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Cross-Strait crossroads: Pathways for America's Taiwan policy

Ryan Hass, Jude Blanchette, Kharis Templeman,
Jennifer Kavanaugh, Bonnie S. Glaser, David Sacks, and
Matthew Turpin

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Adapting US Taiwan policy for a new strategic reality

Recommendations from Brookings–RAND workshop series

Ryan Hass and Jude Blanchette

Washington, Taipei, and Beijing have been navigating tensions in the Taiwan Strait for three quarters of a century. It was June 1950 when President Harry Truman sent the U.S. Navy 7th Fleet to patrol the waters off Taiwan to deter an attack by Mao Zedong. This decision set in motion a strategic commitment that the United States is still managing today. In the decades since, the three parties have weathered military confrontations, a wrenching switch of formal ties from Taipei to Beijing, the flourishing of Taiwan's democracy, and the emergence of China as a global economic power and peer military competitor to the United States. These events severely challenged peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, but none proved fatal.

That history offers an important lesson: determined, adaptive statecraft by all three parties has prevented crises from becoming conflicts. Such efforts will be even more crucial in navigating intensifying pressures on the status quo in the years to come.

This is what motivated the Brookings Institution and the RAND Corporation's China Research Center to undertake a series of workshops with leading experts to explore pathways forward for managing cross-Strait tensions. The public debate over Taiwan has too often been narrow in its focus, heavy on military scenarios, and insufficiently attentive to the diplomatic, political, and economic dimensions of one of the world's most complex strategic challenges. Perhaps most importantly, it has struggled to look to the future. The workshops asked not only how the United States should manage today's cross-Strait tensions, but also what outcomes it is actually trying to achieve and whether current policy is capable of getting there.

Beginning in the fall of 2025, we convened a bipartisan group of leading scholars and practitioners who collectively served in the Clinton, Bush, Obama, first Trump, and Biden administrations for a sustained, structured examination of where American policy stands, where it is falling short, and where it should go. The goal was

to stress test prevailing assumptions, surface disagreements, and tackle inconvenient questions.

Project overview

This project commissioned five policy briefs. These policy briefs and the subsequent workshops around them interrogated three main questions. The first is whether the current cross-Strait status quo is durable. The second is whether it remains possible for the United States and other external actors to influence China's approach to Taiwan. A third question is whether Taiwan's sustained autonomy represents a vital or merely important U.S. strategic interest, and whether the answer has changed or will change as the military balance, technology competition, and other geopolitical and economic factors evolve. How each author resolved this third and threshold question proved at least as determinative of their recommendations as their assessment of conflict probability or Chinese influenceability.

Although there was uniformity across all five papers that China is unwavering in pursuing cross-Strait unification, there was a range of perspectives on the level of urgency Beijing assigns to this objective and the path it would be willing to take to achieve this goal. Several authors viewed Beijing's approach as a coercive and persistent effort to wear down Taiwan's will to resist Chinese designs for unification, whereas others argued that China is prepared and planning to use military force to seize Taiwan.

Broadly speaking, the more confidence the authors expressed about the durability of the cross-Strait status quo, the more they proposed adjustments to, but not a major overhaul of, America's approach to cross-Strait relations. The greater the risk of conflict they assigned to the current situation, the larger the shifts in American policy and strategy they recommended.

Four of the five authors described China's calculus on Taiwan as influenceable to varying degrees. The authors presented a range of recommendations for signaling America's resolve to sustain the status quo. These four papers coalesced around the need to sow doubt in the minds of China's leaders about the feasibility and advisability of trying to seize Taiwan through force. These four papers placed varying degrees of emphasis on the usefulness of reassuring Beijing that America remains open to any peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences as a supporting element of America's broader deterrence strategy.

Jennifer Kavanagh's paper departed from the other four in her judgment that U.S. interests in Taiwan are not sufficiently important to justify the growing costs and risks of deterrence and potential confrontation. Instead, Kavanagh recommended taking the potential of U.S. force off the table, enhancing Taiwan's capacity to defend itself, and redirecting U.S. force posture to fortify its other regional interests as the best way to deny Beijing its strategic aims.

All five authors were commissioned to write on various aspects of America's approach to cross-Strait issues. As such, their papers were in response to prompts and not a clean sheet appraisal of U.S. policy. Nevertheless, none of the authors advocated for maintaining devotion to the current U.S. policy. They all suggested modifications to America's approach to respond to China's expanding efforts to assert control over Taiwan. Similarly, in the broader expert workshops to interrogate each of these five papers, there was no constituency for adhering rigidly or narrowly to long-standing policy. There appeared to be broad acceptance that the cross-Strait strategic environment is changing and that American policy must adapt to these changes.

The main fault line among workshop participants, as in these five papers, was one of degree and direction. Some participants felt strongly that America's capacity to deter China is eroding and that America would be wise to retrench rather

than risk defeat in conflict, whereas the majority of participants advocated for adjustments in America's posture but not abandonment of the underlying principle of American strategy—insistence that cross-Strait differences be resolved peacefully and in a manner that is capable of enjoying support from people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Kharis Templeman explores why Taiwan matters to the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). He concludes that Taiwan is of strategic importance to the United States given its geography, its centrality to the global economy, its symbolism as a bellwether for the credibility of America's security commitments, and its shared values around democracy. For China, Taiwan represents a democratic spotlight that challenges the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) governing narrative. Taiwan's autonomy also stands in tension with the PRC's efforts to assert sovereignty over all its claimed territories. Even so, he concludes that Beijing can tolerate the status quo.

Templeman writes that the United States and China are in a game of coercive bargaining over Taiwan, whereby neither side wants to dilute its bargaining position. To protect its interests, Templeman advises that the United States should oppose unilateral changes to the cross-Strait status quo by either side, reassure Beijing that it will not oppose peaceful unification, deepen economic and security interests with partners in the Asia-Pacific region, and visibly demonstrate to the Taiwan people that their fate matters for the United States. Templeman's analysis of Taiwan's domestic politics implies that the most immediate near-term threat to cross-Strait stability may be political rather than military. Taiwan's fragmented legislature, the Kuomintang's active opposition to President Lai Ching-te's defense special budget, and a measurable shift in sentiment among the under-30 cohort toward less pro-independence views suggest that China's most achievable path to its objectives runs through Taiwan's domestic politics rather than across the Taiwan Strait in amphibious

assault vehicles. Taiwan's 2026 local elections and the 2028 presidential election are thus consequential near-term inflection points.

Jennifer Kavanagh presents a case for overhauling the United States' Taiwan policy. She argues that America's level of strategic interests in Taiwan does not justify direct military intervention in a conflict with China over Taiwan. Rather than risk being pulled into a conflict over Taiwan, Kavanagh argues the United States should instead signal privately to Taiwan that it is turning over responsibility for Taiwan's defense directly to Taipei by 2030 and that Washington will facilitate arms sales to Taiwan during that period. She argues that with proper investments in asymmetric capabilities and updates to Taiwan's defense doctrine, Taiwan could credibly protect itself against threats from the PRC. She suggests Washington could use the pullback of its support for Taiwan's defense to pursue a grand bargain with Beijing, whereby Beijing commits to engage in cross-Strait dialogue and reduce its military pressure against Taiwan. She believes this shift in American posture would lower the risk of conflict, free up American military capabilities, and support a reduction in American defense spending.

Bonnie Glaser examines the role of diplomacy in U.S. management of cross-Strait relations. She urges America's leaders to take more initiative in building public support at home and awareness of Taiwan's importance to American interests. She sees a more active role for U.S. diplomacy in underscoring to Chinese leaders that U.S.-China relations would be irreparably damaged if China ever uses force against Taiwan. She encourages U.S. diplomats to grow more active in countering "America skepticism" in Taiwan. She believes America should encourage cross-Strait dialogue while also opposing any external interference in Taiwan's electoral processes.

Glaser departs most meaningfully from existing American policy by encouraging the United States to organize a coalition of countries to actively discourage Beijing from using force and

instead encourage a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences. She sees an ancillary benefit of such a coalition in helping its members build insulation against Chinese economic coercion. The more that a coalition forms that is willing to counterbalance Chinese economic pressure on countries that engage constructively with Taiwan, the less impact Chinese threats would have in deterring countries from pursuing their interests with Taiwan.

David Sacks develops recommendations for countering China's gray zone coercion of Taiwan. He views China's creeping expansion of actions below the threshold of conflict, or gray zone activities, as an attempt by Beijing to set the conditions for war. He warns that gray zone activities already are sapping confidence in Taiwan about its ability to control its future. To counter these actions, he urges Washington and Taipei to coordinate efforts to raise the costs to Beijing of continuing down this path. He encourages Washington to signal to Beijing that the more PRC leaders mount gray zone pressure on Taiwan, the more the United States will do to offset it. He suggests the United States could do so by increasing security assistance for Taiwan, making shifts to the U.S. regional defense posture, adjusting America's approach to the U.S.-China relationship, and increasing security support to other South China Sea claimants as a cost-imposition measure. Central to Sacks' argument is a challenge to the premise that countering gray zone activities is in tension with a "strategy of denial." His "linked escalation" framework treats well-designed responses to Chinese gray zone coercion as instruments of a denial strategy rather than distractions from it.

Sacks suggests that linking changes to America's security posture toward Taiwan and other countries with territorial disputes with China presents one way to horizontally raise costs to China for continuing to exert gray zone pressure against Taiwan.

Matt Turpin makes the case for greater clarity and less ambiguity about America's security posture toward maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. He observes that America's declaratory policies on Taiwan were designed for a different era. America's "One China" policy and its posture of strategic ambiguity were compromises intended in part to secure China's commitment to peaceful means in pursuit of unification. He contends that China has invalidated this approach through its massive military buildup and increasingly aggressive actions toward Taiwan. In light of this, Turpin calls for the United States to conduct a "clean sheet" review to update America's policies to uphold its strategic interests in Asia: maintaining access to a free, open, and stable region; and preventing any rival from dominating the region at America's expense.

Turpin argues that deterring China requires the United States to clearly demonstrate it possesses both the capabilities and the political will to prevent China from seizing Taiwan. A clearer articulation of American determination would be stabilizing, Turpin suggests, by shrinking the risk of miscalculation. The goal would be to convince Beijing that it cannot secure its objectives by force and that it must abandon coercion in favor of negotiation with Taiwan's leaders to resolve cross-Strait differences.

Key takeaways

A stand-back review of the five policy briefs and the closed-door workshops used to interrogate them reveals several key takeaways:

- There was broad agreement among the expert community that the strategic equilibrium in the Taiwan Strait is shifting as China gains greater capabilities to influence the environment around and within Taiwan. But there was a range of views on the sharpness and urgency of the threat Taiwan faces.

- None of the participants advocated for keeping U.S. policy on autopilot. The main areas of contestation are over how much to adjust American policy and how much to rely upon military tools for deterring conflict and preserving American interests.
- Disagreements among Taiwan experts are narrower than they initially appear. A small group, often aligned with retrenchment, argues that the United States should step back from defending Taiwan and pursue a broader accommodation with China. The more consequential divide, however, lies within the mainstream camp. Advocates of strategic clarity and defenders of strategic ambiguity disagree because they hold different empirical assumptions about how Beijing interprets U.S. commitments and signals. Until there is stronger evidence about how China responds to these signals, the debate will remain unresolved.
- One area of expert consensus that deserves higher policy priority than it currently receives is China's legal and normative campaign against Taiwan's international standing. Beijing is systematically pressing governments to treat U.N. General Assembly Resolution 2758 (which transferred the "China seat" in the United Nations from the Republic of China to the PRC in 1971) as having also resolved the question of Taiwan's sovereignty, a claim the resolution's text does not support. Simultaneously, Beijing has pressured governments in Europe and across the Global South to adopt its "One China" principle rather than the U.S. "One China" policy." Beijing is in effect framing support for the cross-Strait status quo as tantamount to support for Taiwan independence. This campaign is active, well-resourced, and has achieved measurable results in multilateral institutions, European capitals, as well as in capitals in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. It is also an area where coordinated U.S. and allied pushback is both feasible and strategically important. The workshop identified a stronger consensus for American action in countering China's legal

and normative campaign than on the military deterrence questions that tend to dominate the policy debate.

- One dimension that the workshop treated as a background assumption rather than an analytical focus was that of a nuclear escalation risk. Any Taiwan conflict involving direct U.S.-China military engagement carries a non-trivial risk of escalation beyond conventional warfare, and China's ongoing nuclear buildup is already affecting the credibility of U.S. deterrence commitments in ways the papers do not fully reckon with.
- In discussions of "retrenchment," important objections were raised about the challenge of drawing new, credible lines of defense. If the core argument that Taiwan is not a sufficiently vital U.S. interest to justify the costs and risks of potential conflict with a nuclear-armed China is accepted, one could imagine this logic expanding to encompass U.S. commitments across the first island chain. Future discussions premised on this logic should be explicit about where, precisely, America should draw its defensive line in Asia and what theory of deterrence sustains it at that new position.

Conclusion

The purpose of American strategy on Taiwan is not to engineer a specific outcome to long-standing cross-Strait disputes, or to keep Taiwan permanently within an American security perimeter. It is to protect America's long-standing interest in preventing conflict and keeping a path open for leaders on both sides of the Strait to resolve their differences peacefully and in a manner that is acceptable to the people of Taiwan and China, however long it may take for them to arrive at such a destination.

One dynamic the workshop identified, but that policy discussions often underweight, is the relationship between U.S. credibility and Taiwan's willingness to defend itself. Polling consistently

shows that Taiwan's public support for increased defense spending, extended conscription, and armed resistance is contingent on the belief that the United States would intervene on Taiwan's behalf. This creates a feedback risk: erosion of U.S. credibility in Taiwan reduces Taiwan's investment in its own defense, which reduces the deterrent value of Taiwan's defenses, which in turn further erodes U.S. credibility. Managing this dynamic, and preventing a spiral of mutual pessimism, is as important a near-term policy task as any of the force posture or declaratory policy questions the papers address.

