

Spring 2022 - Marcellus Policy Analysis

## A New US Balancing Act: Rejecting War & Protecting Taiwan

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If maintaining peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region — and if preserving the economic autonomy, political freedom, and human rights of Taiwan — is in the national interest, then U.S. policy must adapt to changing security conditions. The U.S. should commit to military non-intervention if the cross-Strait dispute over Taiwan's sovereignty were to deteriorate. This position of restraint is intended to prevent such deterioration from occurring. China's patience on the matter of reunification, and by extension its willingness to either accept or disrupt the status quo, is inextricably linked to its perception of Taiwan's independence movement. This perception is formed by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) observations of the synergy between Washington and Taipei. Beijing's threat perception heightens exclusively during periods of coexistence between a liberal executive in Taiwan and a deeply engaged U.S. government. Therefore, if the U.S. were to shed its cloak of "strategic ambiguity" and clearly commit to staying out of this fight, China would have significantly less reason to start a fight in the first place.

To be clear, an express commitment to military non-intervention does not mean that the U.S. would abandon Taiwan. The U.S. should simultaneously commit to supporting Taiwan's resilience in three meaningful ways. Specifically, the U.S. ought to recommit to consistent and limited arms sales of a strictly defensive nature, commit to financing projects that enhance Taiwan's ability to produce energy domestically, and prepare to initiate negotiations on a grand bargain for both avoiding war and protecting Taiwan's human rights. For China, these U.S. actions would significantly raise the human, economic, and political costs of unprovoked aggression. These costs, paired with a lower threat perception, would be sufficient to make continuity of the status quo the most feasible, viable, and desirable option for China.

With ambiguity steadily losing its utility as a stabilizing approach to the Taiwan Strait, this paper will make the case for why a restrained version of U.S. "strategic clarity" has the greatest potential to replicate the conditions for peace and stability that ambiguity had initially fashioned. The first section will explain why and how ambiguity is failing, the dangers of clearly committing U.S. armed forces to Taiwan's defense, and the strategic benefits of restraint. The second section will explore the two main defensive services that the U.S. *can* responsibly provide to Taiwan in order to deter a rational China. The third section will present a grand bargain specifically designed to manage a cross-Strait crisis in case China acts irrationally on Taiwan. The conclusion will summarize policy recommendations.

## Failing Ambiguity, Fledgling Clarity

### Growing Weary: Why & How Ambiguity is Failing

Structural changes in the relationships between the U.S., China, and Taiwan account for the diminishing utility of U.S. strategic ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> China has been rising at a rapid pace, translating its wealth into military might, and thereby disrupting the balance of power that had made ambiguity an effective strategy for maintaining the status quo.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, ambiguity's success hinges on the U.S. possessing decisive power, which had been the case when the U.S. established ambiguity in the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979.<sup>3</sup> China's rise now threatens the U.S. maintenance of such power, or at least its abilities to use such power in the Strait.

It will be beneficial to conceptualize ambiguity as a fulcrum, the cross-Strait relationship as a plank balancing on the fulcrum, and U.S. power as a load in the center of the plank. If either side exerts too much downward force — for Taiwan, this means the provocation of declaring formal independence; for China, this means launching an unprovoked attack — the weight of U.S. power moves against the interests of the provocateur. As long as the U.S. wields decisive power in the Strait, both sides are incentivized to accept the status quo. Over the past four decades, this basic model has maintained peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

However, when accounting for the new balance of power, this model no longer serves U.S. interests of regional peace and stability. In fact, this model becomes a direct path to great power war. If China were to launch an unprovoked attack on Taiwan sometime within the next 5-15 years, this model would likely have the U.S. and Taiwan bear down *without* a clear power advantage in the Strait.<sup>4,5</sup>

Moreover, the matter of China's military power goes beyond sheer size and technological sophistication. China has deliberately enhanced its capabilities over the past three decades in accordance with two main goals — to annex Taiwan and to delay or weaken U.S. forces that attempt to respond.<sup>6</sup> China's progress toward these specific goals further affect how the model

