



Taiwan Is a Country in All But Name: Still, That Doesn't Mean America Should Defend It

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Even the biggest, toughest, meanest movie characters go wobbly when facing the Great Panda. At least when Chinese nationalism demands they kowtow to its demands.

The latest Hollywood wimp who plays a real man on screen is John Cena. The former wrestler, when promoting his role in *Fast & Furious 9*, stated that Taiwan was a country. After realizing his "mistake," he immediately prostrated himself and groveled before what he hoped would be a massive Chinese audience for his movie: "I made a mistake, I must say right now. It's so so so so so so important, I love and respect Chinese people."

But not, obviously the Taiwanese people.

Alas, abasing himself did not appear to help the film, whose Chinese ticket sales plummeted – though some critics ascribed that to negative reviews rather than Cancel Culture, China-style. In any case, the cringe-worthy spectacle, however sensible from a profit-maximizing standpoint, left Cena's manhood on the floor. He will long suffer from snarky memes about needing a backbone transplant.

However, the controversy raises a larger issue. Does it matter for U.S. policy if Taiwan is a country? Does that designation determine whether Washington should defend Taipei from Chinese attempts at coercion, whether threats or actual invasion?

The issue has become more important as Chinese power has increased. Although many issues divide Washington and Beijing, none may be more important than the status of Taiwan. The People's Republic of China views the island once called Formosa as a province gone rogue. However, the people of what is formally named the Republic of China consider themselves to be a nation separate from the PRC.

From 1949, when Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party took control of the mainland, and 1979, when President Jimmy Carter officially recognized the PRC, Washington treated Taiwan, to which the defeated Chiang Kai-shek and many of his mainland supporters retreated,

as the legitimate government of all China. Since then every American administration has declared the PRC to be China's legitimate authority, while maintaining unofficial ties with an autonomous though not fully "independent" Taiwan.

For years Beijing's poverty was immense, exacerbated by Mao's lunatic policies, such as the Great Leap Forward and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Thus, Beijing long lacked the capability to assault or invest the island, even if the US navy had not been poised to intervene. In 1995 and 1996 the Chinese government conducted missile tests near Taiwan to demonstrate its displeasure at President Lee Teng-hui's reputed support for independence and threaten the electorate in the upcoming election. Washington responded by dispatching two carrier groups to safeguard the island; Taiwan's voters gave Lee a majority in a multi-candidate field. The PRC was humiliated.

Beijing vowed never again and since then China's GDP has jumped 18-fold, about six times after accounting for inflation. Much of the increased wealth in recent years went to the military. Moreover, the armed forces are actively preparing for a possible Taiwan contingency, which would be a difficult operation even for well-trained troops.

At the same time, Taiwan demonstrated little commitment to and even interest in its own defense. Last year, reported Grant Newsham of the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies cited: "successive Democratic Progressive Party and Kuomintang administrations' mystifying but steadfast refusal to properly fund defense – even though Taiwan is a wealthy nation and facing a serious threat from mainland China. Exact figures are elusive, but one estimate has it that during the 12 years from 2008 to 2020 defense spending increased only about 8% overall. Another assessment claims that between 1995 and now the increase is only 4% when adjusted for inflation."

Ironically, the Taiwanese people's commitment to their defense faltered while their identification – 83 percent last year – as Taiwanese rather than Chinese intensified. The number of people under 30 who stand with the PRC is minuscule. The vision of one country, two systems, always was a tough sell for Beijing. After such horrific mass atrocities as the Great Leap Forward, Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and Tiananmen Square massacre, who would trust the Chinese government, even one officially committed to reform? Over the last year the PRC's ruthless suppression of the Hong Kong democracy movement – simply criticizing the Beijing has become grounds for prosecution and imprisonment – destroyed any lingering attachment to the colossus next door.

Unfortunately, Taipei appears to expect America to save the island if necessary. Why take hard and expensive steps yourself if you can get the great superpower across the ocean to handle the problem?

Washington's position, since switching recognition from Taiwan to China, has been "strategic ambiguity." That is, refuse to take a clear position. Then both sides will be confused and won't do anything stupid. This is a dangerous gamble, since both sides instead might assume what they prefer, making confrontation and war more likely.

For instance, when asked about the administration's position, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki stated: "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." Which was clear only in saying nothing meaningful or useful, precisely as intended, about whether the US was prepared to act if the PRC attacked Taiwan.

With tensions rising in Asia, an increasing number of policymakers appear to be leaning toward removing uncertainty by making an explicit defense commitment. Richard Haass and David Sacks of the Council on Foreign Relations 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."

