

The American Conservative

No One Can Afford A Fight Over Taiwan

Washington's chief responsibility is to protect the American people, which means avoiding an unnecessary war with a nuclear power.

Doug Bandow

October 21st, 2021

Taiwan is a vibrant democracy with a free market economy and liberal culture. Only a couple generations ago the territory was a dictatorship facing a fearsome totalitarian regime barely 100 miles away, which claimed the island state as its own. What was known as the Republic of China survived against long odds. Today, however, Taiwan's future looks increasingly bleak.

Of late Beijing's preference was a negotiated surrender, based on the "one country, two systems" model. Alas, that option has disappeared. The Chinese Communist Party has transformed Hong Kong, the prime example of "two systems," from a free-wheeling, semi-autonomous polity into an authoritarian vassal in which free speech, political activism, and journalistic autonomy have disappeared and CCP apparatchiks rule. Such a system holds no attraction for Taiwan's population, especially younger Taiwanese who feel no connection to historic China, let alone today's increasingly totalitarian superstate.

So the People's Republic of China, which claims Taiwan as a wayward province, has stepped up pressure on the island's nearly 24 million people. Beijing's latest tactic has been staging regular incursions in Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone, which has caused much wailing and gnashing of teeth in Washington.

In fact, there is less to China's overflights than initially meets the eye. The ADIZ is a political artifact, not legal airspace, and the U.S. regularly flies through the PRC's ADIZ over the East China Sea which Washington views as excessive. Beijing's air activity represents an escalation, not a crisis.

In recent years China has increasingly pushed to restrict Taiwan's independent role. The PRC has pulled away some countries that once recognized Taipei's nationhood (down to 14 plus the Vatican) and sought to exclude Taiwan from international organizations or force Taiwan to operate under nominal Chinese authority (for instance, as "Chinese Taipei" in the Olympics). In keeping with its increasing totalitarian course at home, Beijing also has been using its economic

clout to punish foreign businesses and celebrities for simply acknowledging Taiwan's independent identity.

Such activities are obnoxious and may irritate, but ultimately are small ball. At least compared to the possibility of war, which is increasing.

Historically, Taiwan was Chinese. Japan seized the island as war booty in 1895. Taiwan was returned in 1945, only to become home of the ousted nationalist government after the CCP's victory in 1949. For decades the ROC as well as PRC claimed to rule all of China.

The Taiwanese eventually abandoned this hopeless pretense and focused on developing their own nation. In contrast, most mainland residents, not just apparatchiks, still see the island as Chinese. That was not an easy sell to Taipei even after Mao Zedong's death and Beijing's move from totalitarian to softer authoritarian rule. Over the last decade, however, Xi Jinping has reversed course, steadily crushing free action and thought beneath an ever more oppressive party and personal dictatorship—most dramatically in Hong Kong but throughout the entire mainland.

Having destroyed any reason for Taiwan to voluntarily accept absorption, he has left coercion as the only Chinese option. His pacific rhetoric of late belies the ugly reality. Earlier this month Xi called for “the reunification of the motherland by peaceful means.” Indeed, he pretended that there was Taiwanese support for absorption, observing: “Compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait should stand on the right side of history and join hands to achieve China's complete unification.” Unicorns are more plentiful than Taiwanese wishing to become the CCP's next victims. He is ratcheting up pressure now hoping to encourage a negotiated surrender. If the PRC's threats do not cow the island's residents, military force will be Beijing's last resort.

China has a range of options. An outright invasion would be most risky: 100 miles of water separates the mainland and island, and amphibious operations are among the most difficult military operations. Other possibilities include seizing small islands within sight of the Chinese coast, blockading Taiwanese ports, targeting important political, military, and other government sites with missiles, and attempting to isolate the island from outside traffic.