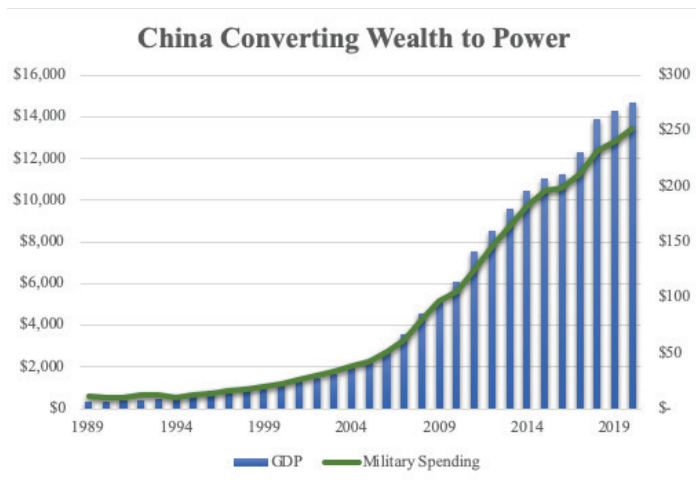
of ambiguity functions because they lessen the weight of U.S. and Taiwan power bearing down.

### Changing Power Balance Has Warped the Logic of Ambiguity

In response to the increasingly unfavorable balance of power in the Strait, the U.S. and Taiwan have spent recent years strengthening their political-security relationship.<sup>7,8</sup> Evidence that this relationship is changing primarily includes the more frequent and formal nature of bilateral diplomatic engagement. In 2020, the Trump administration lifted rules preventing the formal interaction of American and Taiwan diplomats, a policy which the Biden administration has continued.<sup>9,10</sup> The Biden administration has also argued in favor of Taiwan's independent inclusion in the United Nations, the institution tasked with managing global security issues.<sup>11</sup>

Given China's rise, the U.S. and Taiwan pursuing closer political and security alignment is the most logical action within the model currently constructed. However, it is not apparent that increasingly coordinating actions and combining power would be sufficient to tilt the balance back into a favorable position. In fact, as detailed later in this section, a closer U.S.-Taiwan partnership will only encourage the power-advantaged China to accelerate its timeline for reunification and incentivize a resort to force. Ambiguity had been designed to prevent these exact outcomes.<sup>12,13</sup> If logical thinking within this current fulcrum model leads to illogical decisions and unfavorable outcomes, the model itself must be replaced.

While many analysts in the U.S. still favor maintaining some semblance of ambiguity, strategists increasingly advocate for clarifying U.S. commitments to Taiwan.<sup>14</sup> However, advocacy for clarity has heretofore been mostly supportive of enhancing deterrence by shifting to a security guarantee for Taiwan.<sup>15</sup> Extending a security guarantee would not be preferable to maintaining a failing policy of ambiguity because the former is the final product of the latter. Whereas ambiguity aims for dual deterrence, a security guarantee could restrain neither Taiwanese independence nor Chinese aggression. In fact, it would catalyze both disruptions to the status quo.



Data Sources: World Bank, SIPRI<sup>16,17,18</sup>

## Sleepwalking Into War: The Dangers of Defaulting to Intervention

For Americans concerned about the wellbeing of people in Taiwan, the preservation of peace and stability in the region, and the broader geopolitical contest between the U.S. and China, there are three key factors to consider when devising a new strategy for the Taiwan Strait. Temporal advantage, spatial relativity, and the unintended consequences of power each demand more thought and greater weight in analysis.

