

Should We Go To War For Taiwan?

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The American people need a debate now, before a crisis arrives.

Last month, Admiral Philip S. Davidson, commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Taiwan is one of China's targets and "the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years." Some observers, noting increased Chinese military action, believe a crisis could come even sooner.

What would the U.S. do? Washington's policy of "strategic ambiguity" dictates no answer. When asked about the issue, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki responded: "Our position on Taiwan remains clear. We will stand with friends and allies to advance our shared prosperity, security, and values in the Indo-Pacific region," whatever that means.

The American people deserve to know what they might be expected to die for. Washington is filled with people who believe that being a superpower means never having to limit one's ambitions, consider the actions of other nations, or fear the consequences of military interventions. Yet the impact of war over Taiwan would be disastrous.

By any normal measure, the Republic of China, its official name, is an independent country. However, the island of Formosa, plus some much smaller possessions, is claimed by China. And the ROC is recognized by only 14 small countries. Most nations, including the U.S., accept Beijing's "one China" policy while maintaining an unofficial relationship with Taiwan focused on trade.

The island was detached from imperial China by Japan in 1890, recovered by the ROC in 1945 at the end of World War II, and separated again by the retreating Nationalists in 1949. For years, the U.S. recognized the ROC located on Taiwan as the legitimate government of all China.

That began to change with President Richard Nixon's trip to the People's Republic of China in 1972. President Jimmy Carter completed the process on January 1, 1979, establishing formal diplomatic ties with the PRC.

Chinese speak of the "century of humiliation" during which various European powers, Japan, and the U.S. forced the once great empire to surrender (or "lease") territory. Taiwan is the final significant "Chinese" territory which remains separated from the mainland. The PRC long lacked the ability to conquer the island, but the military balance is shifting strongly toward the mainland.

Beijing once assumed that the Taiwanese people would choose to come "home" to the growing colossus. However, the increasingly authoritarian superstate holds ever less appeal to residents of the small, vibrant capitalist democracy.

Last year 83 percent of the population said it viewed itself as Taiwanese; 78 percent of people said they would resist a Chinese invasion. Taiwan's people ranked trust in China at two on a scale of zero to 10. Younger Taiwanese were skeptical of even economic ties with the PRC. Beijing's crackdown in Hong Kong destroyed any illusions that any Taiwanese might once have had about "one country, two systems."

Which means the possibility of peaceful reunification has disappeared.

Relations between Taiwan and the mainland deteriorated after President Tsai Ing-wen's election in 2016, since her Democratic Progressive Party long has been inclined toward independence. The PRC refused to have any contact with her government and worked to deny Taiwan membership in and even recognition by international organizations, convince governments to switch diplomatic recognitions from Taipei to Beijing, and intensify military pressure on Taiwan.

What should Washington do?

Under "strategic ambiguity" no one is sure how this or any future administration would react to an attempt to coerce Taipei. The theory is that Taiwan can't take U.S. support as a given and therefore won't do anything reckless. And that China can't be sure that America wouldn't send in the cavalry and therefore won't take any chances.

Yet current uncertainty is more likely to run the other way. Taiwanese officials have told me that they expect American support even if their behavior, such as a declaration of independence, triggered Chinese action. And Beijing officials consistently express skepticism that Washington would act against its own interest, risking, as one Chinese general put it, Los Angeles for Taipei.

However, as PRC ambitions have expanded, military power has increased, and human rights have worsened, Washington opinion against China and for Taiwan has hardened. Elbridge Colby, a Trump DOD official, opined: "We just need China to understand that we would come to Taiwan's defense." Even reliably left-wing Barney Frank, a former Democratic congressman, recently wrote that the U.S. should "resolve now that we will commit our full military force to helping Taiwan repel a Chinese invasion."

Support for dropping ambiguity has correspondingly increased. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, along with David Sacks, also at the Council, last year argued that "The time has come for the United States to introduce a policy of strategic clarity: one that makes explicit that the United States would respond to any Chinese use of force against Taiwan." Author Francis P. Sempa contended that the U.S. should "make it unmistakably clear to China that we will defend Taiwan if China attacks." Even Adm. Davidson argued that strategic ambiguity "should be reconsidered."

This is not a debate for the faint-hearted. Beijing calls Taipei's status an internal affair, in which the U.S. plays no legitimate role. Top Chinese officials indicate that their willingness to wait to resolve the issue is diminishing. For the PRC, Taiwan's status is a likely casus belli.

Last year, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said that Beijing would "resolutely oppose and deter any separatist activities seeking Taiwan independence." More explicit were remarks by Li Zuocheng, Joint Staff Department chief and Central Military Commission member: "If the possibility for peaceful reunification is lost, the people's armed forces will, with the whole nation, including the people of Taiwan, take all necessary steps to resolutely smash any separatist plots or

actions.” Blunter still was Wu Qian, spokesman for China’s Defense Ministry, who recently allowed that “Taiwan independence means war.”