The task for the current moment is to buy time, but with clarity about what that time is for and what it requires. In the near term, it requires Taiwan to redirect defense investment toward asymmetric, survivable capabilities (drones, anti-ship missiles, naval mines, air defense stockpiles) rather than the high-visibility platforms that respond to gray zone pressure but are of diminished utility in defending against a direct assault by China. It requires sustained investment in the alliance architecture that makes U.S. deterrence credible and helps distribute the burdens of peace in the region across a larger number of allies and partners. And it requires active, well-resourced diplomacy to counter Beijing's normative and legal campaign against Taiwan's international standing before that campaign further constrains the options available to future leaders.

None of this is costless or guaranteed to succeed. But the workshop's participants broadly agreed that the failure mode to be most actively avoided is unmanaged retrenchment, with a gradual withdrawal of U.S. commitment without the compensating investments that could make Taiwan genuinely defensible and the regional order genuinely resilient. America will place itself in a stronger position by relying on statecraft backed by credible military capacity. This approach would strengthen America's ability to preserve a path to resolving cross-Strait disputes by signaling its support for negotiations and making clear that China would pay a high price for any attempts to seize Taiwan by force.

American military power is necessary to underpin and give credibility to statecraft, but it is not a substitute for it. As the past 75-plus years have shown, there is no increment of military power available to the United States that would cause the People's Republic of China to abandon its ambitions to secure control of Taiwan. Given China's considerable nuclear arsenal and array of space, cyber, and conventional military capabilities, Beijing will not be compelled to abandon its designs for Taiwan so long as the PRC remains controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Realizing sovereignty over Taiwan is bound up in the CCP's founding narrative for maintaining a monopoly of power over the PRC.

Unfortunately, the current regime in Beijing does not appear capable of the creativity needed to bridge generational differences between Beijing and Taipei. The reality, therefore, is that resolving cross-Strait differences in the near-term may well be impossible. But, if peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait can be engineered through a combination of deterrence and diplomacy, future leaders in Beijing and Taipei may well build reservoirs of new thinking about how to narrow differences and build a more permanent architecture of coexistence.

The role for the United States, and its allies and partners, is vital. America must remain militarily strong, economically invested, and diplomatically active in the region. It must offer strategic and supportive counsel to Taipei, including on the importance of avoiding actions that would unnecessarily enflame tensions. It will also demand that the United States deploy its highest-end capabilities to the Pacific theater to raise the cost and risk to Beijing of any attempts to seize Taiwan by force. Over the longer term, it will require active and energetic American diplomacy with rising leaders in the PRC and Taiwan to stimulate new thinking about the future.

The next chapter of cross-Strait relations will be shaped by whether Washington, Taipei, and like-minded partners can resist the temptation to accommodate Beijing's expanding demands

in the name of stability, and the temptation to treat military deterrence as a substitute for the diplomatic and economic statecraft that gives deterrence its political foundations. The five papers gathered here do not offer a consensus blueprint, but they do propose a clear map of where the expert community agrees, where it genuinely disagrees, and where the conventional debate has not yet asked the right questions. This project does not represent the end of the debate on America's approach to cross-Strait issues. Hopefully, though, it has helped focus and sharpen awareness of critical questions that will demand further interrogation going forward.

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Thinking through America's baseline priorities on Taiwan

Kharis Templeman

Taiwan's future lies at the heart of the U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry. Much of the debate in Washington over how—or even whether—to counter Beijing's aggression against Taiwan is rooted in implicit and often poorly specified assumptions about why Taiwan matters to both countries. For the United States, the rationales for supporting Taiwan have shifted over the decades, from its strategic location to its symbolic value, economic importance, and democratic political system—but all these interests remain relevant today. For the Chinese Communist Party, by contrast, the “Taiwan question” has always been primarily about sovereignty and regime legitimacy, and its chief priority is to compel acquiescence to Beijing's right to rule over the island and its people. And in Taiwan, while there is no evidence of rising support for unification, neither is there a groundswell of support for de jure independence if it triggers a war.

Thus, there remains space to preserve peace across the Taiwan Strait. Neither the United States nor the PRC is willing to go to war with the other to change the cross-Strait status quo. Instead, as they have been for decades, Washington and Beijing remain engaged in a long-term contest of coercive bargaining over Taiwan's status. The intentions, capabilities, and bottom lines of both sides are inherently ambiguous, and both are trying to shape their adversary's perceptions to their own advantage. To make the American commitment to preserving the peace more credible, U.S. strategy should seek to clarify the vital American interests at stake in Taiwan to the American people, to Beijing, to partners and allies, and to the Taiwanese people themselves.

Why Taiwan matters to the United States

Since 1950, the United States has been Taiwan's main security provider. Over the last 75 years, successive U.S. administrations have justified this support with at least one of four rationales: geography, symbolism, economic interests, and political interests. Although the weight given to these factors has shifted over time, all remain relevant concerns to the United States today.¹

GEOGRAPHY

First, Taiwan matters because of its strategic geography.² It lies in the first island chain directly south of Japan and north of the Philippines. Both countries are long-standing U.S. defense treaty allies, which have territorial disputes with Beijing—Japan over the Senkaku Islands, the Philippines over the South China Sea—that have become increasingly acrimonious in the Xi Jinping era. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) control over Taiwan would weaken both states' defense postures and could force a fundamental restructuring of the U.S.-led security order to counter Beijing's revanchism. Taiwan also straddles sea lanes through which about \$2.5 trillion in trade—one-fifth of global trade—passes through. That number includes nearly a third of Japan's trade and over a quarter of South Korea's, as well as most of their energy supplies, creating a potential chokepoint for these important U.S. economic partners—and for the United States.³

Given Taiwan's strategic location, Washington has had a long-standing goal dating back to the Truman administration of preventing any force hostile to U.S. interests from occupying the island. This concern faded somewhat after 1979, as the United States switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC, and later as the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended. But it has

reemerged in recent years as a point of emphasis for some observers, who argue that PRC control over Taiwan could tip the regional power balance decisively in Beijing's favor.⁴ For instance, Taiwan absorbs much of the strategic planning and modernization efforts of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and if the PRC were unconstrained by the need to deter Taiwan independence, it might be more aggressive in asserting territorial claims in other parts of the region. It could also more easily expand its power projection capabilities to become a global, rather than simply a regional, military rival. Even if Beijing continued to limit most of its military activities to the Western Pacific, PLA forces operating out of Taiwan—and especially the use of Taiwan's east coast ports by the PLA Navy submarine fleet—could have dire implications for the U.S. Navy's ability to operate and sail in the waters of the region.⁵

SYMBOLISM

Second, Taiwan matters because of its symbolic value as both an alternative economic and political model to the PRC and a signal of U.S. credibility. Ever since the United States intervened in June 1950 to prevent a PLA invasion, Taiwan has been a chief beneficiary of the U.S.-led regional order. The United States provided Taiwan with significant aid and preferential access to U.S. markets. As a result, Taiwan's economy grew rapidly, and the island was gradually transformed from a poor, insecure, authoritarian regime into a rich, resilient, liberal democracy that today is a high-tech economic powerhouse.

Taiwan has also become an important symbol of the U.S. commitment to maintain regional peace and stability despite China's rise. After the switch in diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, it became U.S. policy to attempt to integrate the PRC into the regional order as well. But that policy proceeded without abandoning Taiwan, and the United States continued to oppose a military resolution of Taiwan's disputed status, as the Taiwan Relations Act and subsequent U.S. policy make clear. In the face of the PRC's growing comprehensive power and coer-

cive activities, Washington's continued support for Taiwan stands as a costly signal of American resolve to uphold the regional order.

ECONOMIC INTERESTS

Third, Taiwan's economy is now vital to the United States. Taiwan in 2024 was the seventh-largest U.S. trading partner, with about \$185 billion in bilateral trade.⁶ Taiwanese companies are dominant players in the global semiconductor industry, and today over 90% of the leading-edge chips used to power everything from iPhones to automobiles are manufactured by Taiwanese firms in Taiwanese factories. This list includes not only the globally strategic TSMC, but also a whole ecosystem of firms with specialized expertise in design, testing, and packaging, and involvement in fabricating memory, logic, application-specific integrated circuits, systems on a chip, and analog and mixed signal chips.

For all the effort Washington has made to mitigate this strategic vulnerability—subsidizing chip production, diversifying supply chains, and cajoling companies to build factories in the United States—the changes that have resulted have been only at the margins. American companies still rely heavily on Taiwan-made chips, and this dependence has only increased in recent years with rapid advancements in artificial intelligence; in December 2025, the value of Taiwan's total exports to the United States surpassed those of the PRC for the first time in many years, driven mostly by surging demand for semiconductors.⁷ As a consequence, access to Taiwan's tech products is now a central element of U.S.-China tech competition.

The potential economic costs of a military conflict over Taiwan are enormous. Taiwan's dense tech ecosystem would probably not survive military action, and the impact on the United States of this destruction has been conservatively estimated at \$2 trillion.⁸ Conversely, if the PRC were able to assert control over these world-leading industries without significant economic disruption, Beijing would acquire a massive new choke-

point to exploit in its economic competition with the rest of the world. The PRC's willingness to use its dominance in rare earths to exert leverage over trading partners offers an ominous preview of what this world would be like.⁹

POLITICAL INTERESTS

Fourth, Taiwan's democracy still matters. The U.S. interest in Taiwan's political development has never been solely about Taiwan itself, but also about presenting an attractive alternative to the path the PRC has taken over the last 75 years. Taiwan today is a liberal democracy in a part of the world where that is rare, and it is also a Chinese-speaking democracy that offers a stark contrast with the Marxist-Leninist party-state system across the Strait. A prosperous, democratic Taiwan stands as a powerful counterpoint to claims that the Chinese Communist Party must have a monopoly on power to prevent political chaos and economic calamity.¹⁰ Taiwan's people have never been subject to PRC control, and they remain far richer on a per-capita basis, with a far lower level of inequality, than their mainland Chinese counterparts.

Taiwan is also better governed. Its democratic system managed to contain the spread of COVID-19 and enjoy a long period of zero domestic transmission of the virus without the draconian lockdowns and pervasive repression employed by Beijing.¹¹ The Taiwanese state imposes a far lower tax burden on its citizens and provides much more comprehensive social services in return than does the PRC.¹² The destruction of Taiwan's democracy would snuff out the possibility that advocates for political reform on mainland China could take inspiration from Taiwan, as Hong Kongers did prior to 2020.¹³ And it would almost certainly accelerate the decline of democracy in the region and beyond.¹⁴

Why Taiwan matters to the Chinese Communist Party

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the “Taiwan problem” is primarily about sovereignty. The CCP justifies its monopoly on power by asserting that it is redressing China’s historical weakness and returning its borders to those of the Qing empire at its greatest extent, which included Taiwan—what it calls “restoring territorial integrity.” The party’s legitimacy also rests on the idea that the PRC replaced the Republic of China (ROC) regime as China’s sole representative in the international system. For decades, the CCP’s chief objective toward Taiwan has been to compel international acceptance of the PRC’s claim to exclusive sovereignty over the island and its people.

However, Taiwan’s current de facto autonomy is not itself a cause for war for the CCP. The party has survived in power in mainland China for 75 years without exercising control over Taiwan, and it has prospered for the last 45 years in part because it did not exercise control.¹⁵ In 1979, CCP leaders chose to tolerate Taiwan’s continued autonomy (and accept an implicit U.S. security backstop) in order to establish diplomatic relations with the United States. That decision produced massive benefits for the regime by opening the door to the PRC’s participation in the global economy. As long as those benefits continue to flow—as they did in 2025, for instance, through a \$1.2 trillion trade surplus with the rest of the world—and as long as the United States can credibly threaten to limit those benefits if Taiwan is attacked, then the CCP has a compelling reason not to seek unification through military force.

Instead, what is a cause for war is formal independence for Taiwan—that is, a de jure declaration that Taiwan is not “part of China,” and wide recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state in the

international system. The CCP has spent several decades insisting to both domestic and foreign audiences that unification is inevitable and that the “Taiwan question ... is at the core of China’s core interests.”¹⁶ Anything that definitively ends the possibility of unification is a threat to the regime’s survival, and under the last four leaders, going back to Deng Xiaoping, the CCP has gone to great lengths to signal its resolve to prevent independence.¹⁷

Finally, under Xi Jinping, there is more continuity with his predecessors than is commonly appreciated in the United States. Beijing’s approach has continued to follow the dual-track strategy put in place under Hu Jintao in 2005: “soft” economic inducements and selective engagement with China-friendly forces on the island, paired with “hard” threats to deter moves toward independence and maintain Taiwan’s diplomatic isolation. Xi has modified Taiwan policy only on the margins, as a reaction to the shifting U.S.-China power balance and trends in Taiwan domestic politics and public opinion.¹⁸ The claim that Xi has “shown an impatient determination to resolve Taiwan’s status in a way that his predecessors never did,”¹⁹ and that he has moved PRC policy from deterring Taiwan independence to compelling unification,²⁰ are not well substantiated.²¹

Chinese analysts still describe Beijing’s Taiwan policy as having two parts: “opposing Taiwan independence” (fandui taidu) and “promoting peaceful unification” (tuijin heping tongyi) rather than “compelling” it (poshi tongyi).²² And the increase in PLA military activity near Taiwan began not with Xi’s rise to general party secretary in 2012, but instead followed the inauguration of the Democratic Progressive Party’s Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. It is Beijing’s perceptions of shifts in domestic politics in Taiwan and U.S. policy, rather than Xi’s personal timeline or perceptions of a closing “window of opportunity,” that are the primary drivers of its actions toward the island.²³

HOW TAIWAN'S DEMOCRACY MATTERS

Ever since Taiwan completed its transition to democracy in 1996, public opinion there has also mattered for the trilateral relationship. Taiwan's leaders are accountable to their own citizens; no elected official can stray too far from mainstream opinion without risking an electoral backlash, and both Beijing and Washington have limited influence over what Taiwanese think. As the Kuomintang strategist Su Chi has put it, democratization has produced a "tail that wags two dogs."²⁴

The basic patterns from public opinion in Taiwan are clear. First, there is almost no support for joining the PRC under "one country, two systems"—the formula that Beijing has offered for "peaceful unification." There is slightly higher (5%-10%) support for unification with "China" at some point in the future, and there is a significant minority (20%-30%) that supports independence now or at some point in the future.²⁵ The more interesting questions are the conditional ones. About 70% of Taiwanese would support independence if it did not result in a war with the PRC. But about 40% would also support unification if the PRC's political and economic system looked more like Taiwan's—that is, if living standards were similar, and if it were a democracy.²⁶ Finally, Taiwanese "will to fight," whether measured as support for increased defense spending, lengthening conscription, contributing to civilian resilience, or enlisting and taking up arms, depends crucially on the belief that the United States would come to Taiwan's assistance. Those who are confident that the United States would respond to the use of force are far more willing to support costly measures to strengthen Taiwan's defenses than those who are not.²⁷

The patterns in Taiwan's party politics are less clear, and Beijing can still find reasons for optimism there. For the last decade, there has been a consensus among outside observers that the China-friendly Kuomintang (KMT) is in long-term (perhaps terminal) decline, and

the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is the new natural ruling party. Moreover, there is an expectation that each subsequent generation is more likely to identify as exclusively Taiwanese (as opposed to Chinese) and to support independence. However, these trends are no longer so obvious.²⁸ Although the ruling DPP won its third consecutive presidential election in 2024, Lai Ching-te only obtained 40% of the vote, and the party lost its majority in the legislature. The KMT's support rate has recovered from its 2020 nadir, and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), which emerged as a centrist "third force" in 2020, has surprised many observers by cooperating closely with the KMT to check the DPP government. Most startling are recent trends in public opinion among the youngest adults, who appear to be less supportive of the DPP and less supportive of independence, and who hold more positive impressions of mainland China than older cohorts.²⁹

To sum up the current picture: the DPP is not dominant, the KMT is not dead, the TPP's future is uncertain, and a majority of voters under 30 are disillusioned with the DPP and open to alternatives. The electorate's long-standing pragmatism will remain a significant check on elected leaders from all parties. While there is no evidence of rising support for unification, neither is there a groundswell of support for de jure independence if it triggers a war. Combined with the shifting power balance across the Strait, Beijing still has reasons to believe that long-term trends favor its interests.