Despite rising concern in Washington, no crisis seems imminent. Xi's previous rhetoric suggested growing impatience to fully reverse the “century of humiliation,” during which other nations stripped a weakened Imperial China of its territories. Nevertheless, a failed attempt to force reunification could cost him his job. Argued the Quincy Institute's Michael Swaine: “Beijing is not about to launch an effort to seize Taiwan by force, although this possibility cannot be discounted over the longer term if present trends continue. But it is certainly applying greater levels of pressure on Taiwan, while improving its capacity to increase such pressure if needed, and also testing and straining Taiwan's defense capabilities.”

Although there is apparently no official timetable for Chinese military action, over time it will become more likely. Especially if the PRC finds its expected rise hampered by serious demographic, economic, and political weaknesses. The prospect of China growing old before it becomes rich might accelerate a final confrontation.

What should Washington do? Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen promised not to “bow to pressure.” The Taiwanese people, however, seem unwilling to take steps necessary to resist the PRC. Despite facing a national colossus with a rapidly expanding military next door, Taipei devotes barely two percent of its GDP to the military. The armed forces have trouble attracting personnel. And much of Taipei’s spending goes for high prestige weapons likely to prove of little practical value in resisting an invasion. The Taiwanese evidently expect Washington to take care of the problem—that is, go to war with Beijing.

Although Taiwan is an attractive liberal society, Americans should not fight for people unwilling to do so for themselves. More important, the island matters little for U.S. security. Consult a map: Taiwan is as close to China as Cuba is to America. The PRC does not pose a military threat to the U.S. with or without Taiwan. Beijing will not be sending an expeditionary force to conquer the Hawaiian Islands or California under any conceivable circumstances. Taipei’s status is irrelevant to America’s defense. Instead, Taiwan plays into a struggle over influence in East Asia, *more than 7,000 miles from America.*

Gaining control over Taiwan would aid Beijing in strengthening its control over nearby waters. Washington would prefer that not happen, but geopolitically such an interest is peripheral rather than vital and does not warrant war with a nuclear-armed power in its own neighborhood. America’s economic interests in Taiwan are real but also do not justify military confrontation with the PRC. Taiwan’s chip production is uniquely important, warranting supply and geographic diversification, not conflict.

Some Taiwan supporters resort to the ubiquitous kitchen sink argument used whenever a specific interest is not worth war—warning that U.S. credibility would suffer if Washington did not come to the island’s aid. America has neither a treaty commitment to Taipei nor a security reason to offer one. No great power can afford to go to war for every state that wishes someone else to defend it.

The only serious argument is also the most appealing one: the U.S. shouldn’t allow the increasingly repressive Xi regime to destroy a free society for no reason other than raw nationalism. That raw nationalism, however, mixed with understandable if inflated security paranoia (the potential for U.S. military ties to an island so close to the mainland) makes the situation uniquely dangerous, and should warn Washington away from making such a commitment.

First, the U.S. has no moral obligation to defend every good country in a bad neighborhood. There is a long list of nations (Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine, Georgia, Gulf States, South Korea, and more) and peoples (Kurds, Mideast Christians, Afghans, Hong Kongers, Burma’s ethnic minorities, and others) desiring American military protection. There is good reason to sympathize with all of them and arm some of them, but only very rarely to protect them. Simply citing Taiwan’s democratic system is no argument for America to go to war.

Second, anything short of overwhelming force is unlikely to deter Beijing from attempting to coerce Taiwan. Many Washington solons appear certain that the U.S. need merely threaten the PRC and Xi, along with his many CCP minions, will scurry back to Zhongnanhai in disgrace.

Beijing has spent years building a military with Taiwan in mind. Not just the leadership believes Taiwan is part of China. So do most Chinese, including the young. The issue matters far more to them than Americans, meaning Beijing will risk and spend much.

Third, any conflict would be far too costly to justify. To defend Taiwan the U.S. would have to project power, meaning deploy military forces, thousands of miles from home—imagine the PRC seeking to defend Cuba from American military action. China need only sink rather than match American carriers—with much cheaper missiles and submarines—and could rely on mainland bases. Yet American strikes on the latter would almost certainly trigger Chinese escalation. Support from Japan and South Korea would help Washington even the odds, but their willingness to make China a permanent enemy remains a long shot despite recent debate over the issue in Tokyo. War games suggest that Washington not only could but likely would lose. The PRC is a nuclear power in the process of increasing its arsenal: if the war went bad, it could go very bad.