Many analysts appear to believe that merely making the threat would be sufficient to cow the PRC. Even Leon Panetta, chief of staff under Bill Clinton and defense secretary and CIA chief under Barack Obama, dismissed concern over war with Beijing: "I think frankly if China understands that we're serious about that, China's not going to do that."

Defense can't get much cheaper than these 17 words. Just speak and China's great power pretenders will scurry back into seclusion in their luxury quarters in Zhongnanhai, awaiting Washington's next imperial pronouncement. America wins again! And the world has been made safe for democracy!

Unfortunately, this dream might turn into a nightmare. Simply assuming away the risk of war would be reckless and potentially catastrophic.

The starting point is the question John Cena raised. Is Taiwan a country? Although recognized by only 14 mostly small nations, plus the Vatican, the Republic of China has existed on the island formerly known as Formosa for 72 years. The Taiwanese people have constructed a vibrant democracy atop a liberal political and economic order. The resulting system has all the attributes of a country – much more so than numerous microstates (e.g., Monaco, Andorra, the Vatican).

What Taiwan lacks is general recognition, since most countries accept PRC sovereignty claims. But there is nothing unusual in that. Kosovo seceded from Serbia and acts like a country. However, about half of existing governments refuse to recognize Kosovo's independence, and Russia uses its Security Council veto to block Pristina's entry into the United Nations. Only Ankara recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which rules over land detached by Turkey from the Republic of Cyprus almost four decades ago. A century and a half ago the Confederate States of America was defeated in war after creating what looked and acted like a nation, with an army, postal service, currency, and government.

So the question of whether the US should defend Taiwan is separate from whether Taipei counts as a country. The decision also is not determined by whether Taiwan *should* be independent. In general, no government responds well when some of its people attempt to secede, about the only way new nations are created today. The ultimate criterion for independence is not worthiness but

effectiveness, most importantly the ability maintain a separate identity, even if attacked militarily.

South Sudan did succeed. So did Eritrea. Biafra, which attempted to escape Nigeria, did not. Bangladesh broke off from Pakistan with India's aid. The Soviet Union lost the authority and ability to prevent its dissolution and didn't try. Yugoslavia attempted to suppress secession and failed. Czechoslovakia peacefully separated in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

The Taiwanese deserve to have their own state if they want it. However, Taipei cannot match China's military. Taiwan could impose a high cost for any invasion, a naturally perilous operation. Unfortunately, Beijing's leadership appears to be growing impatient and increasingly determined to complete China's recovery from the much-maligned Century of Humiliation. Xi Jinping and those around him appear ready to pay almost any price so long as victory is achievable. No doubt, the PRC would like to use the threat of force to convince Taipei to negotiate terms of surrender. However, it is widely believed that Beijing is prepared for war, if necessary.

So should Uncle Sam start shooting if China seeks to coerce Taiwan? No.

- **Turning the Monroe Doctrine inside-out ensures conflict.** Historically, America insisted that foreign powers stay out of the Western hemisphere. The US demanded a sphere of interest in which it would maintain military dominance. Almost from America's founding Washington confronted foreign nations which attempted to gain influence "over here": France, Spain, United Kingdom, Germany, the Soviet Union, and most recently China and Russia. Now the US effectively insists that Washington's sphere of interest runs up to every other nation's border, which inevitably clashes with the interests of other great (PRC and Russia) and regional (Iran, Pakistan, and India) powers. America telling Beijing that the former rules 100 miles off China's shore guarantees confrontation and likely conflict.
- **Taiwan is not a vital security interest for America.** It is important not to confuse moral status with strategic value. Taiwan is about as close to China as Cuba is to America. Imagine Beijing claiming that maintaining the independence of Cuba was essential to the PRC's defense. It is self-evident Taiwan is irrelevant to American peace and prosperity. When US analysts contend the island is important for America, they mean that a Taiwan hostile to China extends Washington's reach up to the PRC's border. However, convenient that might be for the US, it is not essential. In contrast, Taiwan is extremely important to China for the same reason.
- **The PRC has far more at stake in Taiwan's status than does America.** The differing intensity of interest guarantees that Beijing will spend and risk much more to assert its interest. And the Chinese population is more likely to support its government and accept potentially high losses. Explaining to Americans why the US was engaged in a high-intensity war with a major nuclear power over an island 7600 miles away which Washington does not even recognize as an independent state would prove daunting, especially in the aftermath of the sinking of an aircraft carrier, destruction of US bases on Okinawa, or worse.