What should the United States seek to do, and not to do, in its Taiwan policy?

I have argued that the United States has a vital interest in preserving Taiwan's de facto autonomy. Likewise, the PRC has a vital interest

in limiting that autonomy. The CCP leadership—and Xi personally—can live with a Taiwan that is not moving toward de jure independence, as long as the path to eventual unification is not irrevocably blocked. To put the point bluntly: neither the United States nor the PRC is willing to go to war with the other to change the cross-Strait status quo. The United States and China are not “destined for war,” and conflict over Taiwan is not inevitable. There is space to preserve peace across the Taiwan Strait.

However, both sides are also in a long-term game of coercive bargaining over Taiwan. In coercive diplomacy, it is rational for both sides to be ambiguous about their intentions, their capabilities, and their bottom lines. If the United States were to clarify its position toward Taiwan—either to explicitly pledge to defend it, or to completely forswear military support—it would undermine the U.S. bargaining position. Providing a formal guarantee to defend Taiwan would be interpreted in Beijing as permanently closing off any path to unification and would likely trigger the reaction it is intended to prevent. And declaring unequivocally that the United States will not fight China over Taiwan would lead to fatalism and collapse of morale in Taiwan, and to sharply rising pressure from Beijing to negotiate a political takeover. Likewise, if Beijing were to halt its military modernization and swear off the use of force, it would undermine its own bargaining position, opening the way for Taiwan to pursue independence with implicit U.S. backing. Thus, although it makes many observers uncomfortable, some ambiguity is inherent in both Washington’s and Beijing’s Taiwan policies.³⁰

Furthermore, in coercive bargaining, much of the contest is about shaping an adversary’s perceptions. To this end, Beijing is trying to influence beliefs in Washington about its Taiwan strategy, just as Washington is trying to influence beliefs in Beijing. The CCP has incentives to overstate the importance and urgency of “national unification,” its capabilities, its resolve, and the costs it is willing to bear to achieve control over Taiwan. Washington needs to recognize that it is a target

of a long-term effort to erode support in the United States for defending Taiwan. This is how Beijing wins without fighting.

The keys to preserving peace across the Taiwan Strait, then, depend on strengthening U.S. credibility on at least four dimensions. First, the U.S. interest in preventing unilateral changes to the cross-Strait relationship must remain convincing, not only to observers in the PRC, but also to American leaders and to the American people. The robust economic ties between Taiwan and the United States, especially but not only in the strategically important semiconductor industry, are one way in which this interest is made clearer to all.

Second, Beijing needs to be reassured that the United States will not oppose unification if the process is peaceful and voluntary. This reassurance does not require the United States to accept Beijing’s claims about Taiwan as Chinese territory, but it does require reinforcing, through both words and deeds, that moves toward Taiwan independence do not align with U.S. interests. High-profile but purely symbolic acts of support, such as visits by high-level U.S. officials, acts of Congress supporting Taiwan independence, and enhanced “transit stops” by Taiwan leaders, undermine U.S. credibility on this dimension. Military training, arms sales, and other forms of security cooperation, by contrast, reinforce the message that cross-Strait changes must be peaceful and that the United States will not allow Taiwan to be coerced into negotiations. It is also long-standing U.S. policy to link these efforts to the cross-Strait security environment; if, in the future, Beijing is willing to engage with the Taiwan government and reduce its own coercive activities, this link should be made explicit by a commensurate reduction in U.S. military activities in the region.

Third, partners and allies need to be reassured that the United States will continue to work together to advance shared economic and security interests. With partners and allies, the defense of Taiwan is a manageable problem;

without them, it becomes impossible. A U.S. partner that is more unpredictable and unreliable is one that encourages other regional powers to consider concessions toward China, especially on the Taiwan issue. More burden-sharing to address the China challenge is good; more hedging from formerly “rock solid” allies is bad. Washington and Taipei are fortunate that leaders in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia have all signaled an increasing willingness to risk Beijing’s wrath in support of collective defense.

And finally, Taiwan’s leaders and the Taiwanese people need to be reassured that Taiwan’s fate is still important to the United States. Rhetoric that frames Taiwan as a free-rider on the U.S. security umbrella or as a bargaining chip to be used in U.S.-China relations undermines U.S. credibility in Taiwan and contributes to fatalism there. Conversely, deepening people-to-people ties, educational exchanges, trade and investment, and high-tech cooperation strengthen confidence in Taiwan, contribute to its economic and social vitality, and position it to survive and thrive in the long term.

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A strategy for staying out: Recalibrating US support to Taiwan

Jennifer Kavanagh

When the United States crafted its current policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan, it left open the possibility of directly defending the island—but did not guarantee it. At the time, in 1979, the cost of any U.S. commitment to Taiwan was low. U.S. military dominance in the Taiwan Strait was largely assured, and the U.S. ability to deter and defeat any coercive threat to Taiwan at a sustainable price seemed nearly certain.¹

These conditions no longer hold. China's massive military buildup has shifted the cross-Strait military balance in Beijing's favor, dramatically raising the costs and risks of a U.S. intervention to defend Taiwan. A war over Taiwan today would be expensive and deadly and would carry the potential for nuclear escalation, even if the United States prevailed.

Since Taiwan is not a vital U.S. interest, maintaining the current level of commitment creates economic and military liabilities for the United States that exceed the strategic benefits. The United States should therefore replace strategic ambiguity with an explicit policy of nonintervention, while restructuring its regional posture and engagement to protect core American interests.

This paper develops this argument and outlines an alternative U.S. approach to Taiwan. It proceeds in three sections. The first explains why the current U.S. approach to Taiwan has become increasingly costly and risky. The second outlines why defending Taiwan is not necessary to protect core U.S. interests. The third lays out a nonintervention approach to Taiwan and the process for implementing the policy change.

America's unsustainable commitment to Taiwan

If China were to blockade or attack Taiwan and a U.S. president called on the American military to intervene, it would be among the hardest campaigns ever attempted. To respond to an invasion of the island, for instance, the United States would need to project military power across thousands of miles of ocean, for weeks on end, while penetrating China's anti-access/area denial capabilities.² China's task would also be extraordinarily difficult. It would need to accomplish a daunting amphibious landing in hopes of placing enough personnel on Taiwan to mount a ground assault of the island that takes control of Taiwan's major cities.³

Win or lose, the costs would be astronomical. The death toll would likely be in the tens or hundreds of thousands per combatant, and there would be the risk of nuclear escalation.⁴ Both the United States and China could lose dozens of warships and hundreds of aircraft, at least.⁵ The global economic toll could reach into the tens of trillions of dollars, due to the demands of warfighting and the disruption to major international trading routes, investments, and financial markets.⁶

In the face of such daunting consequences and projections about China's continued military buildup, there are indications that some U.S. policymakers doubt the U.S. ability to defeat a Chinese invasion of Taiwan (and maybe even to deter one at reasonable cost). Most notably, the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) acknowledges that "the American military cannot" maintain the capabilities to deter China along the first island chain without the help of allies. Because the contributions of allies to a coalition defense of Taiwan remain unclear (and the United States could very well find itself fighting alone), this is a

worrying admission.⁷ The NSS also acknowledges that China could, in some scenarios, "achieve a balance of forces so unfavorable to [the United States] as to make defending that island impossible."⁸

Some U.S. foreign policy experts and U.S. government officials argue that the solution to China's growing military advantages is simple. They maintain that the United States could reverse current trends and sustain both a credible deterrent and a force capable of defeating a Chinese invasion of Taiwan with more investment in U.S. military capacity and modernization.⁹ However, it is not clear that this is feasible given current U.S. fiscal realities. The current U.S. military budget, much of which is invested or allocated with an eye toward China (defined as the "pacing threat"), stands at about \$1 trillion, or about half of U.S. discretionary spending.¹⁰ Political obstacles make some paths to larger defense budgets—such as raising taxes, reforming entitlements, or simply taking on more debt—more difficult and unlikely than in the past.¹¹ Reallocations within the Pentagon's budget to truly prioritize Asia have been promised for over a decade and now seem both improbable and insufficient to address the challenges at hand. And even if Washington increased defense spending, China could respond in kind. The result would be an arms race that might only increase the risk and potential cost of war.

If Taiwan's continued autonomy were of existential importance to the United States, with direct and severe implications for the security of the U.S. homeland and U.S. economic prosperity, then these costs and risks could be justified. U.S. policymakers would have to find the money needed to maintain a credible deterrent and accept that if deterrence fails, the United States could very well find itself at war to defend this island.

This is not, however, the case. While the cross-strait status quo is beneficial for the United States, maintaining Taiwan's autonomy is not required to protect core U.S. interests. As current

Undersecretary of Defense Elbridge Colby said in his confirmation hearing, Taiwan is “very important” to the United States, but it is not an “existential” interest.¹² This admission alone makes the current U.S. policy strategically unwise because it risks that the United States would enter an economically and militarily devastating and possibly nuclear war with China over an issue that is not of core and vital importance to U.S. physical or economic security.

U.S. strategic interests in Taiwan

U.S. policy currently does not formally articulate a national interest in keeping Taiwan separate from China indefinitely. Instead, the U.S. position opposes unilateral changes through coercion and supports a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences—regardless of what that resolution entails. The Taiwan Relations Act, signed in 1979, in fact, suggests that the prevailing American concern at the time was not Taiwan’s autonomy but rather “peace and stability” in the Western Pacific, both because of the region’s economic importance and its strategic location close to U.S. allies.¹³

Recently, however, a growing number of experts and U.S. government officials have suggested that maintaining Taiwan’s autonomy is an important U.S. policy goal in and of itself. Assertions that Taiwan is a “critical node” for U.S. strategic posture in Asia or that Taiwan’s separation from China is vitally important for U.S. economic prosperity have fed a belief that Taiwan’s autonomy is the lynchpin of American military and economic dominance at least in Asia and perhaps globally.¹⁴ The Pentagon’s focus on a U.S. defense of Taiwan as the “pacing scenario” only reinforces the perception that regardless of stated policy, preserving Taiwan’s separation from China is of high importance for the United States.¹⁵

Advocates of Taiwan’s strategic importance justify their position in military and economic terms. Neither holds up to scrutiny. It is certainly true that Washington has interests at stake in Taiwan and that a successful Chinese unification effort would have implications for the United States. But those implications are manageable and do not warrant the costs of war with China or the risks involved in continuing military efforts to prepare for such a war.

In the military domain, some U.S. officials and military analysts maintain that if China were to seize Taiwan, it would accrue significant advantages that would challenge the U.S. ability to protect regional allies, navigate key maritime chokepoints, and access lucrative Asian markets. For many, the biggest concern is that after a successful unification, Beijing could use the island as a kind of military base, stationing submarines and ships on Taiwan’s eastern coast, where deeper water and a forward location would make them harder to track, and setting up missiles and radars in Taiwan’s highest elevations, improving range and targeting for precision strikes. These gains would make it easier for China to project power across the Philippine Sea, putting at risk U.S. forces in Guam and making it harder for the United States to operate freely in the Western Pacific.¹⁶

Subsequent research has challenged the scope of these benefits, however. When it comes to using Taiwan as a base, for instance, even locating its submarines on the eastern side of the island would not allow China to evade all forms of U.S. undersea and satellite detection, at least for now. At some point soon, China’s submarines will be advanced enough to operate more stealthily—regardless of what happens with Taiwan.¹⁷ Basing missiles and radars on Taiwan would offer China some advantages in terms of range and targeting precision, but again, only on the margins, especially given that most Chinese targeting will be done by China’s advanced satellite network in the future.¹⁸ In fact, some analysts argue the ability to dominate water and airspace far into the Pacific is a prerequisite for China to successfully seize Taiwan, not a consequence of it.¹⁹

While it is hard to settle these debates in the abstract, it seems unlikely that China's successful unification with Taiwan would be sufficient on its own to decisively shift the regional military balance in Beijing's favor. This is particularly true if Washington stays out of a war over the island, thus preserving its military power in the region and outside of it.²⁰ In other words, a successful Chinese unification campaign would not prevent the United States from maintaining a balance of power that allows it to match (though not surpass) China.²¹

Still, for some observers, even if taking Taiwan alone would give China only modest military benefits, the broader military implications could be significant. Unification with Taiwan might serve as a jumping-off point for additional Chinese military conquest, for example, of Japan's outlying islands, or it might facilitate more effective Chinese economic and political coercion of its neighbors. With unification accomplished, some analysts argue that China would be able to concentrate the bulk of its military power elsewhere in the region or outside of it.²²

In fact, China's road to regional hegemony would be quite difficult (though not impossible), due to both geography and the nationalism of its neighbors.²³ Even operating from Taiwan, taking countries like Japan, South Korea, or the Philippines by force (or even seizing Taiwan's outlying islands) would be exceedingly challenging for China, given the region's maritime geography and these countries' growing defenses. China might have more luck with economic coercion and political control, but it still seems unlikely that countries like Japan and South Korea would choose to bandwagon with China so easily. These states have long traditions of independence and tensions with their Chinese neighbors. More likely, these countries would react by arming themselves to the teeth, strengthening their position vis-à-vis China. This would not be a bad outcome for the United States and could lessen the overall U.S. security burden.