The common presumption of the usual suspects in Washington is that the U.S. need only express its resolve and the PRC will slink away, never to be heard from again. Consider the comments of former defense secretary and CIA director Leon Panetta: “We’re not going to allow China to invade Taiwan, and to undermine their independence” and “you cannot militarize these islands in the South China Sea, you cannot violate international laws with regards to freedom of the seas, we’re not going to allow you to do that.” Might the result be war? No, he explained: “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. They’ve got to get that signal that the United States is a player in the Pacific, that we are a power in the Pacific.”

These presumptions are common but dangerous, and not because the Chinese are dumb.

First, they reasonably believe the U.S. is bluffing. Look at a map. Geographically, Taiwan is to the U.S. like Cuba is to China. In Beijing’s view, Washington can’t seriously claim that Taiwan is an important security interest. Proximity alone suggests that who rules Taipei is more likely to be vital for China than America.

Second, however much some Americans feel for Taiwan, a great power just 100 miles away from the island cares even more. The U.S. foolishly engaged in endless Third World wars without catastrophic risk. America can’t do the same against nations with serious militaries, including nuclear weapons. Hence the Chinese jibe that the U.S. won’t risk nuclear war over Taiwan. No rational nation would.

Third, if war comes, the PRC has a good chance of winning. Not threatening or occupying America, which wouldn’t be at issue, but thwarting a U.S. attempt to prevent Chinese coercion or conquest of Taiwan, in whole or in part. The tyranny of distance favors deterrence over power projection. China can rely on mainland bases while America’s allies, despite blustery rhetoric today, would be reluctant to become instant targets and permanent enemies of the PRC by aiding U.S. forces.

In this case American strikes on the mainland would be inevitable, which would guarantee retaliation and escalation. Indeed, in 2005 Gen. Zhu Chenghu warned: “If the Americans draw their missiles and precision-guided ammunition on to the target zone on China’s territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons.”

Even defeat would probably build popular support in China to double down and prepare for the next attempt, when the U.S. likely would be more beleaguered economically, enfeebled by debt, and focused on its own problems. MIT’s Barry Posen noted: “The U.S. commitment to Taiwan is simultaneously the most perilous and least strategically necessary commitment that the United States has today.”

What could justify such a risk? Taiwan is a good friend but is not a serious security interest for America. Sen. Josh Hawley called the island “the lynchpin of a free and open Indo-Pacific,” yet the Chinese navy is active and aggressive even now. The Stimson Center’s James Loomis was even more extravagant in his claim: Taiwan is increasingly the “lynchpin” of Washington’s “overall strategy to contain China’s hegemonic ambitions.” That objective alone makes conflict

much more likely. The island might look like a great base in peacetime. However, in war there would be no more vulnerable target than land so close to China.

Although Taiwan's friendship might advance U.S. influence in East Asia, that doesn't make an island 7,600 miles from America worth war. In 2018, Rep. Michael McCaul said the Taiwanese "stand for freedom and democracy in the region." They do, but that's not a good reason for going to war anywhere, especially against a major power, which happens to possess nuclear weapons and has genuinely vital interests at stake.

Moreover, it will become ever more difficult for the U.S. to defend Taiwan. The U.S. is essentially bankrupt. The deficit already was running \$1 trillion annually before COVID-19 hit. The pandemic will ultimately add as much as \$16 trillion in debt, which already exceeds 100 percent of GDP. With the baby boomer generation continuing to retire, the latter number, according to the Congressional Budget Office, is likely to hit 200 percent by 2050.

These numbers do not even count the Biden administration's spending plans for everything from infrastructure to education, health care, and more. Are Americans prepared to spend tens or hundreds of billions of dollars annually—it costs far more to project military force than to deter its use, especially halfway around the world against a serious power—to effectively support just Taiwan?

Before the Biden administration commits the U.S. to war with China over Taipei, the American people should have a serious conversation about the issue. Loomis admitted: "Any sustained military action taken to defend Taiwan will require the domestic support of the American public." The promise might be more costly than anyone imagines. Just what is worth war, and how much?

Instead, Washington should be developing alternatives: e.g., providing Taipei with weapons to create its own deterrent, sufficiently robust to deny China the certainty that it would desire before attacking; bringing together Asian and European nations to warn of the grievous diplomatic and economic consequences of aggression against Taiwan; and looking for a peaceful *modus vivendi*, perhaps one that trades China dropping threats of military action in return for America's assurance not to forge a military relationship with Taipei and Taiwan's agreement to drop its campaign to achieve a larger, separate international existence.

U.S. officials hand out security commitments rather like hotels set chocolates on pillows, free for anyone who asks. But a promise to go to war is serious, especially when directed against a nuclear-armed adversary. Taiwan deserves to be independent. But a war with China is too high a price for Americans to pay.

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