### A Matter of Time

Temporal advantage is the pivotal, crucial factor for the defense of Taiwan.<sup>19</sup> There are three main orders of the concept:

1. **First Order** time refers to the current period in which China still has some degree of patience on the issue of reunification; here, Chinese patience and optimism are temporally advantageous, while Chinese urgency and pessimism are temporally disadvantageous
2. **Second Order** time refers to the period between China's decision to use force and the actual launch of its campaign; here, a long period of time is advantageous to Taiwan's preparations and a short period of time is disadvantageous
3. **Third Order** time refers to the period between the campaign launch and the end of fighting; here, the primary concerns are whether Taiwan can outlast

a blockade, whether Taiwan can asymmetrically wear down the Chinese will to fight, and whether external states can undermine Chinese capabilities for sustaining the attack

Based on these three struggles for temporal advantage, the ultimate strategic question for the U.S. is which version of strategic clarity will afford Taiwan the optimal amount of time. Ambiguity has won the first order temporal advantage since 1979. Now at a critical juncture, the U.S. should not abandon its maintenance of this advantage in its response to the changing balance of power.

Keeping the first order temporal advantage would yield critical new information. For example, these upcoming decades will hold answers as to whether China will first grow old or wealthy, keep the good will of its massive population or experience civil unrest, and inspire other states near and far to either support or oppose its vision of a revised world order. Time would also tell whether China will withstand or struggle under the emerging multifaceted security challenges associated with climate change, and whether it will race ahead or fall behind in the contest for global superiority in advanced technology.

In short, if Chinese aggression cannot be deterred, further patience ought to be incentivized. Xi Jinping has described the annexation of Taiwan as an "unshakable commitment" of the CCP.<sup>20</sup> Yet this commitment remains without a definitive timeline and maintains both peaceful and coercive means as options for reunification.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it remains possible for the U.S. to leverage the qualities of this commitment in order to ensure the maintenance of the first order temporal advantage. This advantage would create opportunities to ensure that Taiwan's power and strategy become sufficient to its self-defense.

On the matter of seeking any temporal advantage, however, clarity of intervention is inadequate to the task. Addressed further in the next section, this approach does not truly reckon with how it affects China's sense of urgency on reunification. Intervention would likely accelerate Beijing's military investment, shorten its timeline for annexing Taiwan, and perversely incentivize an invasion. Additionally, the presence of non-decisive U.S. power in this conflict would function only to prolong the fighting.<sup>22</sup> This

would put Taiwan at a third order temporal disadvantage by perversely *extending* the Chinese window of opportunity for sustaining coercive actions.<sup>23</sup>

## The CCP Nightmare About Taiwan's Prospective Allies

What the CCP fears above all else is an independent Taiwan. A version of the island nation that is formally separate from China could no longer be isolated internationally. Taipei would be free to form its own alliances. It would predictably have many interested partners from the West due to its democratic system, open economy, and strategically valued location. The CCP worries that these Western actors would be hostile towards its regime, its model of governance, and its country's ascension.<sup>24</sup>

Beijing would especially fret about its adversaries, particularly the U.S., gaining a base of operation a mere 80 miles from China's coastline. Here, the fixed spatial closeness of China and Taiwan periodically comes into conflict with the dynamic political closeness of the U.S. and Taiwan. A formal U.S.-Taiwan alliance would make the China feel both exposed and contained, like a fish in a barrel. Whether Beijing is misreading U.S. intentions is irrelevant, as this arrangement would at least give China the *impression* of an immediate, proximate, and grave threat to its mainland.

The fear that Taiwan could be used as a platform for coercion and invasion is rooted in historical grievances. Colonial maneuverings on Taiwan — or, at the time, named Formosa — contributed to the outcomes of the Opium Wars and China's "century of humiliation."<sup>25</sup> Later, in the Sino-French War of 1884, France blockaded Taiwan as a means to weaken China's economic and diplomatic position.<sup>26</sup> In 1937, Japan attacked Shanghai and Guangzhou using planes that were launched from Taiwan.<sup>27</sup>