China's economic and industrial gains from a successful seizure of Taiwan would be more substantial. There are two considerations: U.S. access to markets in the region and the fate of Taiwan's semiconductor industry, on which both the United States and China continue to depend.²⁴ Trump's 2025 NSS articulates both concerns, noting that the island's economic importance is a result of "Taiwan's dominance of semiconductor production, but mostly because Taiwan provides direct access to the Second Island Chain ... Given that one-third of global shipping passes annually through the South China Sea, this has major implications for the U.S. economy."²⁵

Both issues deserve serious examination. It is true that Taiwan lies on important global shipping routes, but even if China seized Taiwan and cut off U.S. access to the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, it is unlikely that this would successfully shut the United States out of Asia's economic markets entirely. With these waterways closed, the United States could still safely navigate the straits in Southeast Asia and operate in the Philippine Sea to the east of Japan to access trading ports in East Asia. Furthermore, it is not clear why China would seek to block the United States from access to the region's waterways and markets in the first place, since disrupting global trade in this way would be militarily difficult and would harm China's own economy in significant ways.

Loss of access to Taiwan's advanced semiconductors would be a more serious blow to the United States, but this alone is not a reason to maintain the current U.S. commitment to Taiwan. Importantly, the risk that war over the island might cut off access to Taiwan's semiconductors does not only fall on the United States. Since Beijing also depends on TSMC, the world's largest chipmaker, at least for the time being, it is likely deterred from attacking the island to maintain access to this technology. Beijing understands that a war over the island would probably destroy Taiwan's semiconductor manufacturing facilities and equipment.²⁶ Furthermore, the intellectual

property that TSMC uses does not live on the island and could be withheld if the factories did fall into Chinese hands.²⁷

The key question is one of relative dependence. Although U.S. companies continue to be TSMC's largest customers, the United States also owns the intellectual property and the software used to design the most sophisticated semiconductors. This gives it an advantage in building domestic resilience in this area. China's indigenous capabilities continue to lag behind. If a war were to result in loss of access to TSMC, the United States could likely recover more quickly.²⁸ It would need to expand its manufacturing and packaging capacity (both of which would take time), but it would have access to the required technologies, while, at least for now, China would not. U.S. vulnerability in this area will also decline over time. According to industry estimates, by 2032, the United States should be able to produce about 30% of the most advanced chips, giving it additional resilience in this area.²⁹ Some Trump administration officials have put forward even more bullish timelines.³⁰ China's dependence on TSMC, then, gives the United States a window to prepare its own domestic production capabilities.³¹

To summarize, a change in the cross-Strait status quo would be survivable for the United States. Even if China successfully seized Taiwan after the United States declined to defend the island, core U.S. interests would be protected, and the United States would retain presence in Asia's economic and political domains.

China would undoubtedly get some military benefits from unification, but the United States would still have advantages in intelligence and the space and undersea domains. Moreover, it could still ensure U.S. freedom of navigation across most of the Western Pacific and the security of the homeland with investments along the second island chain in Guam, Palau, Micronesia, the Marshal Islands, and Australia. U.S. access to key maritime chokepoints and economic markets would be preserved, even if China restricted

passage through the South China Sea. Some U.S.-China economic decoupling might occur if trade links were disrupted, but over time, markets and trade routes would adjust. The United States might find itself trading much more with Latin America or rediscovering its economic ties with Europe, but its long-term economic prosperity would remain robust.³² The United States would need to rapidly scale up domestic production of semiconductors, but the scale of any disruption would depend on the timeline, being much less pronounced as the United States builds domestic capacity. The consequences of a successful Chinese seizure of Taiwan are, therefore, manageable.

To give itself the ability to protect U.S. core interests while staying out of war over Taiwan, however, the United States will need a new policy toward the island. This must be paired with a new regional strategy intended to reassure other U.S. allies while stabilizing U.S.-China ties. The remainder of this paper outlines such a strategy.

A nonintervention approach to Taiwan

The goal of a new U.S. policy toward Taiwan should be to end the U.S. commitment to the island, shifting the burden of its defense to Taiwan itself and adjusting the U.S. regional posture to protect U.S. interests, no matter how cross-Strait differences are resolved. The new U.S. position should explicitly be one of nonintervention, in which the United States would state definitively that it would not send military forces to fight for Taiwan, but might offer intelligence and logistics support in the event of a conflict, to the extent it can do so without getting pulled into a war.

To support this policy and preserve U.S. economic interests, the United States will need to reposition U.S. forces, build resilience in high-tech manufacturing at home, and invest in the physical and economic security of allies like

Japan and the Philippines. Because this shift will take some time to implement, Washington also has some stake in delaying a Chinese military invasion of Taiwan in the near term, using economic and diplomatic tools, and giving China incentives to move toward a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences.

Shifting to a nonintervention stance when it comes to Taiwan would require acknowledging that without a direct U.S. intervention, Taiwan might not be able to deter a Chinese invasion or defend itself should China attack. Taiwan has some advantages, including its geography—it is surrounded by water and its terrain is inhospitable to invaders. Moreover, if Taiwan adopted a truly asymmetric defense strategy and invested heavily in its military and defense industrial base, increasing its stockpile of missiles three or fourfold, acquitting million of drones and acquiring the HIMARS and air defense systems promised in pending U.S. aid packages, it might be able to persuade China that it is simply too risky and too costly to try to achieve unification by force, at least for the foreseeable future.³³ But moving in this direction will require significant investment from Taiwan and large amounts of political will. At this point, it is not clear that either the necessary funds or the political initiative exists.³⁴

Critics will argue that a U.S. nonintervention strategy effectively consigns Taiwan to a future under China's thumb. According to this group, even if Taiwan invests heavily in its own defense, spending 5% or even 10% of GDP on a military buildup, it will still not be able to credibly deter, much less defend, against a Chinese attack or even a blockade intended to choke the island without direct U.S. support. Fully evaluating this claim's accuracy is difficult, but in the end, the answer is not relevant to U.S. strategic calculations. It is not in the U.S. interest to incur the risks or costs of a potential future war with China over Taiwan, even if this means China achieves unification.

It is also possible that Taiwan might choose not to invest more heavily in defense but instead to pursue a *modus vivendi* with China, as has been suggested by some opposition politicians. This might result in a political resolution of cross-Strait tensions. Such an outcome may be more likely if the United States reduces its support, as many argue that Taiwan's will to fight is based on its belief in a U.S. backstop. Ultimately, the United States should accept such political accommodation and let the island's people determine its path forward and take steps to protect U.S. interests, regardless of what Taiwan chooses. This would be consistent with U.S. policy and is possible, so long as Washington takes steps now to make its own regional position more resilient.

TIMING

Ideally, the U.S. shift from its current Taiwan policy to one of nonintervention would be phased to give Taiwan time to build the military capabilities necessary to delay, deter, or, in a best-case scenario, deny China its military objectives, and the United States time to reassure and strengthen relationships with regional allies.

This may not be possible, however, leaving U.S. policymakers with no choice but to make a faster policy change than might otherwise be desired. For starters, a phased approach creates an interim period of high risk. Paying the costs to defend Taiwan is not in U.S. interests, nor is continuing to incur the risk of such a war by maintaining the current policy of strategic ambiguity any longer. As long as U.S. policy and posture remain unchanged, there is a reasonable chance that if Taiwan is attacked, the United States will have to intervene, either because it is dragged in by a Chinese strike on nearby U.S. forces or due to political factors and inertia, as noted above. Because these risks and costs exceed the benefits of the status quo for the United States, Washington should shift its posture and its policy as quickly as feasible to remove Taiwan as a liability to U.S. strategic interests.

A phased approach would also be difficult. Once the United States begins force posture changes to support a nonintervention stance, its old position of strategic ambiguity will lose its credibility, and its intentions will likely be telegraphed to allies and adversaries, in the region and outside it. Posture changes will also make it harder for the United States to defend Taiwan, forcing a policy change, if only due to feasibility.

Finally, while giving Taiwan time to arm itself sounds good, it is not clear that Taiwan is ready and willing to invest what would be required to build a credible deterrent in a reasonable timeframe. The slowness of U.S. defense production is partly to blame, but the bigger problem is that political polarization in Taiwan's government seems likely to hold up the funding that would be required to finance weapons purchases on the scale needed.³⁵

If a phased approach is not possible, then the United States should make no formal announcement of its shift to a nonintervention policy initially, as a sharp policy change could be destabilizing. Instead, Washington should simply move ahead with the steps needed to make a nonintervention approach viable as quickly as feasible, including changing its military force posture in the region and making investments to secure its interests in the region, including in relationships with allies. At some point, a formal notification to allies and to China of the U.S. shift in policy will be required, but it should occur only once U.S. forces are repositioned, and initial moves to reassure regional partners are underway. By that point, the direction of U.S. policy should be clear, and any announcement will simply affirm strategic adjustments already largely completed.

IMPLEMENTATION

To shift to a policy of nonintervention toward Taiwan, the United States will need to do five things.

1. Reposition U.S. forces away from vulnerable locations near China's coast, moving them back to the second island chain.

2. Reinforce preparedness of key allies like Japan and the Philippines.
3. Shift responsibility for Taiwan's defense to Taiwan by encouraging an asymmetric defense and offering arms sales, intelligence, and investment.
4. Accelerate semiconductor reshoring.
5. Stabilize the U.S.-China relationship by seeking reciprocal de-escalation and encouraging nonmilitary solutions to the Taiwan issue.

First, the United States will need to adjust its posture to reduce the risk that it might be drawn into war through miscalculation, to make its own position more survivable and resilient to future Chinese challenges, and to secure U.S. economic interests in the region and U.S. relationships with other allies.

At present, if China were to decide to attack Taiwan or even to try to enforce a blockade, it might be difficult for the United States to stay out of the conflict. U.S. forces are currently based near Taiwan, in Okinawa, Japan, and Luzon in the Philippines. There are even 500 military trainers based on Taiwan. Many experts expect that in case of a full-scale invasion, China might move to attack U.S. bases in Japan first, to limit the U.S. ability to offer support.³⁶ Even if Beijing did not take this step, any casualties among U.S. forces on Taiwan could be enough to drag the United States into war. Right now, these forces are intended to deter Chinese military action, but if the United States were to adopt a nonintervention strategy, having a tripwire in place would be unnecessary and undesirable.

To remove the risk of accidental war and make the U.S. regional posture more resilient, Washington should move U.S. forces from Taiwan and locations nearest China's coast to more secure sites elsewhere in the region. For example, the United States should move most U.S. military personnel and hardware out of bases on Okinawa and shift them to U.S. bases in

northern Japan, Guam, and other second island chain locations. In addition, the United States might move U.S. soldiers away from Luzon and to other U.S. operating locations in the Philippines while also removing provocative offensive platforms like the Typhon missile system from the first island chain. Washington should also take U.S. military trainers out of Taiwan and return them to the United States, where they could continue training Taiwanese soldiers if desired.³⁷ These changes would reduce the number of U.S. military personnel and the amount of hardware within range of Chinese short- and medium-range missiles. They would, thus, be de-escalatory and shift the United States to a more defensive and sustainable regional posture, but one that is still well-calibrated to protect U.S. interests.

The United States should also make targeted investments to emphasize flexibility and power projection with a light footprint to secure U.S. access to regional economic markets and maritime routes while also reassuring regional allies of the U.S. commitment to them. For example, while the United States might reduce the U.S. military presence in Okinawa, it could increase air and naval presence in northern Japan. Keeping submarines and naval vessels in Australia, South Korea, and Singapore, and conducting periodic transits through Southeast Asian maritime chokepoints, would also ensure freedom of navigation for commercial and military vessels across the Western Pacific. The Pentagon should reinforce and expand military infrastructure along the second island chain, including airfields and ports, and increase the forward positioning of uncrewed air and sea vessels and long-range bomber aircraft.

Of course, these moves alone would not rule out the risk of unintentional escalation with China, especially if Beijing increases its military coercion of Taiwan or military pressure directed at U.S. allies. Political engagement with China will also be needed.

Second, to demonstrate its commitment to other allies and reduce the blow to U.S. alliances from a changed U.S. position on Taiwan, the United States should take steps to reinforce the preparedness of key partners like Japan and the Philippines so that they are better able to defend themselves. This will mean prioritizing these two countries for defense sales, coproduction arrangements, and military exercises. Especially important will be that these countries acquire asymmetric capabilities that they can use to resist Chinese coercion.³⁸ Joint planning, for example, on how Japan and the United States can cooperate to protect commercial shipping in the region in the event of a Chinese blockade of Taiwan, would demonstrate U.S. long-term and continuing support to these allies and the region. These activities could also reduce allied uncertainty or fears that the United States intends to accept a Chinese sphere of influence that includes all of Asia. Finally, to help regional allies resist Chinese economic and political coercion, the United States will need a revitalized economic and diplomatic strategy to increase investment, trade ties, and political support.

Building allied preparedness and investing in allied relationships will take time—longer than military posture changes. This means that the U.S. formal shift to a nonintervention stance will likely come before efforts to bolster allies are complete. As a result, the United States will want to offer clear signs of bipartisan support for continuing activities aimed at ally resilience.

Third, the United States will need to recalibrate its relationship with Taiwan. It would be ideal if the United States were able to discuss the future of its support to Taiwan privately, including what it will not provide—direct military support—and what it might provide, including intelligence and logistics support. This would allow Taiwan to make informed decisions about its own investments ahead of any public announcement. However, it is likely that anything that is told to Taiwan in private will leak. Washington should still communicate clearly with Taiwan about its intention to burden-shift, but it should also carefully

consider framing. Clear messaging to Taiwan's leaders and U.S. allies that stresses continued U.S. commitment to the region and to its allies, a preference for peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences, and long-term U.S. interests in Asia will be important.

