

TAIWAN AND STRATEGIC SECURITY

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When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, it also simultaneously attacked the Philippines, triggering World War II in the Pacific. It was the opening salvo in the Japanese Empire's campaign to invade and subjugate Southeast Asia in pursuit of its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The planes that bombed Hawaii were launched from Japanese aircraft carriers in the Pacific. The aircraft that attacked the Philippines took off from the island of Taiwan which was then under Japanese military rule. General Douglas MacArthur called Taiwan "the unsinkable aircraft carrier" and it was the jumping-off point for the attacks on both the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). Throughout the war, Taiwan served as the staging area and major supply base that sustained Japan's armies in Southeast Asia and as the control point for all shipping through the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. State Department at the time stated that no location in the Far East, with the exception of Singapore, occupied such a controlling strategic position. Taiwan's geography tells the story.

Situated 100 miles east of China, Taiwan is positioned at the edge of the South China Sea's shipping lanes. To the south it is 200 miles from the

Philippines, 700 miles from China's Hainan Island, and 900 miles from Vietnam and the Spratley Islands. Linked to the north with the Ryukyu Islands, it is 700 miles from Japan's home islands. Historically, Taiwan's pivotal location off the China coast and between Northeast and Southeast Asia has served a variety of strategic purposes for regional powers, both offensive and defensive. In the contemporary era, Taiwan remains geographically at the intersection of most of East Asia's danger points. (Even a conflict on the Korean Peninsula could be impacted by operations that might be launched from Taiwan.)

Drawing on historical experience, the question is whether Taiwan would be as valuable a strategic asset to a potential aggressor in Asia today as it was for Japan in the 1940s. The only powers that presently threaten the peace and stability of the region are the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Northeast Asia and its patron and protector, the People's Republic of China which has active ongoing disputes in both Northeast and Southeast Asia. Taiwan, which Beijing claims as an integral part of Chinese territory, would enhance China's strategic position in both areas.

Controlling Taiwan would facilitate China's operations in the South China Sea and enable it to assert its territorial and maritime claims even more aggressively against the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. China's sweeping "nine-dash line" immediately would become both more real and more

easily enforceable by Beijing. Most of the 1600 ballistic missiles now targeting Taiwan and the U.S. Navy could instead be moved to Taiwan itself and re-targeted against the ships and territories of other Southeast Asian states as well as the region's shipping lanes used by world commerce. China would be in an enhanced advantageous position to make the South China Sea the "Chinese lake" it claims as a historical right.

Further, from China's perspective, Taiwan is one of the critical links in the so-called "first island chain" that includes Japan, the Ryukyus, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia. Beijing sees the navigational "choke points" between those island clusters as constraining the People's Liberation Army's naval access to the "second island chain" (Guam, the Marianas, the Palau island group and other small islands in the central Pacific) and from there into the open ocean far from China's shores.

China's coast-line in the East China Sea lacks the deep-water ports needed to service its naval bases located there. Its submarines must operate on the surface until they are able to submerge and dive deep when they reach the area of the Ryukus archipelagoes. If China controlled Taiwan, its submarines would have a far easier exit from Taiwan's deep-water ports into the Pacific. They could present a new danger for Japan--which is totally dependent on the East Asia sea-lanes for its energy and other raw materials. In addition to augmenting the Chinese submarine

threat, China's possession of Taiwan would increase by 100 miles the range of China's land-based ballistic missiles. That combination would enhance China's ability to project power into the Pacific, presenting an increased threat to the U.S. Seventh Fleet, Guam, Hawaii, and even the West Coast of the United States. Moreover, to the extent China's far-ranging navy would distract Washington and Tokyo and embolden North Korea's already-reckless leader, it could directly endanger the security of South Korea.

From a purely naval and military perspective, control of the island of Taiwan would constitute a huge strategic asset for China and a danger to the region in both Southeast and Northeast Asia as well as to the United States. Chinese control of Taiwan, its technologically-advanced economy, and control of the entrance to the South China Sea would have major economic, diplomatic, and political implications for the region. There would likely be a cascading effect as regional governments recalculate their self-interests in the face of an even more powerfully situated China. Singapore might well be intimidated into a more pro-China position, consolidating Beijing's control of the South China Sea with Taiwan in the north and Singapore in the south. Denying China that asset and that leverage is clearly in the strategic security and economic interests of the countries of Southeast Asia, Japan, and the United States.