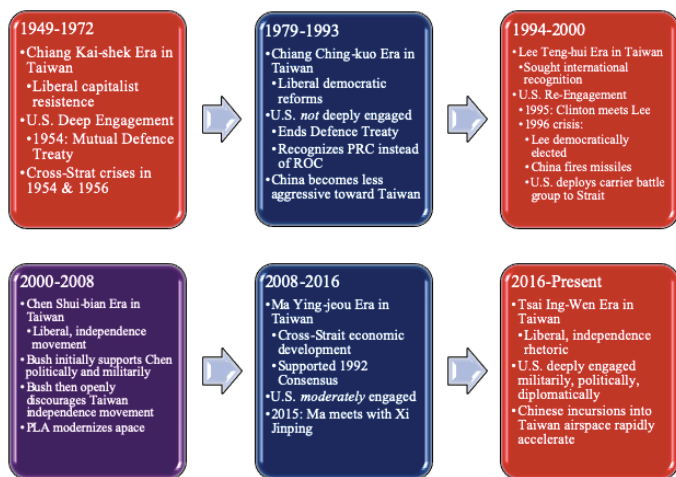
This fear of an adversarial foreign influence weaponizing the island is evident when members of China's leadership speak on the Taiwan issue. In January of 2022, the Chinese ambassador to the U.S. said, "If the Taiwanese authorities, *emboldened by the United States*, keep going down the road for independence, it most likely will involve China and the United States,

the two big countries, in a military conflict."<sup>28</sup> Not long prior to this statement, the spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in November of 2021, "'Taiwan independence' elements, *in collusion with external forces*, are constantly engaging in provocations by seeking 'independence,' which is the root cause of the current tense and turbulent situation in the Taiwan Strait."<sup>29</sup> Between these sentiments and Beijing's tolerance for Taiwan's current status, the aggressiveness on reunification is evidently not stemming solely from Taiwan's autonomy or democracy. Rather, concern is placed more specifically with the international implications of Taiwanese independence.

Yet this is not a new theme in CCP rhetoric, so neither is it solely a function of the highly strained and uniquely complex U.S.-China relationship that has characterized the period following the global financial crisis of 2008. From 1949-1979, the CCP tried to justify its threats of force against Taiwan by claiming to seek liberation for the island.<sup>30</sup> Washington's support for the Taiwan in this period gave the impression of U.S. domination by proxy, which renewed historical anxieties of geographical insecurity within the CCP. In short, Beijing sought not to "liberate" Taiwan from its regime, but more precisely to prevent a foreign influence from using the island against China.

States, especially great powers, are willing to resort to extreme uses of force when this type of immediate, proximate, and grave threat is suspected of existing or developing.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, a clear and unconditional U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan would function less as a deterrent and more so as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The closer that security coordination between Washington and Taipei becomes, the more Beijing will believe that a formal declaration of Taiwan's independence is imminent, and Beijing will then fear the potential synergies that would follow such a declaration. Thus, the stronger the U.S. defense commitment, the stronger the incentive for China to prevent Taiwanese independence and alliances with an attack.





## Crisis Defines Periods of Strong U.S.-Taiwan Synergy

Indeed, the scenario most capable of significantly changing Beijing's risk assessment is the one in which it perceives the U.S. as emboldening Taiwan to declare independence. China's leadership, at some level, understands the extremely high costs and difficult tactical challenges that remain associated with taking Taiwan by force, even if China eclipses U.S. power. Evidence of this understanding is China's high level of activity that is restricted to the gray zone.<sup>32,33</sup>

Internationally, any act of war risks inspiring a large and firmly resolved coalition intent on balancing against China's rise.<sup>34,35,36</sup> China need not contend with such a coalition so long as it continues to back up its assurances with peaceful conduct.<sup>37,38</sup> Domestically, the consequences of an all-out assault would strain China's demographic stability, border security, and welfare economy.<sup>39</sup> These external pressures and internal erosions are powerful disincentives to Chinese aggression. However, the prospect of a formally independent and Western-allied Taiwan is likely disturbing enough to Beijing that it would discount these real costs in order to force reunification.