To live up to the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act, Washington should be willing to continue to supply Taiwan with defensive weapons and even to offer Taiwan a priority place in the arms production queue. It can encourage Taiwan to spend more on defense and offer certain types of military and economic assistance that could help the island resist Chinese gray zone coercion. For example, it could help guide Taiwan's defense investments by limiting defense sales to materiel that will support an asymmetric defense strategy. It could make some types of military assistance conditional on Taiwan's level of defense spending or on reforms to Taiwan's military recruiting and training.³⁹

The United States could also help Taiwan with investments in its critical infrastructure, build communications networks that can help the United States share intelligence with Taiwan, or support the development of logistics hubs that might enable U.S. resupply during a conflict, if a president deemed this to be in U.S. interests. It could also facilitate investments in Taiwan's defense industrial base to help Taiwan produce more of its own defense equipment.

However, if Taiwan's government decides to spend less on defense or pursue a political modus vivendi with China, the United States should not interfere. This means accepting that China may achieve its unification objective, either through political accommodation or through coercion of some kind. Washington can push for the former but should avoid intervention even if China pursues its aim with force.

Fourth, the United States will have to address its dependence on Taiwan for semiconductors, building resilience and shifting as much production as possible to the United States or allies

elsewhere. As noted above, in the near term, China is also dependent on semiconductors produced in Taiwan, which may give Beijing reason to defer a move on Taiwan. This gives the United States a narrow window to build its domestic resilience in this area. It is already on this path. Yet it should seek to accelerate the timeline where possible, investing in both skilled workers and production capacity, while also stockpiling older chips as a "good enough" fallback option to mitigate economic damage in case of temporary shortages in more advanced chips. Because this process will take some time, the United States has some incentive to delay any military conflict in the Taiwan Strait for as long as possible. It can do this with diplomatic or economic initiatives.

Finally, shifting to a nonintervention approach will require adjusting the U.S. relationship with China as well. The United States should aim to use political and economic tools to encourage China toward political solutions to the Taiwan issue or at least to delay any military moves for as long as possible, even as it steps back from its commitment to the island.⁴⁰ Though the United States would give up some of its leverage by reducing its military presence along the first island chain, the United States still has some ability to influence Chinese behavior. It could, for example, seek reciprocity from China for some of its posture moves, especially those of high value to Beijing. China might agree to reduce its military exercises near Taiwan in return for commitments on the removal of U.S. intermediate-range missiles from Japan and the Philippines.

In the political domain, Washington should indicate that in shifting its position on Taiwan to one that avoids direct military intervention, the United States is not changing its stance on the importance of noncoercive resolution to cross-Strait differences or planning to cede all of Asia to China's influence. The United States could make clear that there would be steep economic and diplomatic consequences for China if it were to use military force against Taiwan. The United States could also offer China incentives

to support peaceful approaches to unification, including better trade terms, reduced tariffs or sanctions, or access to U.S. technologies.

Political signals could be used to urge Chinese restraint as well. Reaffirming that the United States does not support Taiwan's independence would be an easy first step. Harder but more meaningful to China (and so more useful as a possible bargain with Beijing) would be a more significant shift in U.S. policy, such as stating that Washington opposes Taiwan's independence.⁴¹ Such moves might be tied to a Chinese commitment to engage in a serious cross-Strait dialogue aimed at finding political solutions to disputes. This might not prevent war, but it could delay a conflict by encouraging Chinese patience, thus serving U.S. interests.

Of course, this strategy comes with some risks. The biggest is that any change in U.S. posture accelerates and worsens cross-Strait escalation rather than lessening it. Reducing U.S. military support for Taiwan could cause Taiwan to act rashly, such as by seeking a nuclear weapon—a move that would nearly guarantee a Chinese strike. Alternatively, it might be China that acts quickly, seeing a window of opportunity and no obstacles in its way, to make a military move on Taiwan or simply to double down on political and economic coercion.

But these outcomes are not guaranteed. Even if the United States acknowledged that it would not intervene, China would still have to contend with a range of geographic, military, and economic challenges were it to initiate an invasion of Taiwan.⁴² Unless Beijing is fully confident of its chances for success and so long as the door to unification does not appear to be closing, it is hard to see why China's leaders would deviate from the current strategy of increasing coercion to shrink Taiwan's littoral spaces and flexibility.⁴³ If anything, the United States stepping back from its long-time support to Taiwan should reduce China's concerns and make Beijing more patient, rather than less.

The bottom line is that the United States' interests are not served by keeping its military forces and its position in Asia entangled in Taiwan's fate. For every argument that a reduction in U.S. military power might increase the risk of war, there is an argument that it is the presence of U.S. military power so close to China's coast that is the true source of cross-Strait instability. It is hard to say whether retrenchment will increase the risk of war or create a path to peace. But removing an implicit U.S. security guarantee would force Taiwan to confront its geopolitical reality more directly. The United States will be better off with a policy that explicitly rules out a direct defense of Taiwan.

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The role of diplomacy in US management of cross-Strait relations

Bonnie S. Glaser

Peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait are vital to U.S. national security, economic prosperity, and global credibility. Although Beijing has intensified military, economic, and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan—including large-scale exercises and coercive gray-zone tactics—conflict is neither imminent nor inevitable.¹ The United States faces the challenge of strengthening deterrence in ways that promote stability without increasing the risk of miscalculation or confrontation. America’s role is not to determine Taiwan’s future, but to prevent the People’s Republic of China (PRC) from using force or coercion to impose its will. Further, America must ensure that any resolution of cross-Strait differences is achieved peacefully and with the consent of Taiwan’s people.

Diplomacy must play a central role in that effort. While military deterrence remains essential, sustained diplomatic engagement with Beijing, Taipei, and like-minded partners is indispensable for communicating intent, discouraging unilateral changes to the status quo, and reinforcing

international opposition to the use of force. At the same time, the United States must clearly articulate why Taiwan matters to American interests and ensure that its “One China” policy remains credible, flexible, and aligned with its broader strategy.

This paper outlines a comprehensive diplomatic approach to preserving peace in the Taiwan Strait. It argues for reaffirming and adapting U.S. declaratory policy, strengthening public understanding of Taiwan’s importance, intensifying engagement with both Beijing and Taipei, encouraging cross-Strait dialogue, preventing election interference, and building a coalition of like-minded countries to raise the costs of aggression. Integrated with military, economic, informational, and legal tools, such a strategy can reduce the risk of conflict while safeguarding American interests and regional stability.

US declaratory policy

Since establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1979, the United States has recognized it as “the sole legal Government of China” while maintaining unofficial relations with Taiwan. This forms the foundation of the U.S. “One China” policy. It is distinct from Beijing’s “One China principle,” which holds that “There is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory, and the Government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.”² The United States should remain committed to its “One China” policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act,³ the Three US-China Joint Communiqués,⁴ and the Six Assurances.⁵ All the elements of the “One China” policy do not have to be stated every time it is referenced by U.S. officials, but messaging on the “One China” policy should periodically include all the following long-standing statements. The United States:

- Opposes any unilateral changes to the status quo by either side.
- Does not support Taiwan independence.
- Supports cross-Strait dialogue.
- Expects cross-Strait differences to be resolved by peaceful means, free from coercion, in a manner that is acceptable to the people on Taiwan.⁶
- Does not take a position on the ultimate resolution of cross-Strait differences, provided they are resolved peacefully.

The Trump administration’s commitment to all elements of the “One China” policy is uncertain. In February 2025, the U.S. State Department updated its Taiwan fact sheet, removing the phrase “we do not support Taiwan independence.” Several months later, it pulled down the fact sheet from the website and, as of this writing, has not reposted it. Official documents issued by the administration, including the 2025

National Security Strategy (NSS), do not reference the U.S. “One China” policy, prompting questions in Beijing and other capitals about the direction of U.S. policy. There is speculation that, as part of a deal with Xi Jinping, President Donald Trump might say that he “opposes” Taiwan independence or even “supports peaceful reunification.” Such a concession could embolden Beijing to press for further adjustments in U.S. Taiwan policy, unsettle Taipei, and raise concerns among allies that Washington is moving away from its long-standing position of not taking a stance on Taiwan’s ultimate political status, provided any resolution is peaceful.

If the United States were to abandon its “One China” policy altogether, it would destabilize cross-Strait relations, increase the risk of miscalculation by all parties, and undermine Washington’s ability to deter coercion while maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Yet, the United States has options beyond simply reserving or abandoning the policy. The U.S. “One China” policy is dynamic rather than static, and it has evolved in response to changing circumstances. For instance, U.S. arms sales to Taiwan have increased significantly despite the August 1982 Communiqué with China, in which the United States agreed to “reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution.”⁷ A central reason for maintaining and upgrading these weapon sales is Beijing’s failure to honor its pledge to seek a peaceful resolution of its differences with Taipei.

Going forward, the U.S. “One China” policy should remain flexible and responsive to developments in the Taiwan Strait. The policy contains limitations and internal contradictions and is, in certain respects, suboptimal. Nevertheless, the risks associated with fundamentally changing it exceed any likely benefits.

Articulate why Taiwan matters

Beijing's accelerated military modernization, more frequent and complex People's Liberation Army (PLA) operations around Taiwan, and Xi's insistence that the Taiwan issue cannot be left to future generations have heightened the risk of conflict. Given the very real possibility that the United States could become involved in such a conflict, it is essential for the U.S. government to clearly articulate to the American people the stakes the United States has in Taiwan's security. Officials have likely refrained from emphasizing Taiwan's importance in public statements because doing so could increase tensions with the PRC, especially if Beijing interprets them as strengthening the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan. Nonetheless, if Americans are someday asked to defend Taiwan, they should understand what they are being asked to fight for. This is particularly important because, unlike its formal allies in Asia and Europe, the United States does not have a defense treaty with Taiwan.

In my view, Taiwan matters to the United States for at least three reasons:

1. Taiwan is a vibrant democracy of approximately 23.5 million people and, as George W. Bush stated during his presidency, is a "beacon of democracy to Asia and the world." Taiwan serves as a powerful alternative to the Chinese Communist Party-led party-state political system. Although its democracy is imperfect and faces internal challenges, including intense partisan polarization, it nonetheless presents a compelling example to the PRC and the broader international community of the resilience of democratic institutions and values.
2. Taiwan is crucial to U.S. economic competitiveness and prosperity. In 2025, Taiwan was the United States' fourth-largest trading partner, surpassing Germany. But more

importantly, it is one of the world's leading producers of advanced information and communications technologies, including semiconductors. Taiwan manufactures over 60% of the world's total output of all semiconductors and more than 90% of the most advanced chips, which are essential for virtually all electronic devices, including computers, cars, smartphones, and military equipment.⁸ A conflict disrupting Taiwan's chip production would have immediate and severe consequences for the global economy and U.S. national security.

3. Taiwan is central to perceptions of American credibility: How the United States responds to PRC aggression against Taiwan would shape views of U.S. reliability among allies and partners in Asia and beyond. A decision to refrain from defending Taiwan against an unprovoked attack would shatter confidence in U.S. security guarantees. It could prompt some U.S. allies to pursue their own nuclear deterrents and unravel the regional alliance system that has helped to preserve the Pacific Ocean as a barrier against threats to the U.S. homeland.

Various means can be used to build greater public understanding of America's stake in Taiwan's security. The president could explain why Taiwan matters to U.S. security and prosperity in his annual State of the Union speech. The national security advisor or the secretary of state could deliver a speech that goes into greater depth, linking Taiwan to broader U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific. Senior officials can also discuss China's growing threats to Taiwan and draw connections to U.S. interests in on-the-record briefings. Congress can also play a role by holding more public hearings about Taiwan. Members can talk publicly about the importance of preserving peace and security in the Taiwan Strait and share findings from members' travel to the region.

Diplomacy toward China

Washington should make it unambiguously clear to Beijing that were it ever to use force against Taiwan to coerce reunification, U.S.-China relations would be irreparably damaged. Even as the United States remains ambiguous about whether and under what circumstances it would defend Taiwan, Washington should ensure that Chinese leaders understand that U.S. intervention is an option and that it has both the political will and military capability to inflict massive harm if China initiates a war of aggression.

In addition to credible military threats, effective deterrence requires credible assurances, preferably by all relevant parties. As my co-authors, Thomas Christensen and Jessica Chen Weiss, and I wrote in *Foreign Affairs*,

“Credible assurance is not a reward or a carrot. It is a guarantee that a threat is fully conditional on the behavior of its target. ... It can and should be made unilaterally to strengthen deterrence, as long as it does not weaken the credibility or capacity to respond to perceived threats.”⁹

U.S. presidents should continue to provide assurances to China’s leader that the United States remains committed to its “One China” policy and does not seek to use Taiwan as a tool to contain China’s rise. In addition, Washington should also make clear that it would accept any outcome that both sides reach peacefully and that has the consent of the people of Taiwan.

The United States should urge Beijing to strengthen the credibility of its commitment to relying on peaceful means to resolve its differences with Taiwan by providing its own assurances to Washington and Taipei. For example, China could revert to conducting military exercises on its side of the Taiwan Strait centerline, a dividing line that it tacitly observed from 1999

to 2019. Beijing could also revise its 2005 Anti-Secession Law, which set out conditions under which the PRC would use “non-peaceful means” against Taiwan, to make its threat conditional on Taiwan’s behavior.¹⁰ For example, Beijing could state that China will refrain from using force as long as Taiwan does not seek formal independence.¹¹

U.S. and Chinese officials should regularly discuss Taiwan at senior and working levels to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation. Clear communication helps each side better understand the other’s policies and strategic intentions, reducing the likelihood that routine military activities or political statements are misinterpreted as escalatory moves. Officials posted to U.S. Embassy Beijing should meet frequently with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government officials responsible for Taiwan-related diplomacy and policy at the central and local levels, such as the Taiwan Affairs Office, the United Front Work Department, the PLA, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They should also engage PRC Taiwan experts at leading research institutes and universities.