Yet, for a brief period after World War II, Washington seemed to lose sight of Taiwan's strategic value, even after China itself fell to the Communists. Secretary of State Acheson's famous National Press Club speech in January 1950 delineated America's security perimeter in Asia but did not include either Taiwan or South Korea. Mao Zedong and Kim Il-sung--as well as their senior partner, Josef Stalin—interpreted the statement as indicating that the U.S. would not defend either country and saw a green light for their expansionist plans. North Korea moved first and invaded South Korea in June, 1950. The Truman administration, which until then had effectively written off Taiwan's security value to the United States, was shocked by Pyongyang's naked aggression and determined that it could not be allowed to stand. It organized an immediate U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing the multilateral use of force to defend South Korea. The president, fearing additional Communist advances in Asia, further reversed course by deploying the Seventh Fleet to deter a Chinese move against Taiwan. (It was also designed to block an attempt by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek to try to re-ignite the Chinese Civil War. The Nationalists had promised to retake the mainland ever since they were expelled from China.) President Truman's statement explained the dramatic shift in U.S. policy on Taiwan in the context of the Cold War:

The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use invasion and war. It has defied the orders of the Security Council of the United Nations issued to preserve international peace and security.

In these circumstances the occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to the United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area.

Accordingly I have ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary of this action I am calling upon the Chinese government on Formosa to cease all air and sea actions against the mainland. The Seventh Fleet will see that this is done.

The United States was now explicitly committed to the defense of Taiwan against Chinese aggression—as well as to stability in the Taiwan Strait that might be threatened by military action *from* Taiwan. The rationale had less to do with protecting Chiang Kai-shek or even the Taiwanese people than with Taiwan's geopolitical position in East Asia and America's own strategic interests. General Douglas MacArthur, who was responsible for the postwar transitional administration of Japan, expressed the U.S. position in stark terms:

I believe if you lose Formosa, you lose the key to our littoral line of defense . . . the Philippines and Japan both would be untenable from our military point of view.

[F]rom our standpoint we practically lose the Pacific Ocean if we give up or lose Formosa. . . . We do not need Formosa for bases or anything else. But [it] should not be allowed to fall into red hands.

If the enemy secured Formosa and secured thereby the Pacific Ocean, that would immeasurably increase the dangers of that ocean being used as an avenue of advance by any potential enemy.

In 1954, China shelled the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in what became known as the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. The U.S. responded by entering into a formal mutual defense treaty with the Republic of China on Taiwan (as well as with the Republic of Korea after the end of its war with the North). President Eisenhower stated the reason for the Taiwan defense treaty as follows:

In unfriendly hands, Formosa and the Pescadores would seriously dislocate the existing, even if unstable, balance of moral, economic, and military forces upon which the peace of the Pacific depends. It would create a breach in the island chain of the Western Pacific that constitutes for the United States and other free nations, the geographical backbone of their security structure in that ocean.

In addition, this breach would interrupt north-south communications between other important elements of that barrier, and damage the economic life of countries friendly to us.

This history demonstrates that both Republican and Democratic administrations saw Taiwan's strategic value in the same light. The Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time put it this way:

The geographic location of Formosa is such that in the hands of a power unfriendly to the United States it constitutes an enemy salient in the very center of our defensive perimeter, 100 to 150 miles closer to the adjacent friendly segments--Okinawa and the Philippines--than any point in continental Asia

The emphasis clearly was on Taiwan's defensive, not offensive, role. Even during this period when the U.S. and the Republic of China had a formal mutual defense pact, the U.S. consistently viewed Taiwan primarily as an important strategic asset that must not be allowed to fall under Beijing's control, rather than as a staging point for offensive operations against China or other potential adversaries in Asia. The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958 saw a resumption of Chinese bombardment of the offshore islands. The defense of Quemoy and Matsu became an issue in the 1960 presidential campaign as both Vice-President Richard Nixon and Senator John Kennedy pledged to defend Formosa and the islands of Quemoy and Matsu against Chinese aggression. The Taiwan-China and U.S.-China standoffs over Taiwan continued for the next decade-and-half with the Seventh Fleet serving as the enforcer in the Taiwan Strait, through administrations of both parties. Taiwan reciprocated as a loyal ally during the 1960s, providing logistic, intelligence, and other support to the United States during the Vietnam War.