## It's All Relative

So, for China, spatial relativity is the single most important factor motivating its behavior on toward Taiwan. Without control over Taiwan, Beijing fears that the island could be used to both stage attacks on the mainland and restrict China's maritime economy. Yet if Beijing controlled Taiwan, the island would function to both shield the mainland and support its

maritime ambitions.<sup>40</sup> This geo-economic explanation for China's aggression toward Taiwan is too often minimized in U.S. strategic planning.<sup>41</sup>

Americans today enjoy the most geographically defensible position in the world, which is certainly a benefit in terms of homeland security and economic prosperity.<sup>42</sup> However, this position can become a detriment to the analysis of foreign state behavior. Even the most empathetic American strategists will struggle to fully relate to the map-reading of states in more crowded regions of the world. From the U.S. vantage, international developments make more sense when they appear to have psychological, cultural, and institutional drivers. After all, these are frequently the drivers of U.S. domestic and international behavior. This projection often leads American analysis to prioritize political factors before those of geographic security, even when the latter carries greater weight.<sup>43</sup>

Geographic differences also create challenges for the U.S. conducting extended military operations overseas. Whereas the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would possess a home field advantage in a fight over Taiwan, U.S. forces would need to venture to the other side of the globe.<sup>44</sup> This major difference in spatial relativity gives China the second order of temporal advantage over the U.S., as well as logistical, tactical, and motivational advantages.<sup>45</sup>

Here, clarity of intervention is again inadequate. Advocates of intervention will typically argue that the U.S. must commit to Taiwan's defense because to do otherwise puts U.S. credibility at stake.<sup>46</sup> However, credibility is earned through consistently meeting expectations. Therefore, the real risk to U.S. credibility is committing to a task and setting expectations that it is either unwilling or unable to follow completely through on. The spatial relativity factor severely degrades the capacity of the U.S. to guarantee Taiwan's defense. So, intervention invites a tragic irony. By discounting spatial relativity in the Taiwan Strait, the pursuit of strengthening U.S. credibility would cause its deterioration.

Advocates of intervention will also typically argue that both the unfavorable trends in the balance of power and the tyranny of distance could be overcome if the U.S. would invest more in defense spending.<sup>47</sup> However, even when the U.S. possessed decisive and

overwhelming power in the Strait, this did not convince China to forsake reunification. It only succeeded in delaying these ambitions. Now, China's blend of patient stubbornness on reunification, economic largeness, and geostrategic motivation suggests it will invest as much in its military modernization as necessary to gain a relative power advantage. Indeed, reinvigorated U.S. defense spending aimed specifically at deterrence in the Strait will only incentivize China to do the same for its own capabilities. A great power arms race would ensue.<sup>48</sup> In this context, the U.S. is unlikely to regain decisive power.

## With Great Power, Comes Great Responsibility

The U.S. has not lost power in objective terms.<sup>49</sup> However, the temporal and spatial factors at play evince the importance of the U.S. applying its considerable power more judiciously. Unintended consequences of irresponsibly applied U.S. power have already begun to emerge in Taiwan.

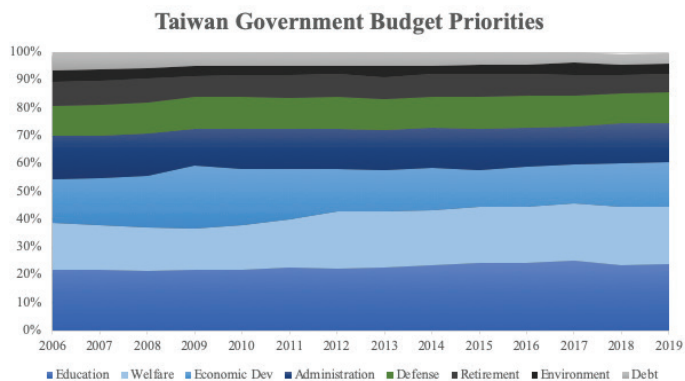
The presence of U.S. power has undermined Taiwan's military self-sufficiency at both the strategic and tactical levels. Taiwan espouses asymmetric defense, which refers to the strategy that maximizes the island's geographic defensive advantages. This strategy features a large number of relatively cheap, small, simple, and mobile assets positioned near the coastline, at natural bottlenecks, and in dense forest or urban landscapes.<sup>50,51</sup> This force structure would neutralize the technological and size differences between Taiwan and China.