In public statements and official *démarches*, U.S. officials should condemn all forms of PRC coercion and pressure on Taiwan and insist that Beijing use peaceful and non-coercive means to resolve cross-Strait differences. They should privately encourage the resumption of both cross-Strait dialogue without preconditions and cross-Strait Track 2 dialogues and exchanges. The United States should also urge Chinese officials to recognize that the “one country, two systems” framework is overwhelmingly unpopular and considered unviable by the people and government of Taiwan and advise them to use more flexible and creative approaches toward Taiwan.

The United States should strongly object to Beijing’s increasingly assertive efforts to portray U.N. General Assembly Resolution 2758, which transferred the “China seat” in the United Nations from the Republic of China to the PRC in 1971,

as having resolved the dispute over Taiwan's sovereignty in Beijing's favor. The United States should also use diplomacy creatively to advocate for Taiwan's participation in U.N.-affiliated agencies such as the World Health Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Maritime Organization, as well as other intergovernmental bodies like INTERPOL, where its absence has potentially large-scale ramifications for regional and global security.

In meetings with Chinese counterparts, U.S. officials should push back on Beijing's efforts to portray U.S. and allied support for preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait as support for Taiwan independence. They should also resist demands that countries jettison their "One China" policies and adopt Beijing's "One China" principle. The United States should communicate its willingness to impose costs on China if it continues to try to compel adherence to its "One China" principle. For example, senior U.S. officials could publicly affirm that Washington does not recognize the PRC's claim that Taiwan is part of China and considers Taiwan's political status as unresolved. Such explicit language is rarely used by U.S. officials because it would likely provoke strong opposition from Beijing and could raise the risk of an escalatory spiral in the bilateral relationship.¹²

Diplomacy toward Taiwan

U.S. diplomacy toward Taiwan is essential for multiple reasons. Maintaining effective channels of communication with the government of Taiwan is necessary to safeguard America's interest in preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Communication channels are also essential to convey U.S. concerns if Taiwan pursues policies that could trigger an escalatory spiral in cross-Strait tensions. Such channels allow Washington to clarify its red lines, provide early warnings, and offer guidance that can help avert a crisis.

Both public and private diplomacy is vital to provide assurances that the United States will uphold its commitments to Taiwan's security, which, under the Taiwan Relations Act, include keeping a strong, unofficial relationship with Taiwan consistent with the U.S. "One China" policy; assisting Taiwan in maintaining a sufficient self-defense capability; and maintaining the U.S. capacity "to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security or the social or economic system of Taiwan."

Such assurances are crucial because, at its core, Beijing's Taiwan strategy is designed to erode public morale and gradually compel capitulation. Taiwan should not feel compelled to enter political talks with the PRC because it has no other options; it should only do so voluntarily and with the support of the majority of the Taiwan people.

Washington should develop a strategy to counter growing doubts in Taiwan about the United States' dependability. While it is not in U.S. interests for Taipei to be overconfident that the United States has its back in all circumstances, the spreading narrative that the United States will eventually abandon Taiwan carries risks. Failure to address this trend of increasing "U.S. skepticism" could help Beijing convince the people of Taiwan that their best and perhaps only option is unification on Beijing's terms, despite their strong preference to preserve the status quo. Moreover, pessimism about the United States' willingness to support and defend Taiwan could erode support for a larger defense budget and weaken resolve among the island's citizens to fight in the event of an attack.¹³ Since Washington and Taipei have many shared interests, interactions between U.S. and Taiwan officials are routine and should be subject to as few restrictions as possible. The U.S. State Department's contact guidelines for Taiwan should remain in place but be periodically reviewed and revised as necessary.

The United States should periodically send senior-level officials, including cabinet members, to visit Taiwan and should also welcome visits by

senior Taiwan officials. Although Beijing claims that such interactions are “official” and therefore violate the three U.S.-China communiqués, these visits are permitted under the Taiwan Relations Act, which provides for extensive unofficial relations. Senior-level visits should have a specific purpose, such as signing a trade agreement. They should be limited to functional areas such as transportation, education, agriculture, energy, economics/trade, and science and technology. Periodic senior-level exchanges serve U.S. interests by:

1. Demonstrating that the United States opposes Beijing’s claim that Taiwan has no right to international engagement.
2. Providing cover for other countries to have interactions with Taiwan’s officials.
3. Reassuring Taiwan’s public of U.S. support and assuaging fears that the United States is drifting toward accommodation with Beijing.
4. Strengthening the confidence of Taiwan’s leaders to pursue defense reform and resilience measures.
5. Signaling predictable U.S. policy and showing continuity across administrations.
6. Reducing the risk that Beijing miscalculates U.S. resolve based on perceived political divisions.

Congressional and staff delegations should also regularly visit Taiwan to ensure Congress remains informed, to engage in discussions about shared concerns, and to reassure Taiwan of U.S. support.

Taiwan’s president should be permitted to transit the United States upon Taipei’s request, with travel allowed anywhere in the country outside Washington, DC, and with transit arrangements handled in accordance with established precedent.

Encourage cross-Strait dialogue

There has been no official dialogue between the governments in Taipei and Beijing since Tsai Ing-wen took office in 2016.¹⁴ Chinese leaders have refused direct contact with the Democratic Progressive Party-led administrations of Chen Shui-bian, Tsai Ing-wen, and Lai Ching-te due to the party’s refusal to accept the 1992 Consensus—which is understood differently in Taipei than it is in Beijing.¹⁵ Communication has not only lapsed between Taipei’s Mainland Affairs Council and Beijing’s Taiwan Affairs Office—the agencies responsible for handling cross-Strait relations—but interactions between their respective “white glove” organizations—Taiwan’s Straits Exchange Foundation and the PRC’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait—have also diminished.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, cross-Strait scholarly exchanges and dialogues have occurred only sporadically. The convening of the Kuomintang-CCP joint think tank forum in Beijing on February 3 marked the first such meeting since 2016 and signals a deepening of party-to-party dialogue. However, it does not substitute for official communication between the PRC and Taiwan’s elected government. The absence of both official and informal channels heightens the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation, leaving few mechanisms to de-escalate tensions once they arise.

While Beijing’s precondition for cross-Strait dialogue is that Taipei’s leader endorses the 1992 Consensus, Taiwan President Lai Ching-te insists that talks with China can only take place on the basis of equality, mutual respect, and dignity, not under conditions that imply Taiwan is subordinate to mainland China. He also stresses that Taiwan’s future should be decided by Taiwan’s people, and that any dialogue must respect Taiwan’s democratic system. Neither the preconditions set by Taipei nor by Beijing are likely to be met.

Across multiple U.S. administrations, including those of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, and the second Trump administration, Washington has consistently encouraged both sides of the Taiwan Strait to settle their differences peacefully through constructive dialogue. As recently as December 2025, a U.S. State Department official called on Beijing to engage in meaningful talks with Taiwan.¹⁶ The United States, however, has refrained from acting as a mediator between Taipei and Beijing, in part because President Ronald Reagan's Six Assurances included the commitment that "the United States will not exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC."¹⁷ Unless Taiwan consents to a U.S. intermediary role, Washington risks undermining its credibility and damaging its relationship with Taipei by attempting to act as a go-between.

Given rising cross-Strait tensions, U.S. officials should consider whether greater priority should be given to privately urging both governments in Taipei and Beijing to restore contacts. These should begin with the resumption of Track 2 dialogues between scholars from both sides of the Strait, authorized by their respective governments, followed by more effective and regular utilization of channels between Taipei's Straits Exchange Foundation and Beijing's Association for Exchanges Across the Taiwan Strait. Cross-Strait agreements that serve both Taipei's and Beijing's interests should be more effectively implemented, including those on joint crime-fighting and mutual assistance, air transport, sea transport, and food safety, all of which remain in force.

No interference in elections in Taiwan

The United States should communicate to Beijing that it strongly opposes any interference in Taiwan's elections. Washington should make clear that this includes a broad range of tactics such as propaganda, disinformation, use of economic carrots to sway voters, and material support to favored candidates via friendly networks.¹⁸

At the same time, Washington should maintain its policy of not taking sides in Taiwan's elections. Regardless of which party or individual is elected, U.S. policy toward Taiwan should remain the same, and the United States' strong, unofficial relationship with Taiwan should continue. U.S. diplomats posted to the American Institute in Taiwan should engage in frequent discussions with the major political parties in Taiwan to fully understand their positions and convey U.S. concerns, policies, and priorities. It is especially important for the US to deepen its contacts with the two leading opposition parties, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party.

If the KMT returns to power in 2028, the United States should engage closely with the new government, maintaining ongoing, in-depth discussions about Taipei's objectives in cross-Strait relations and its strategy toward Beijing. While Washington should convey any concerns about the KMT-led government's approach to the PRC, it should not oppose efforts by Taipei to restore linkages with Beijing.

Build a coalition with like-minded countries

During the Biden administration, the United States emphasized working with allies to strengthen deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. This included encouraging allies to join maritime patrols, condemn Beijing's military pressure on Taiwan as destabilizing the cross-Strait status quo, expand support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations, and enhance exchanges with Taipei. Biden's approach coincided with many countries' growing recognition that a crisis or conflict in the Taiwan Strait could have catastrophic economic and security consequences. The result was a notable increase in statements and actions supporting the preservation of the status quo, sending a clear signal to Beijing that the use of force against Taiwan would carry international costs.

The Trump administration rejected this strategy. For example, in 2025, U.S. officials encouraged European allies, including the U.K. and Germany, to focus on the Euro-Atlantic region and discouraged them from deploying military assets to the Indo-Pacific or otherwise contributing to cross-Strait deterrence. While it is reasonable to ask European allies to prioritize defending their continent, discouraging actions that signal a stake in maintaining peace and security in the Taiwan Strait is ill-advised.

The United States should instead use diplomacy to forge a standing coalition of like-minded countries to shape Xi's calculus regarding the use of force against Taiwan. Beijing has mounted disproportionate diplomatic and propaganda efforts opposing U.S. alliances and U.S.-led coalitions, including the Quad (India, Japan, and Australia), AUKUS (the U.K. and Australia), and U.S.-Japan-Republic of Korea trilateral cooperation. Beijing routinely frames these partnerships as evidence of "encirclement" and "containment,"

indicating that China views coalition-building as a significant threat. The United States should seek to leverage these insecurities to strengthen deterrence in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁹

Washington should articulate a set of positions that like-minded partners can endorse, including opposition to the use of force, opposition to unilateral changes in the status quo by either side of the Taiwan Strait, and support for the peaceful resolution of differences. A meeting of the signatories could be convened to discuss steps that could be taken collectively or by a subset of countries to protect peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Examples include:

1. Jointly declaring support for Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations that require sovereignty for membership.
2. Criticizing Beijing's distortion of U.N. General Assembly Resolution 2758 to establish its "One China" principle as international law.
3. Coordinating contributions to Taiwan's whole-of-society defense resilience program.
4. Warning Beijing against excluding Taiwan's participation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in 2026.
5. Preparing measures to impose costs on China if it uses force against Taiwan.

As part of its coalition-building efforts, the United States and its like-minded partners should support countries targeted by Chinese economic coercion or other punitive actions for engaging with Taiwan. Washington's silence in response to Beijing's moves to punish Japan for Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's statement to the Japanese Diet—that a PRC attack on Taiwan could constitute a "survival-threatening situation" under Japanese law, thereby permitting military intervention—undermines U.S. interests by fueling fears that the United States might abandon its allies.²⁰

Coalition members could use coordinated public messaging to increase the costs of Beijing's retaliatory actions. If China restricts imports from a target country, coalition partners could help that country access alternative markets to offset economic harm. Beyond crisis response, the coalition could focus on anticipating and deterring Chinese pressure by strengthening members' resilience to economic coercion and making the consequences of coercive behavior predictable and public.

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Conclusion

Preserving peace in the Taiwan Strait will require sustained American leadership, strategic coherence, and disciplined diplomacy. The United States cannot control Beijing's ambitions or Taipei's politics, but it can shape the environment in which decisions are made. By clearly articulating its interests, reinforcing deterrence in concert with allies and partners, maintaining credible communication channels with both sides of the Strait, and building a coalition prepared to oppose coercion and raise the costs of aggression, Washington can reduce the risk of miscalculation and conflict. The objective is not to predetermine Taiwan's future, but to ensure that it is decided peacefully and without coercion. A steady, principled, and internationally supported strategy offers the best prospect for deterring the use of force while preserving stability and safeguarding U.S. interests.

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Paint it black: An asymmetric approach to China's gray zone coercion of Taiwan

David Sacks

The United States has a long-standing, vital strategic interest in preventing a rival power from dominating Asia. Deterring aggression in the Taiwan Strait is critical to that objective. If the People's Republic of China (PRC) were to attack and successfully annex Taiwan, this would shatter the balance of power in the world's most economically consequential region. U.S. allies—Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and South Korea—would lose faith in the credibility of American commitments. Some would pursue strategic autonomy, potentially to include developing an independent nuclear deterrent, while others would accommodate China. U.S. influence in the region would wane, while China would be well on its way to establishing regional hegemony, with dire economic consequences for the United States.¹ To protect this interest, the United States should pursue a strategy that not only deters outright military aggression but also counters China's growing reliance on coercion short of war.

The United States has embraced a strategy of deterrence by denial: convincing Beijing that it cannot achieve its political objectives on Taiwan through force at an acceptable cost.² In practice, this has translated to procuring capabilities ranging from anti-ship missiles and standoff munitions to uncrewed systems. While the range of platforms and systems is broad, they share common characteristics: they are relatively mobile, cheap, survivable, and lethal. Properly implemented, the strategy could make a Chinese attack on Taiwan unlikely to succeed and limit Beijing, at best, to a pyrrhic victory.

A pure denial focus, however, is insufficient. By focusing on high-end conflict, it cedes space for China to exploit the gray zone—coercive actions below the threshold of armed conflict. Near-daily incursions by People's Liberation Army (PLA) fighter jets, surface warships, and drones into the airspace and waters near Taiwan steadily erode the island's security and political resilience. The military capabilities prioritized under a denial strategy are poorly suited to counter such activ-

ities. Traditional responses, such as scrambling jets and naval vessels, divert assets from their primary wartime missions and overtax them, further raising doubts as to their ultimate utility.