The situation changed dramatically with President Nixon's opening to China in 1972 in order to play the China card against the Soviet Union and to win Beijing's support for an honorable American exit from Vietnam. Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, were so intent on enlisting China as a strategic partner against the Soviets that they began making concessions on Taiwan

even before Nixon visited China—which violated their so-called “realist” principles about never giving up something valuable without being sure of getting something of equal or greater value in return. Instead, Nixon almost immediately withdrew the Seventh Fleet from the Taiwan Strait and began removing all remaining U.S. military facilities from Taiwan.

Then came the Shanghai Communique, Beijing’s “one China” principle that Taiwan is part of China, and Washington’s “one China policy” that it is up to China and Taiwan to work out the relationship peacefully. The U.S.-Taiwan Mutual Defense Treaty remained in effect for the time being during the Nixon-Mao entente, but the handwriting was on the wall for Taiwan’s fate within the international community. Seven years later, the Carter administration made it official, recognizing the People’s Republic of China, severing formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and terminating the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty. Once again, Taiwan’s strategic value was being ignored by a presidential administration in Washington more intent on cultivating good relations with China.

The U.S. Congress, however, had a different perspective on Taiwan’s future and passed the Taiwan Relations Act “to declare that peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern.” The Act stated that its further purpose was “to make clear 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.”

To help deter China’s use of force against Taiwan, the TRA also obligated the United States to provide Taiwan with all necessary defensive arms. Congress considered the Act essential to undo some of the harm caused by President Carter’s abrogation of the Mutual Defense Treaty that had kept the peace for a quarter of a century. But the TRA fell slightly short of renewing the iron-clad American commitment to defend Taiwan that the Defense Treaty had guaranteed.

The opportunity to affirm that kind of strong and clear U.S. commitment to Taiwan came when China reacted to a U.S. visit by then-President Lee Teng-hui in 1995 by firing missiles toward the island in both cases and closing the Taiwan Strait and the airspace above it to world commerce. President Clinton sent two aircraft carrier battle groups through the Strait, the first time the U.S. Navy had traversed it since Nixon withdrew the Seventh Fleet 23 years earlier. China vehemently protested the incursion into what it considered Chinese waters. Washington, instead of simply informing Beijing that the U.S. and other nations had every right to be there under international law, said the transit was the result of a weather diversion, implicitly conceding that China’s consent was required.

In December 1995, Chinese officials asked Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Nye directly what the U.S. would do if China attacked Taiwan. Instead of invoking and strengthening the Taiwan Relations Act by saying the U.S. would assist Taiwan's self-defense, Nye's response was: "We don't know and you don't know. It would depend on the circumstances." A few months later, in March 1996, Taiwan held its first direct presidential election and China showed its displeasure once again by lobbing missiles toward Taiwan, this time straddling both sides of the island. And once again, Clinton dispatched a carrier battle group to the region. But this time, Beijing warned that any ships entering the Strait would find "a sea of fire" (also a threat favored by North Korea and Iran). Washington got the message and the ships stayed out—not just on that occasion but for the next decade. The experience taught Beijing some lessons about how it could deter U.S. involvement in a cross-Strait crisis.

It was only when the Defense Department reviewed its Freedom of Navigation program in 2006 that the U.S. Navy began sending its ships back through the Taiwan Strait, always over Chinese objections. In 2007 after Beijing suddenly revoked a scheduled good-will U.S. port visit to Hong Kong, the Kitty Hawk battle group returned to Japan by going through the Strait. China strongly condemned the passage and Admiral Timothy Keating, head of the U.S. Pacific Command, responded: "We don't need China's permission to go through the

Taiwan Strait. We will exercise our free right of passage whenever we need to—
correct that--whenever we choose to.”

The incidents demonstrate that it is not only the island of Taiwan that is of critical strategic importance, but also the Taiwan Strait. Any conflict across the Strait would have a major impact on both naval and commercial passage. If China controlled both sides of the Strait, it would have a stranglehold on that international waterway.

There is another aspect to Taiwan’s security dimension that flows from its geostrategic location—and that is its role in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, both as a recipient and a provider of HADR. The Asia-Pacific is subject to some of the world’s worst weather and natural disasters. When Typhoon Morakot struck Taiwan in 2009, the U.S. Seventh Fleet sent ships and aircraft to come to the aid of the Taiwanese people. In 2011, when the earthquake and tsunami devastated Fukushima, Taiwan immediately dispatched rescue teams and technical personnel and was the largest financial contributor to Japan’s recovery effort. When the Philippines suffered the impact of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, Taiwan responded quickly with major assistance. Taiwan has consistently responded to HADR needs around the world from Indonesia’s 2004 tsunami, to Haiti’s earthquake in 2010,

the Western Sahara's drought in 2013, and other natural disasters in Asia and elsewhere.