Yet Taiwan's military procurement planning reveals that symmetrical weapons are still desired to "inflict multi-domain interception blows and joint firepower strikes to sequentially weaken the enemy's operational capabilities and dismantle its offensives."<sup>52</sup> Specifically, this is evidenced by the \$1 billion allotted for air-to-ground cruise missiles and upgrades to the Hsiung Feng III, which increases missile range from 90 miles to 250 miles.<sup>53,54</sup> Taiwan's leadership seeks additional long-range missile systems from the U.S. as well, namely the AGM-158 JASSM with a range upwards of 230 miles.<sup>55,56</sup> Sinking enemy ships is one matter, but launching missiles at ports and bases in mainland China is decidedly symmetric warfare.

## Symmetric Conflict Is Not In Taiwan's Interest

1. The ability to strike mainland China would support the notion in Beijing that the use of military force is necessary to achieve reunification
2. Counterforce build-up would incentivize Beijing to use its own force sooner rather than later, which would sacrifice Taiwan's first order temporal advantage
3. China possesses the larger population, economy, and military industrial base, which means that it can absorb symmetric damage at a lower marginal cost and overwhelm Taiwan in sheer size, granting China the third order temporal advantage

Further, Taiwan's overall budget shows that defense spending has been a significantly lower priority than education, economic development, and social welfare.<sup>57</sup> With its budget priorities misaligned with the threat it faces, Taiwan's military service members have struggled to take basic training and reserve duty seriously.<sup>58,59</sup> Together, these factors suggest that Taiwan would be neither strategically prepared nor appropriately trained to repel a direct attack. None of these issues are *entirely* the product of U.S. power, but each issue is exacerbated by a constant U.S. presence.



Data Source: Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of China 2019, Table 91

## **Waking Up: The Benefits of U.S. Restraint**

In order to replicate the conditions for peace and stability that ambiguity had initially fashioned, the U.S. must now explicitly restrain its political and security relationship with Taiwan. Though the regional power balance has recently been shifting in China's favor, its perception of U.S.-Taiwan synergy is a significantly stronger predictor for its aggressiveness than is its raw military might. Ultimately, China's military capacity ought to be understood as an *enabling* factor for coercing reunification, but its perception of U.S.-Taiwan synergy is the primary *motivating* factor for coercing reunification.

In terms of temporal advantage, spatial relativity, and the judicious use of power, U.S. military restraint is the most effective option for maintaining peace and security in the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. should make clear that it will not intervene in any sovereignty conflict on behalf of Taiwan, a non-ally. The U.S. should use this opportunity to affirm that it remains fully committed to its formal allies in the Asia Pacific region, precisely because those are formal alliances.

In contrast to intervention, restraint would lower tensions in the cross-Strait relationship because it would diffuse any perception in Beijing of U.S.-Taiwan synergy. Conditioning U.S.-Taiwan relations would also stabilize relations between the U.S. and China in order to ensure that cooperation on areas of converging interests such as climate action, nuclear security, and counterterrorism remains possible.

Additionally, restraint would strongly incentivize Taiwan to invest a greater share of its resources in its own defense and to specifically invest in asymmetric capabilities. Finally, clarifying its security commitments would protect U.S. credibility, thereby strengthening the U.S. alliance system and maintaining deterrence in the broader region.

At the same time, restraint does not amount to the abandonment of Taiwan. U.S. foreign policy is over-militarized as it is, which is a condition that is deeply embedded in national institutions and the public consciousness.<sup>60</sup> This condition makes the lack of direct military involvement in a conflict feel akin to inaction among American foreign policy elites. The next section will challenge this notion by explaining

two critical protective services that the U.S. can provide to Taiwan while acting short of war.

## **Raising the Costs of Aggression**

On inducing desired behavior, the combination of carrot and stick remains a classic for good reason. The previous section of this paper covered the carrot — with clarity of U.S. military restraint, Beijing's perception of threatening synergies will be tempered. This section will now address the stick, which comes in the form of conditional arms sales and financing for energy infrastructure in Taiwan.