Beijing has increasingly turned to the gray zone because it concludes that this approach effectively piles pressure on Taiwan without triggering a strong response. It can see that Washington and Taipei differ on how to address these coercive activities. Leaders in Taipei see a need to more proactively demonstrate to their citizens that they are protecting the island's sovereignty. Many in the United States, however, view responding to such activities as a distraction from the urgent task of pursuing a strategy of denial. U.S. allies, for their part, also want to avoid escalation and retaliation from Beijing, and thus urge a more cautious approach. China assesses that these differences, combined with U.S. and Taiwanese risk aversion, allow it to leverage the gray zone without paying meaningful costs. The United States and Taiwan have yet to develop a coherent, unified response to this challenge.

China can exploit this situation because the United States and Taiwan have implicitly accepted Beijing's framing of the gray zone as activity short of a kinetic use of force and, therefore, demanding restraint. In reality, China's behavior reflects a pre-conflict campaign that is designed to weaken Taiwan and set the conditions to prevail in a war. The United States should therefore seek to eliminate China's perception that gray zone coercion is cost-free. In practice, this would mean lowering the threshold of response and imposing a cost on China for its actions. The United States could pursue this route without sacrificing its strategy of denial—in fact, reinforcing it—by explicitly linking Chinese coercion to accelerated U.S. actions that diminish the prospects of a successful Chinese use of force. The United States needs to develop a gray zone playbook to augment its denial strategy.

A broken playbook

Since Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) assumed Taiwan's presidency in 2016, ending eight years of Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) rule, China has shifted from emphasizing the benefits of cross-strait rapprochement to demonstrating the costs of continued separation.

China's military activities most clearly demonstrate this shift. China has vastly increased the frequency and scope of violations of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). It has erased the "median line" in the Taiwan Strait, a buffer that both sides respected for decades and which reduced the chances of an incident in the air or at sea. It has positioned PLA Navy and Chinese Coast Guard vessels around Taiwan on a near-continuous basis. China has declared exclusion zones in international airspace and waters to conduct complex multiday military exercises around Taiwan, disrupting the island's commerce. Most provocatively, China violated Taiwan's territorial airspace with a military drone for the first time in January 2026.³

China's coercive playbook extends to leveraging the other tools of national power. Politically, China has intensified its efforts to isolate Taiwan by poaching some of its remaining diplomatic partners, preventing Taiwan from participating in international fora, and waging a legal campaign that seeks to build an international consensus that Taiwan is a part of the PRC.⁴ Economically, it has sanctioned Taiwanese firms and sectors, targeting companies connected to the DPP or based in DPP-leaning constituencies. Finally, China has manipulated Taiwan's information space and interfered in its elections.

Beijing's goal in applying such pressure is to make the Taiwanese people conclude that unification is inevitable and induce a future elected government in Taiwan to submit to political talks on the island's fate. China's strategy is bearing fruit. Admiral Samuel Paparo, commander of

the United States Indo-Pacific Command, has warned that “We’re very close to that [point] where on a daily basis the fig leaf of an exercise could very well hide operational warning.”⁵ A senior Taiwanese military official has similarly evaluated that Beijing could “switch from peacetime to war operations any time.”⁶ Beijing has increasingly isolated Taiwan, as a growing number of countries publicly endorse its position that Taiwan is a part of the PRC.⁷ Taiwanese are coming to question whether the island can continue to rely on the United States for its security.⁸ Taiwan’s politics are growing more fractious, in part due to PRC influence operations.

At the same time, China’s pressure campaign has not come at the expense of preparing for a blockade or invasion of Taiwan. The PLA has built an inventory of precision weapons, such as anti-ship ballistic missiles and air-launched long-range missiles, designed to deny the United States the ability to intervene on Taiwan’s behalf and to degrade U.S. bases in the region. China has infiltrated critical infrastructure in the United States, including targets that could enable U.S. intervention in Taiwan contingencies.⁹ The PLA’s amphibious exercises continue to increase in sophistication, while China is also building amphibious lift and associated enabling (special barge/floating pier ships) capabilities.¹⁰ The question is not whether China is preparing for a full-scale war over Taiwan—it plainly is—but whether there is any preparation it is not undertaking.

While the United States and Taiwan have thus far deterred an attack against the island, they have failed to deter Chinese coercion below that threshold. Worse still, Washington and Taipei have responded to gray zone coercion in counterproductive ways. For instance, when China sends military aircraft or naval vessels into Taiwan’s ADIZ, Taiwan has responded by scrambling jets, warships, or coast guard vessels to observe these activities. These responses have exhausted Taiwan’s military assets and personnel, forcing the military to divert resources toward fuel and maintenance, in turn reducing readiness.

Meanwhile, China, far from halting these activities, continues to increase their frequency and scale. This is likely in part because China sees that this is wearing down Taiwan’s military readiness. In addition, China knows that it can operate with near impunity. Taiwan has committed to not firing the first shot out of fear that it would be painted as the aggressor, while the United States similarly does not want to be seen as the party escalating tensions.¹¹

China’s gray zone strategy only works because it is confident that the United States and Taiwan will not impose meaningful costs on its behavior and that it has more tolerance for risk than its opponents. Beijing believes it knows exactly where Washington’s and Taipei’s red lines are and can act as it pleases right up to those lines. Only by forcing China to question these assumptions can the United States stop its destabilizing coercion.

From gray to black and white

Ignoring China’s gray zone pressure against Taiwan might make sense in the abstract; one way to neuter this campaign is to deny China the attention it is seeking. In addition, it is true that no gray zone activity, by itself, will prompt Taiwan to surrender and allow Beijing to achieve its political objective. The danger, though, lies in the totality of these discrete steps. China is using this pressure to improve its ability to execute a blockade or punitive campaign against Taiwan, while gradually eroding Taiwanese citizens’ confidence in their government’s ability to protect them. Similarly, if the United States were to refrain from helping Taiwan respond to these coercive activities, regional partners would come to see Washington as unreliable.

Given this reality, the United States and Taiwan should leverage China’s gray zone coercion to take politically difficult but necessary steps to bolster deterrence against a blockade or use

of force. The United States should link heightened Chinese coercion to changes to U.S. force posture in the region; particularly egregious Chinese activities could be met with additional deployments of the Typhon missile system or additional exercises in Japan's southwest islands with U.S. Army Multi-Domain Task Force and U.S. Marine Littoral Regiment units.

Washington should also demonstrate its willingness to link developments in the Taiwan Strait to the broader U.S.-China relationship. The basis for such a position can be found in the Taiwan Relations Act, which states that "the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means."¹² The United States can explain that it views China's strategy of gray zone coercion as running counter to the foundation of U.S.-China relations and that such activities will materially impact other aspects of the bilateral relationship. For instance, the United States could respond to severe gray zone activities against Taiwan by imposing additional export controls on China.

The United States should be prepared to respond to China's gray zone coercion with asymmetry and creativity. For instance, if the PLA and Chinese Coast Guard enter Taiwan's territorial waters, the United States could levy sanctions on Chinese entities or place Chinese companies that had any part in the construction of those Chinese assets onto the Department of Commerce's Entity List. This approach would demand far more coordination across the U.S. government, requiring departments and agencies to act in ways they might otherwise resist. The national security advisor should personally oversee this effort.

Washington could also signal that if China were to qualitatively intensify its pressure campaign against Taiwan—for example, by diverting Taiwan-bound cargo ships to Chinese ports, claiming control over Taiwan's airspace, or denying Taiwan's right to its territorial waters—then the United States would respond by

increasing the tempo of freedom of navigation operations and enhancing its security partnerships with claimants in the South China Sea.

This menu of policy options carries a risk of moral hazard. Taiwan could respond to such U.S. moves by growing bolder in its cross-Strait rhetoric or even taking more operational risks in the seas or skies around the island. Taiwan could seek to provoke more Chinese gray zone activities if it believed that such coercion would automatically trigger more U.S. security cooperation and support. But the steps advocated here do not have any automaticity; Washington would maintain the initiative and could choose not to respond to certain Chinese actions if it judged that Taiwan had acted provocatively. Indeed, the United States should privately communicate to Taiwan that this playbook would be contingent on Taiwan not taking unilateral steps that deliberately provoke Beijing. Washington should also distance itself from such steps if Taiwan were to take them. Taiwan, for its part, should develop a complementary gray zone playbook, shifting from scrambling expensive fighter jets and frigates to monitoring Chinese military activities with cheaper uncrewed systems.

This course also risks an escalatory spiral with China. If the United States seeks to counter pressure on Taiwan by strengthening its security ties with the island and with regional allies, China could respond by putting more pressure on Taiwan. However, this paper argues that on the current trajectory, deterrence will likely fail. Ignoring China's gray zone campaign is itself destabilizing: it teaches Beijing that coercion works, reinforcing the very behavior that makes miscalculation and eventual conflict more likely. China is exploiting the asymmetry of risk tolerance to change the facts on the ground and increase the likelihood that a blockade or invasion will succeed. Moreover, explicitly linking U.S. responses to Chinese gray zone activities would give Washington a graduated escalation ladder, filling the gap that currently exists between doing nothing and going to war. The United States and its allies will need to accept more near-term risk of escalation to preserve long-term deterrence in the Taiwan Strait.

The decisive fight

The United States and Taiwan should remain focused on the critical variable that continues to ensure peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait: China's lack of confidence that it can achieve unification by force at what it deems to be an acceptable cost. Put differently, the absence of full-scale conflict in the Taiwan Strait over the past seven-plus decades is not primarily due to Chinese forbearance, but rather because China has possessed neither the military capabilities nor the belief that it can use those capabilities to compel unification.

Pursuing a strategy of denial is the best way to sow doubt in Beijing regarding the wisdom of turning to military force against Taiwan. At the same time, though, China's gray zone coercion can negatively impact that strategy to the extent that it enables Beijing to prepare for a conflict against Taiwan and degrade Taiwan's defenses. As a result, the United States has an interest in reducing this pressure on Taiwan. It can and should do so by linking China's pressure campaign to U.S. policy adjustments that make a Chinese use of force against Taiwan less likely to succeed.

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The case for greater clarity and less ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait

Matthew Turpin

Over the past decade, relations between the United States and China shifted from what looked to be a fragile partnership into a hostile rivalry. This shift should prompt American policymakers to reexamine the policies adopted when that partnership appeared to be growing closer and consider whether those policies are still fit for purpose. One of those policies, colloquially known as “strategic ambiguity,” maintains that the United States will decline to publicly state whether it would intervene militarily if the People’s Republic of China (PRC) abandoned efforts at “peaceful reunification” and attacked Taiwan.

Strategic ambiguity emerged as part of a broader Cold War framework governing U.S. relations with China following normalization in 1979. For the United States, this policy was a compromise, an effort to bridge multiple competing interests. The United States sought to deter China from attacking Taiwan, maintain peace and stability in the Western Pacific, deepen cooperation with the PRC to counter the Soviet Union, and preserve

a close—if unofficial—relationship with Taiwan, particularly as the country transitioned to democracy in the late 1980s. Ambiguity over the circumstances of U.S. military intervention was a policy compromise intended to balance these interests while buying time for a peaceful resolution to the dispute between Beijing and Taipei.

Together with strategic ambiguity, the U.S. “One China” policy formed the core of Washington’s approach to managing cross-Strait relations. The U.S. “One China” policy was another compromise to bridge these same competing interests. The policy recognizes the PRC as the sole legal government of China and acknowledges Beijing’s position that Taiwan is part of China, while maintaining a robust unofficial relationship with Taiwan, providing defensive arms, and opposing any unilateral change to the status quo by either side. Additionally, the “One China” policy insists that any resolution of the dispute must be peaceful and done with the consent of the people of Taiwan. This policy is guided by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the three U.S.-China

joint communiqués, and the Six Assurances that the Reagan administration provided to the Taiwanese government in the early 1980s.

Crucially, this U.S. framework is notably distinct from Beijing's own "One China" principle. China's principle asserts that Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan is nonnegotiable and a domestic affair that no third country should interfere with. The U.S. "One China" policy simply "acknowledges" China's sovereignty claim without endorsing it. This nuanced policy was the compromise that Washington and Beijing hammered out during their negotiations in the 1970s and early 1980s. Taken together, these arrangements represented a bargain that reflected Cold War conditions rather than an effort to definitively resolve the dispute between the two sides.

The strategic environment that made this Cold War framework viable no longer exists. China is no longer a weak partner aligned with the United States against a common adversary, nor is Beijing credibly committed to a peaceful resolution of its dispute with Taiwan. Under these conditions, strategic ambiguity no longer strengthens deterrence. Instead, it risks encouraging miscalculation by obscuring American resolve to defend Taiwan at a time when Beijing has the capability and incentive to use force. To protect its vital interests in the Indo-Pacific, the United States should retain its "One China" policy but replace strategic ambiguity with a policy of strategic clarity that signals its willingness to defend Taiwan against aggression.

The assumptions underpinning strategic ambiguity no longer hold

When the United States and China signed their third and final joint communiqué in August 1982, it was grounded in Cold War logic. Both Washington and Beijing viewed the Soviet Union as their most serious geopolitical threat and were willing to compromise on other issues to reach an agreement on a partnership. For the United States, the primary theaters of competition were Central Europe and the Middle East, not the Western Pacific. Regardless of Chinese rhetoric about retaking Taiwan, American leaders knew that the PRC in 1982 did not pose a serious military threat to Taiwan, especially following China's disastrous campaign against Vietnam in 1979. For all practical purposes, the Taiwan Strait in 1982 was a deep and insurmountable moat.

Under these conditions, it was rational for both sides to accept a negotiated compromise. The United States downgraded its formal ties with Taiwan to secure Beijing's cooperation against Moscow. China, in turn, compromised on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and Washington's "unofficial" relationship with Taipei in exchange for Washington's support against Soviet threats, economic aid, and technological assistance after decades of Mao Zedong's disastrous rule. From the American perspective, this bargain resulted in the U.S. "One China" policy and the policy of "strategic ambiguity."

Four decades later, the geopolitical, economic, and technological conditions that made that compromise possible couldn't be more different. The Soviet Union is gone, and China has transformed from a partner seeking Western support into Washington's main rival. Rather than aligning with Washington against Moscow, Beijing now proclaims a "no limits" partnership with Moscow,

providing the financial, material, and technological support Russia needs to wage its war on Ukraine.¹

Additionally, the primary theater of U.S. strategic competition has shifted from Central Europe to the Western Pacific, now the world's most economically and technologically dynamic region. China's industrial development and military modernization have been equally significant. China now accounts for about 28% of global manufacturing, while the United States represents about 17% (the third- and fourth-largest manufacturing nations are Japan and Germany at about 5% each).² China fields the world's largest navy and sophisticated air and rocket forces, all of which routinely conduct exercises to simulate attacks on, or the isolation of, Taiwan. Today's strategic environment does not resemble that of the early 1980s.

