Afghanistan withdrawal translates into uncertainty about U.S. credibility regarding all of its global security commitments is an utter fallacy. Some interests and commitments clearly are

far more central than others. Just because Washington terminated one unrewarding venture in an area of marginal importance to the United States does not signal that U.S. leaders would remain indifferent if a threat to a key interest elsewhere emerged. With respect to East Asia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are all top priorities for Washington. Taiwan, for example, not only occupies a coveted strategic location in East Asia, it is the world's leading producer of semiconductor chips, a commodity that is crucial to the U.S. and global economies at large.

Second, Taiwan as a political entity and military actor is not even remotely comparable to Afghanistan. The latter case involved a resistance struggle against an imperial power that had occupied the country for nearly two decades. Most Afghans, even if they didn't especially like the Taliban, had little allegiance to the puppet regime that Washington installed. Conversely, Taiwan is a modern, cohesive society with an increasingly distinct identity. It also is a society in which a large majority of the population is firmly opposed to being absorbed by the PRC.

Those crucial differences lead to two important conclusions. The United States is highly unlikely to walk away from its relationship with Taipei the way it belatedly abandoned the quixotic, nation-building mission in Afghanistan. If the PRC mounted a military challenge to Taiwan's de facto independence, Washington almost certainly would respond with the full extent of its air and naval power in the western Pacific. Whether the commitment to Taiwan remains wise, given the potential risks and costs, is open to doubt, but there is no credible indication that the United States considers relinquishing it. Even if the U.S.-led defense proved to be both ill-advised and unsuccessful, the result would be a horribly destructive war between the United States and the PRC—a development that would benefit no one.

Moreover, Taiwan would respond ferociously to a military assault from the mainland. Taiwanese leaders rightly ridicule contentions that an Afghanistan-style collapse would take place. The growing prominence of a distinct Taiwanese (as opposed to a Chinese) identity among most of the island's inhabitants, combined with a determination to resist being absorbed into a one-party communist state, would fuel a determined, sustained resistance. Any notion on the part of PRC leaders that the Taiwanese military and government would disintegrate like its counterparts in Afghanistan is an illusion based on wishful thinking and a failure to appreciate the monumental differences between the two situations.

Alarmists in the United States need to cease expressing foolish notions that the Biden administration's decision to extricate America from the Afghanistan quagmire means that Washington is now inclined to abandon Taiwan. Even more important, the PRC must cease indulging in the twin fantasies that the United States will walk away from its commitment to Taiwan, and that the Taiwanese government is a U.S. puppet lacking domestic support and would collapse like a house of cards. Indulging in such fantasies could have very ugly, real world consequences.

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