To summarize, Taiwan's strategic importance from a military, economic and humanitarian assistance standpoint is clear even though there have been historical periods when U.S. administrations of both parties have seemed to minimize it for the perceived greater goal of accommodating the Chinese government.

Since the 1980s, however, the people of Taiwan have added an entirely new dimension to the country's importance to the West. Taiwan's political opposition, and eventually the leaders of the governing party, recognized that once official U.S. diplomatic relations had shifted from Taipei to Beijing because of considerations of *realpolitik*, its salvation as a viable *de facto* independent entity depended on shared moral and political values. Taiwan's phased, planned transition to democracy meant that Washington and the West had now lost the easy "realist" rationale at their disposal. No longer was it a matter of choosing a small, friendly dictatorship or trying as opposed to improving relations with a larger, potentially hostile one. Now that Taiwan had democratized itself, Americans, and Japanese, could look at Taiwan as a moral and political soul mate, certainly by contrast to a country ruled by the Chinese Communist Party with its the anti-Western hostility.

For the same reason, Taiwan now became even more of a bone in Beijing's throat as a model of democratic governance in a Chinese society, undermining the PRC's myth that democracy and Confucianism are incompatible. This happened at a time internal pressure for political reform in China was increasing during the 1980s, culminating in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. Given those geopolitical stakes, the Taiwan Relations Act took on even greater strategic significance for the United States.

When President Obama announced the U.S. "pivot to Asia" before the Australian parliament in 2011, he linked U.S. strategic interests to the success of democracy in the region and pledged "every element of American power" to achieving "security, prosperity, and dignity for all." That places Taiwan and its democratic future at the strategic epicenter of America's moral and political commitment to the region. U.S. credibility is now tied inextricably to Taiwan's fate, with or without an explicit defense commitment in the TRA. Any weakening of American resolve to ensure Taiwan's continued security would significantly undermine that credibility throughout the region among friends, allies, and most critically, our adversaries.

Those who argue that the Taiwan game is not worth the candle fail to grasp how much weight other countries in the region place on America's commitment to

Taiwan as a bell-weather of U.S. reliability should any of them come under increased coercive pressure or outright hostility from China. They see the U.S. as the necessary balancer to China's military buildup and expansionist policies and Taiwan as the number one test case of U.S. will.

That is why the U.S. declarative policy of "strategic ambiguity" needs to change sooner rather than later. Washington's refusal to make an explicit public commitment to not only provide Taiwan with defensive weapons but to come actively to its defense sows doubts in the region. Worse, it encourages China to continue pursuing its anti-access, area denial strategy of deploying attack submarines and ballistic missiles to deter, delay, or defeat any U.S. intervention in a cross-Strait conflict. After all, Washington has said ever since 1995 it might or might not defend Taiwan depending on the circumstances. So Beijing has been creating the circumstances to affect that calculus. It is worth considering whether China would have invested so much of its national wealth and effort to an anti-Taiwan strategy if the U.S. had made it clear back in 1995, when Beijing asked the direct question, that an attack on Taiwan would certainly mean military conflict with the United States. Whatever their faults, Chinese leaders are not suicidal.

Yet, some experts argue that a clear declarative policy statement on Taiwan is unnecessary and "passé." According to that thesis, China has been told in no uncertain terms in various private meetings of the U.S. commitment to defend

Taiwan. So, the argument goes, it is already being deterred from taking action against Taiwan. The analysis is flawed. First, it is highly implausible that a U.S. commitment to go to war with China would be made behind closed doors without informing the American public or Congress. Second, any commitment that is not made publicly lacks credibility precisely because American prestige is not put openly on the line--a secret red line is especially evanescent. Third, China observed what happened when, for one brief shining moment, strategic clarity broke through U.S. policy. After the EP-3 incident in April 2001, President George W. Bush was asked what the U.S. would do to defend Taiwan against a Chinese attack; he replied "whatever it takes." That unambiguous statement sent shock waves through the China specialist community. White House and State Department officials rushed to "clarify" that U.S. policy had not changed. That is where our public posture remains today. Fourth, much as China's leaders complain about U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, they understand that Washington has in fact deferred to Chinese sensibilities in both the quantity and quality of the weapons transferred. Taiwan is consistently denied the advanced systems it requests: F-16-CDs, F-35s, diesel submarines. Fifth, Beijing has reason to doubt U.S. will and staying power in any serious military confrontation with China after its first-hand experience with America's conduct of limited war in Korea and Vietnam. It has also observed U.S. strategic planners' penchant for "off-ramps" on