- **China has several coercive options, some of which would be difficult to counteract so far from home.** The PRC could seize small, outlying islands, mount increasingly uncomfortable missile "tests," declare an air and sea blockade, and even launch missile strikes on Taiwan. If the US then intervened the latter would be seen in China as firing the first shot. Launching amphibious operations to retake islands located so close to the mainland could prove well-nigh suicidal. Confronting PRC attacks from the mainland would probably require retaliatory responses on the mainland, dangerously upping the ante.
- **It is easier to deter the use of power than to project power, especially over such a distance.** Beijing does not need to deploy 11 carrier groups, as does America. Beijing needs the ability to sink American carriers, which costs far less than building them. Hence China's emphasis on missiles and submarines. The Pentagon realizes the challenge in counteracting the PRC's Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategies. As the Chinese navy and air force grow in strength the cost of victory will continue to increase ever more disproportionately compared to the interests at stake.
- **The PRC would have the advantage of operating from the mainland.** Logistics would be far simpler for Beijing without thousands of miles of water to cross. Washington might expect to operate from bases in Japan and South Korea, but America's allies likely would go MIA. South Korea has refused to even criticize China's human rights practices. It is unlikely to turn itself into a permanent target of a vengeful neighbor with a long memory by joining a war over Taiwan. Tokyo's policy is slowly evolving in a more confrontational direction, but the Suga government was quick to dismiss speculation that it would offer military support in a conflict. Even if aid is promised, popular pressure might cause Washington's friends to stand aloof from hostilities.
- **Chinese use of the mainland in any war against Taiwan would make dangerous escalation likely.** The US would have little choice but to target threatening forces. However, Beijing could not ignore strikes on its homeland and would face popular pressure to escalate. Retaliatory attacks on Guam, the Commonwealth of Mariana Islands, and Hawaii, at least, would be possible. If either side appeared to be losing, it would be tempted to expand and intensify operations.
- **The assumption of US victory echoes past episodes of arrogance and ignorance which led to disaster.** The quick triumphs expected by both sides in the American Civil War and World War I; the supposed speedy conquests to be accomplished by European powers in the Boer War and Russo-Japanese War; the seemingly inevitable collapse of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union from French and German onslaughts; America's fabled cakewalk in Iraq and Saudi Arabia's equally easy march on Yemen. In fact, American forces have lost many a wargame involving Taiwan. They often respond by looking for innovative alternatives, but preserving the possibility of success will become increasingly expensive for Washington.
- **A US defeat is forever while a Chinese defeat is temporary.** If Beijing succeeds in subjugating Taiwan, Washington will not be back. It would be difficult enough to justify to the American public war to protect the independence of a friend. There would be no prospect of undertaking a massive arms buildup for a war of liberation against the PRC. However, though China's government might fall after a loss – at

least, XI Jinping or his successor likely would be "seeking new opportunities," as the saying goes – the Chinese public and ruling regime would not likely accept a loss. Almost certainly, rearmament would be intensified and another military round would be scheduled. The odds would be longer against America in a rematch and the Taiwanese people might decide the cost to them of another fight was not worth it.

Refusing to turn Taiwan into a security dependent does not mean doing nothing. Recognizing China's interests and seeking a peaceful accommodation is a better though admittedly imperfect strategy. The objective should be preserving the status quo, which appears to be an acceptable second best for everyone. Imagine if Washington continued to provide arms for Taiwan's defense and broadened economic relations but promised no military intervention in Taiwan or nearby waters. If Taipei dropped attempts to expand its international presence while China publicly rejected military options and withdrew some threatening missiles. And all sides sought to publicly dampen rhetoric and behavior.

At the same time, the US should seek to build an international consensus among leading Asian and European governments on the damage Beijing would suffer from taking military action against Taiwan. Inevitably, democratic nations would have to limit or sever investment and trade; apply tough economic sanctions; diplomatically isolate the PRC; and support China's neighbors militarily to help the latter deter similar threats. The result likely would be a cold war with great harm to the Chinese economy, yet prosperity has been the Chinese Communist Party's strongest asset with its people. The PRC could survive such a reversal of fortune, but few Chinese, including denizens of Zhongnanhai, would like to relive Maoist-era isolation.

Taiwan is an issue with no good answer. Nationalism is a powerful force: Americans jumped into the abyss of civil war, at a cost of some 750,000 dead, proportionally eight million today. France, Russia, Greece, China, Korea, Vietnam, and many other states have suffered through similarly brutal and bitter conflicts.

The same passions could push the PRC into a foolish and destructive attack on Taiwan. While America's sympathies should lie with Taiwan, a war in the Taiwan Straits would not be America's fight. There may, and likely will, be sometime in the future when Americans must risk their all in another great conflict. This would not be that moment.

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