The presence of a robust “stick” distinguishes between decreasing threat perception and increasing real costs of aggression. China must not interpret restraint as an invitation to invade. Restraint must send two signals to China simultaneously — that the U.S. seeks peace and that, even without a U.S., taking Taiwan by force is ill-advised.

## **Taiwan's Self-Sufficiency Would Maximize the Island's Defensibility**

Even as China sharpens and enlarges its power, reuniting with Taiwan by force will never be an easy task. The island's natural environment makes Taiwan a veritable fortress. Its features include an oceanic moat, only a few beaches that function as viable drawbridges, and topography and urban density conducive to guerilla warfare. With the proper defense equipment, Taiwan has a realistic chance of repelling PLA forces that attempt to invade by air or sea. This is the case despite China's advantages in the number of soldiers and the sophistication of weaponry, owing to the natural bottlenecks that PLA forces would need to pass through in an amphibious assault and the open-air vulnerability of paratroopers. The U.S. should help to resource only the type of defense that takes full advantage of the natural environment.

## **Presidents Have Approved Questionable Arms Sales**

The character and quantity of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan remain up to the discretion of Congress, so these provisions are not beholden to the misguided notions of symmetric warfare that persist in Taipei. It

is unwise for Washington to acquiesce to requests for small numbers of high-cost assets such as the 40 units of medium-sized howitzers that were included in the Biden administration's first arms sale.<sup>61</sup> This sort of artillery system has unavoidable survivability problems. The unit size makes each an easy target and the low number of units makes the marginal cost of each loss very high. More to the point, these units are of limited usefulness to an asymmetric defense concept, which exacerbates the opportunity cost associated with their purchase.

Moreover, it is arguably unlawful for arms sales to go beyond self-defense into the realm of counter-offense. The TRA clearly states that the U.S. may "provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character." There is no language in the law explicitly granting permission to sell long-range weapons such as the 66 units of next-generation F-16 fighter jets that the Trump administration approved in 2020.<sup>62</sup> Though the line between offense and defense can easily blur, arms of a *strict* defensive nature do not include weapons that would primarily have utility for striking mainland China.

## Congress Should Supplement the TRA to Strengthen Asymmetric Capabilities

The U.S. ought to exclusively provide arms that are of a strict defensive nature. This would entail large quantities of limited assets such as light-weight missile-equipped boats, water mines, drones, shoulder-launched stinger missiles, hand-held firearms, and mobile land-based short-range anti-ship missiles. Concentrating these weapons in the few areas where PLA forces could feasibly land on the island will empower Taiwan's smaller fighting force to inflict outsized casualties on China's larger force. In the Middle East, the U.S. has experienced first-hand how a large and sophisticated military can be frustrated by a smaller and simpler but highly motivated and organized insurgency. When fully committed to, asymmetric defense can evidently protract a conflict until the aggressor grows weary.<sup>63</sup>

Here, the U.S. has interests in both lowering China's threat perception of U.S.-Taiwan synergy and maximizing the effectiveness of Taiwan's asymmetric defense. The selling of offensive counter-strike weapons to Taiwan will heighten China's threat perception. The

selling of a few large, slow-moving, highly sophisticated machines will undermine asymmetric defense planning. Achieving its interests therefore necessitates the U.S. to be highly disciplined in its arms sales to Taiwan.

To this end, Congress must re-assert its authority to preclude the reactivity and erraticism that occurs when Executive-to-Executive dialogue is allowed to determine the content of arms sales.<sup>64</sup> Congress should supplement the TRA with new legislation that will explicitly direct consistent annual amounts of a conditional nature in arms exports to Taiwan. This measure would ensure that U.S. arms exports to Taiwan are more constructive to winning the first and third order temporal advantages than the current arrangement.



Data Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database<sup>65</sup>

## Minimizing Taiwan's Supply Chain & Blockade Vulnerabilities

Though Taiwan's geography creates immense fortification advantages, its small size and lack of natural resources create real insecurities that must be addressed. Taiwan is critically dependent on international supply chains for basic resources. Its government imports 98 percent of the energy and 65 percent of the calories that its citizens consume.<sup>66,67</sup> These factors make Taiwan especially susceptible to coercion under siege.