the escalatory ladder so that things don't get out of control. That approach restrains U.S. freedom of action even in the context of non-kinetic means like sanctions, particularly against a major power. Weak or easily by-passed sanctions were applied by the West in the case of Russia over the Ukraine issue or with Iran over its nuclear program. China's leaders may well calculate that, even if there is an initial U.S. response to a Chinese move, they can demonstrate a willingness to escalate the crisis. In Beijing's scenario, it would be a matter of China protecting a core interest, even seeming to act irrationally, whereas Washington would inevitably back down rather than risk war over a perceived peripheral interest.

This question will become less theoretical as Taiwan's 2016 election approaches. Xi Jinping said recently that Taiwan's status cannot be deferred for another generation. If the candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party appears to have a reasonable prospect of winning, Beijing may see its last chance at peaceful unification receding out of reach. China's leaders may decide at that point that they cannot accept deferral of peaceful unification for at least another four years, possibly eight, and that Taiwan has had long enough to accept Communist Party rule.

At that point, as China's leaders from Mao Zedong on have made clear, Beijing will not hesitate to resort to the use of force if it believes it can get away with it. That threat was codified in China's 2005 Anti-Secession Law, which

threatened war if Taiwan declared formal independence or took actions toward that end. But the ASL went beyond warning Taiwan against taking affirmative pro-independence action; it also threatened Taiwan for *failing to act* in accordance with China's wishes. It states: "In the event that . . . possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity." In other words, both *de jure* and *de facto* independence (Taiwan's present *status quo*) are unacceptable to Beijing and would justify going to war with Taiwan.

However, the ASL does provide the following assurance to the people of Taiwan:

In the event of employing and executing non-peaceful means and other necessary measures . . . the state shall exert its utmost to protect the lives, property and other legitimate rights and interests of Taiwan civilians and foreign nationals in Taiwan, and to minimize losses.

When the bombs and missiles start falling on Taiwan those words will provide cold comfort.

The historical U.S. view of Taiwan in strictly negative terms—as a strategic asset to be denied Beijing--has carried forward to the current period. But that thinking could well change as China's recent expansionist policies in Northeast and Southeast Asia threaten America's allies and increase the likelihood of a China-U.S. confrontation. If Beijing has mistakenly convinced itself that its area-denial/ anti-access strategy has succeeded in weakening America's commitment to

Taiwan, U.S. strategy may require a reassessment of Washington's self-imposed Taiwan-denial posture. That is, if sinkable, sea-going aircraft carriers are kept outside the first island chain, the unsinkable aircraft carrier concept might need to come into play. Taiwan, instead of merely constituting a vulnerable place to defend, could become precisely the forward base for offensive operations that U.S. officials have long disavowed.

The evolving Air-Sea Battle concept, under which bases and facilities on the Chinese mainland might be targeted would add a strategic dimension to a U.S.-China conflict that Beijing for too long has ignored. From time to time, China's military officials and strategic planners like to amplify a Chinese general's warning to Washington during the 1995-1996 missile crisis that "you care more about Los Angeles than Taiwan." Now they would have to contemplate whether China cares more about Taipei than Beijing and Shanghai. These implied strategic threats are unfortunately reminiscent of the "mutually assured destruction" language of the Cold War. Yet, after forty years of diplomatic engagement with China--including the unending stream of Western aid, trade, and technology that enabled its remarkable economic and military rise--Beijing has chosen to make itself not a friend, strategic partner, or responsible stakeholder, but a new quasi-Cold War adversary.

China can no longer be allowed the luxury of issuing reckless threats against the United States without having to confront the very real consequences of converting such rhetoric into action. Otherwise, we will both be in danger of repeating the strategic miscalculations that led to the Korean War. As Kissinger has written: “We didn’t expect the invasion; China didn’t expect our response.” Asia does not need another war based on poor communications.