Fourth, any American victory would likely be transitory. A conflict over Taipei's autonomy would be part of Beijing's larger struggle for international status and influence. Germans were unwilling to respect the verdict of World War I; the Chinese people would be no more likely to accept a U.S. attempt to limit their nation's rise, especially over a territory widely considered to be part of their nation. Like the infamous Versailles Treaty, such a settlement might be just a generational ceasefire while the warring parties rebuilt for the next round. The side most likely to fold in such a sustained struggle is not the PRC.

Fifth, Washington is in no financial position to invest so much in a single contingency. America's debt to GDP ratio is already over 100 percent and heading toward the record set by World War II. The Congressional Budget Office recently warned that current trends will push the debt to 200 percent by mid-century. Yet an aging population and related increases in social spending will make it difficult to cut America's expanding welfare state. Military outlays will necessarily be on the budget chopping block.

Thankfully, America's defense remains relatively simple and cheap. Isolated by oceans east and west, secured by pacific neighbors north and south, and protected by a strong nuclear deterrent, the U.S. has little to fear. Russia has exhibited no aggressive global ambitions and should be constrained by Europe, which overmatches Russia in economy and population. The Middle East matters much less to America than decades ago and Central Asia never was a vital battleground.

The biggest military drain on Washington will be Asia. A strapped federal government will have to decide whether it can devote a huge portion of military outlays to defending a distant island of little strategic value against a rising power motivated by burgeoning nationalism. If forced to choose between Taiwan and retirement security, how will America's aging population vote? Once aware of the true cost of any Taiwan commitment, even Americans who today say they favor defending the island might tomorrow think otherwise.

To forgo military action would not mean abandoning Taiwan. The U.S. should encourage private economic and cultural connections. A free trade agreement would be helpful. Supporting

Taipei's membership in other commercial pacts would also enhance the island's international visibility and support.

Washington should sell Taiwan weapons while recommending purchases likely to strengthen deterrence. At the same time, Washington should make clear that the Taiwanese must defend themselves rather than expect America to come to their rescue. They can and should ensure that the cost to China of military action would be high, higher than the CCP and Chinese would want to pay.

The U.S. also should bring together other democratic nations to address possible Chinese aggression. Beijing should face the threat of diplomatic isolation, ouster from international organizations, economic punishment, and social ostracism. Such a course obviously would be undesirable, but ignoring military aggression against such a free state would be worse.

Moreover, Washington should seek a regional modus vivendi kicking the potential conflict down the road—for instance, the U.S. pledging no military connections with Taiwan, Taipei reducing its effort to gain independent status in international organizations, and China withdrawing military forces directed at the island and making a public commitment to resolve the issue peacefully. The objective would be to lower the current temperature of the issue while easing longer-term pressure to force a final resolution.

Perhaps most important, U.S. policymakers should have a serious conversation with the American people. Members of the infamous Blob, overwhelmingly committed to defending Taiwan, are today arguing over whether the U.S. should replace its ambiguous commitment to the island with a clear one. But the rest of America should be invited into the conversation. The American people should be informed about what war with China would mean—not another Iraq or Afghanistan, but something much worse. Are they ready for a conflict more like Korea, or even World War I or II, with mass casualties? Where the news would be about bases bombed, planes downed, ships sunk, and, possibly, nuclear-tipped missiles hitting American cities?

There is much about the world that good people believe should be changed. Much of that cannot be done, at least not at reasonable risk and cost. So it is with the U.S. defending Taiwan against China. Washington's chief responsibility is to protect the American people. Which means avoiding an unnecessary war with a nuclear power over interests distant and other than vital. Not intervening against an attack on Taiwan would be awful. But doing so would be catastrophic.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.