In many ways, Chinese leaders understand how much has changed. While they insist that their American counterparts remain faithful to past agreements, Beijing largely does not observe any of the restraints that underpinned the compromise between the two countries. Chinese leaders have mostly dropped the pretense of working toward "peaceful reunification"; today, Beijing employs military threats, economic coercion, cyberattacks, and political warfare on a nearly daily basis to isolate Taipei and compel its capitulation. The United States' decision to constrain its security relationship with Taipei in the late 1970s was predicated on Beijing's alignment with Washington against Moscow. That foundation no longer holds.

Under these new circumstances, American policymakers should conduct a "clean-sheet" review of the policies that have governed Sino-American relations for nearly half a century. This review should not seek to shoehorn existing policies into today's geopolitical environment but clearly identify America's vital national interests and then develop the alliances, policies, and strategies that would most likely sustain and protect those interests. If strategic ambiguity and the U.S.

"One China" policy continue to serve American interests, they should be retained. But if they do not, they should not be preserved out of habit or nostalgia.

What are America's vital interests?

To assess U.S. policy toward Taiwan, American policymakers must first identify the United States' vital national interests in the Indo-Pacific. A stable and secure Western Hemisphere is necessary, but not sufficient, to provide for the prosperity and security of the United States. Over the past few decades, the Indo-Pacific has become the locus of global economic and technological power, compelling American leaders to recognize two vital national interests in the region. The first is to maintain a free, open, peaceful, and stable region. The second is to prevent a rival from dominating this most important economic, technological, and geopolitical region in the world. The logic that encouraged the United States to prevent Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union from dominating Europe in the 20th century now encourages it to prioritize the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century.

Today, the United States and China are now hostile rivals, seeking to establish competing visions of an international order by controlling the Indo-Pacific and translating that control into a global system. For now, the rivalry falls short of outright conflict, but the relationship is defined by tension, not only competition, and can no longer be described as a partnership. In the spectrum between friends and enemies, the United States and China have moved away from the former and closer to the latter.

The one place where this rivalry is most acute, with risks of a large-scale military conflict, is Taiwan. Aside from perhaps aggression by North Korea, the potential of a large-scale military attack on Taiwan is the most plausible scenario that would threaten the first U.S. vital national

interest listed above—that of a free, open, and peaceful Indo-Pacific region. Further, if China were successful in conducting an attack and annexing Taiwan, the second vital national interest—preventing a rival from dominating the Indo-Pacific—would be threatened.

Taiwan's importance to the United States cannot be understood without examining why it holds such a prominent place in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) strategic and ideological calculations. For the CCP, Taiwan represents the last unresolved element of the Chinese civil war, and, for a variety of reasons, the party has tied its legitimacy to Taiwan's eventual annexation. The party proclaims that it prefers to achieve this goal through "peaceful" means, but China's leaders have stated explicitly, and on numerous occasions, that the use of military force, including the invasion of Taiwan, is on the table. Moreover, the PLA's training, doctrine, procurement, and exercises are designed to undertake such an attack.

Taiwan is not just symbolically powerful but also influences the regional balance of power. Taiwan represents a geographic barrier, when combined with other U.S. Indo-Pacific allies, that contains Chinese power inside the first island chain. Taiwan also possesses the most advanced microelectronics production industry in the world. Controlling and having access to this technology grants enormous advantages for both economic prosperity and national security.

Taiwan's transition to democracy in the 1990s adds a significant ideological dimension to its relations with Beijing. Today, the island nation represents an alternative political system to mainland China, in ways that the Kuomintang dictatorship of the 1950s to the 1980s did not. As a democracy, Taiwan is connected to, and representative of, the liberal international order built by the United States. This poses a significant ideological risk to the CCP's monopoly on power. Taiwan's existence as a democracy provides a real-world example to Chinese citizens that ethnic Chinese can thrive and be prosperous in

a dynamic multiparty democracy. Subverting, dismantling, and erasing Taiwan's democracy is a domestic security imperative for the CCP.

For the United States, Taiwan directly affects both vital interests identified above. Taiwan's dominance of semiconductor production is critically important to the U.S. economy and to the United States' technological military advantage vis-à-vis the PRC.³ As Taiwan is the geographic pivot point between Northeast and Southeast Asia, the United States can more easily maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific and prevent a rival from dominating the region if Taiwan remains free. Since Taiwan's transition to democracy, the island nation has become a significant success story for representative government with a strong rule of law, meaning Taiwan is important to America's long-term effort to build a friendly international order and to America's rivalry with China to control that order.

Taiwan's fate would also have immediate and significant consequences for U.S. allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific. Like Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines are under assault from the PRC, which seeks to take territory and maritime rights from them in the East China Sea and South China Sea, respectively. This has encouraged both countries to pursue closer security cooperation agreements with the United States, as well as with each other. In Japan's case, Japanese leaders have recognized that a PRC military attack against Taiwan would threaten Japanese vital national interests. Tokyo has used this rationale to undertake military modernization and rearmament since Chinese aggression in the East China Sea started in 2010.

Securing America's vital national interests

The United States must seriously consider that, at some point in the future, Chinese leaders may decide to abandon “peaceful unification” and seek to forcefully annex Taiwan. Such a decision would directly threaten America’s two vital national interests in the Indo-Pacific: maintaining a free, open, peaceful, and stable region; and preventing a hostile rival from dominating the region’s economic and technological centers of gravity. Under these circumstances, a policy of strategic ambiguity places the United States in a reactive mode, only able to mount an effective defense and gather the necessary coalition after Chinese leaders decide that the conditions are favorable for them to attack.

Deterrence, therefore, is the best way to protect the United States’ vital national interests. Effective deterrence requires convincing Chinese leaders that they could not achieve their desired objectives through a military attack—whether that is a standalone blockade, a blockade that escalates to an invasion, or a sudden invasion—at an acceptable cost. Presumably, Chinese leaders would only direct such an operation after concluding that the United States is either unwilling or unable to stop it. Yet strategic ambiguity, by design, creates uncertainty about U.S. intentions, leaving Beijing uncertain about whether the United States would intervene in response to aggression against Taiwan. Under current regional circumstances, that uncertainty is destabilizing: it undermines deterrence rather than reinforces it.

For deterrence to succeed, Chinese leaders must be confident of two things simultaneously. First, they must believe that the United States possesses the trained and ready military capabilities to prevent China from achieving its military objectives at an acceptable cost. Second, they

must believe that the United States has the political will to pay the substantial costs of employing those military capabilities to prevent China from achieving its military objectives. As long as both conditions hold, Chinese leaders are unlikely to initiate a war of aggression against Taiwan, given the near certainty that a conflict would be exceedingly long and costly.

Strategic ambiguity, however, purposefully obscures Chinese leaders’ certainty regarding American intentions. In the late Cold War, this vagueness aligned with U.S. interests. At the time of adoption, U.S. leaders believed that China lacked the capability to mount an effective attack on Taiwan and remained committed to “peaceful reunification.” Ambiguity discouraged Taiwanese leaders from outright rejecting Beijing’s entreaties while reassuring Chinese leaders that Washington was not completely opposed to their interests. Under those conditions, strategic ambiguity supported stability and served as a lubricant for cross-Strait negotiations, but those conditions no longer prevail.

Today, China’s PLA is far more capable than ever before, while the risk of conflict has grown. To achieve deterrence under these circumstances requires the United States to have a military posture and readiness that keeps pace with the PLA’s ability to coerce and threaten Taiwan. Just as important, U.S. leaders must persuade their Chinese counterparts that the United States will militarily intervene even if doing so comes at a very high cost in lives and resources. American leaders can build credibility in this area by expending political capital to convince the American people that deterring a Chinese attack on Taiwan is in their interests. They can also take steps to build a collective security framework to defend Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan from Chinese aggression, with support from partners like Australia, Europe, and others.

Ultimately, convincing China to forego the use of force against Taiwan necessitates a degree of clarity about U.S. intentions that American leaders have been reluctant to provide. Strategic

ambiguity now risks signaling hesitation or lack of will at a moment when deterrence depends on resolve.

The case for strategic clarity

Successful deterrence rests on two elements: the physical capability to impose intolerable costs and the demonstrated willingness to bear the costs of doing so. One without the other is not persuasive. Deterrence takes place within the mind of one's opponent, meaning it only succeeds when one's opponent believes that their actions will reliably trigger consequences that prevent them from achieving their objectives.

STRENGTHENING PHYSICAL DETERRENCE

In terms of physical capabilities, the United States still fields an impressive military force in the Western Pacific, along with a military headquarters that has spent decades focusing on responding to a Chinese attack on Taiwan. Although the U.S. military's advantages over the PLA have certainly shrunk since the 1990s, American capabilities and operational concepts have adapted as the PLA expanded and modernized.

A military attack on Taiwan would require the PLA to conduct a joint offensive operation over vast and difficult terrain in the face of significant and well-trained defensive military forces. Current and emerging military technologies, as seen on the battlefields of Ukraine, the Black Sea, and the Middle East, appear to favor the defense. Integrated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance forces, along with complex and redundant communications systems, can integrate dispersed and mobile weapons platforms on land, in the air, at sea, and in the ocean. If China were to blockade Taiwan, Chinese forces would need

to maintain a distributed ring around the island, which would be vulnerable to periodic disruption by the defenders. If China were to invade Taiwan, its forces would need to achieve mass at a specific time and place. Meanwhile, defenders would hold the advantage of detecting those preparations and using fires to disrupt the assault by destroying the units and assets Beijing needs to accomplish its objectives.

To support these advantages, the United States should maintain capable, forward-deployed forces west of the international date line; continue to conduct unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral training exercises tailored to intelligence on Chinese military plans and operational concepts; and field its most advanced weapon systems to the Indo-Pacific region. The exercises conducted by China to intimidate Taiwan provide excellent insight into how China would conduct a range of military operations.

The United States should maintain its long-standing policy of fielding its most advanced weapon systems to the Indo-Pacific region and continue to update and refine tactics and operating concepts based upon intelligence on how China intends to operate in a military contingency.

The United States should also expand its rehearsals and exercises for conducting distributed logistics across the Pacific, as well as develop and rehearse plans for protecting critical infrastructure and the defense industrial base inside the continental United States. Ensuring that the Panama Canal and U.S. ports are free of Chinese influence is an important step. The United States should make itself a "harder target" against Chinese sabotage and strikes to take out critical assets and infrastructure.

The United States should expand the number of military units aligned to contingencies in the Indo-Pacific, just as the U.S. Army did on December 5, 2025, when it permanently assigned I Corps and the 4th Infantry Division to United States Army Pacific.

The United States should maintain its long-standing policy of training with Taiwanese military forces. Moreover, it should expand the opportunities in which U.S. and Taiwanese military forces can operate alongside each other in high-end contingencies, build interoperability, and create a broad understanding of how each military operates and conducts its military missions. U.S. and Taiwanese military cooperation should expand to contingency planning and involve detailed specifics on how units would fight alongside one another. To be effective, the United States must provide a greater degree of certainty to its partner about U.S. intentions.

STRENGTHEN PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERRENCE

These measures to build capability and resilience are necessary but insufficient to maintain deterrence. Indeed, simply positioning military forces, training them, and building infrastructure to support them does not mean that U.S. political leaders and the public are prepared or willing to employ those forces at great cost and sacrifice. Authoritarian regimes often convince themselves that democracies are weak and unwilling to fight, unless those democracies demonstrate through public opinion and political consensus a willingness to accept sacrifice in defense of their interests.

This is why the policy of strategic ambiguity is so problematic under the current circumstances. By intentionally being vague about whether the United States would militarily intervene if China attacked Taiwan, and by failing to explain to the American people why it is in their interest to deter an attack on Taiwan, U.S. leaders feed into authoritarian preconceptions of democratic weakness. Ambiguity, by definition, creates uncertainty, and uncertainty may persuade Chinese leaders that they have a window of opportunity to attack Taiwan without an American or allied military response.

Adopting a policy of “strategic clarity” would not surrender U.S. autonomy to Taipei, nor would it require abandoning the U.S. “One China” policy. Ambiguity and clarity are not binary; they exist across a spectrum. As discussed earlier, the U.S. “One China” policy is not the same as Beijing’s “One China” principle and has always preserved the right to provide for Taiwan’s defense and to intervene militarily should American leaders decide it is in their interest to do so. Strategic clarity would make that conditional commitment more credible.

Conclusion

By pairing a policy of “strategic clarity” with the U.S. “One China” policy, Washington can better balance deterrence and reassurance under present conditions. China’s growing military power and shift toward hostile rivalry with the United States compel Washington to provide greater clarity on its intentions regarding Taiwan. Such clarity would allow U.S. leaders to prepare the American people for a potential conflict with China and mobilize partners to join with the United States. It would also help deter Chinese aggression and ultimately protect U.S. vital national interests.

Successful American, Taiwanese, and allied deterrence is likely to drive Chinese leaders further toward indirect coercion, consisting of cognitive warfare, gray zone threats, economic coercion, and political interference, tactics Beijing already employs. While these methods are disruptive and pose challenges to Taiwan and its partners, they are unlikely to achieve China’s ultimate political goal of annexing Taiwan and dismantling its democracy.

One could imagine a future scenario in which Chinese leaders conclude that their aggressive approach to Taiwan is counterproductive, that Beijing is pushing the Taiwanese people away. Chinese leaders might adopt a new approach, perhaps dismantle a portion of the military infrastructure threatening Taiwan, end their economic

coercion and political interference, and pursue good-faith negotiations with elected Taiwanese leaders. These would all be positive changes that American leaders should welcome. Under those conditions, it might be wise for U.S. leaders to return to a policy of “strategic ambiguity.” However, until such a time as Beijing reverses course in its attempts to isolate and pressure Taiwan, the United States’ interests in the Indo-Pacific would be better served by adopting a policy of strategic clarity.

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Endnotes

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