Given the high human and material costs that would be associated with a direct invasion, especially if



Taiwan fully embraces asymmetric defense, Beijing's most logical option would be to feature a blockade in its opening sequence.<sup>68,69</sup> A successful blockade would cut off Taiwan's access to sources of mechanical and caloric energy.<sup>70</sup> Stockpiled rations may not last long enough for the blockade to be broken.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, breaking a blockade could prove difficult regardless of whether U.S. forces were to respond to such a crisis.

The PLA Navy has thus far been modernized specifically in order to conduct operations against Taiwan.<sup>72</sup> Even with highly accurate anti-ship missiles such as the Harpoon (RGM-84/UGM-84/AGM-84), Taiwan's training shortcomings and combat inexperience make it questionable whether human error can be minimized.<sup>73</sup> Further, a joint blockade featuring PLA air superiority could intercept Taiwan's land-based strikes with air-to-surface cruise missiles. Externally, any ships or aircraft attempting to break the blockade would be delayed and weakened by China's A2/AD systems.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, the asymmetric defense concept hinges on mobility — on being able to deploy, shift, and scatter large numbers of small units quickly. Boats, trucks, and other mobile units all require fuel. So, asymmetric firepower purchased from the U.S. would be rendered ineffective if Taiwan cannot also sustain the energy to make good use of these armaments. Essentially, resource starvation would undermine the defensive advantages of the island's geography.

Therefore, the U.S. ought to aid Taiwan in building its capacity to produce more energy domestically. This should be acted upon immediately because it will take time for Taiwan to develop these abilities. Additionally, the key to building resilience is to invest in systems during periods of normalcy so that those systems are ready to surge during periods of crisis. If Taiwan's electricity and food systems can achieve this type of resilience prior to a cross-Strait crisis, the island nation will have much better odds of withstanding a blockade.

There are three priority energy industries that U.S. dollars can directly finance — geothermal, offshore wind, and nuclear. Each source has struggled to catch on in Taiwan thus far, but many of the technical, economic, and political barriers would likely be removed

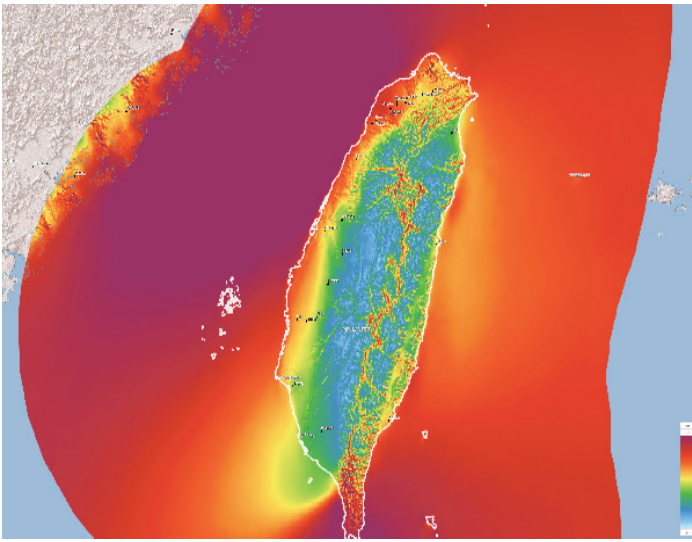
upon greater U.S. investment. Ultimately, each of these sources would aid in the defense of Taiwan.

## **Geothermal Energy is Reliable & Indigenous**

First, geothermal energy potential in Taiwan is massive. The heat beneath the island's surface is equivalent to 32 gigawatts annually, which is five gigawatts more than the entire population's current energy demand.<sup>75</sup> Not only is this energy potential abundant, but it would supply “always on” energy. Whereas the intermittency of solar or wind generation requires advanced storage technology in order to access energy on demand, geothermal energy functions more like fossil fuel in that it can be converted from its natural state instantly. This type of production could account for 25-30 percent of Taiwan's energy mix.<sup>76</sup> Though Taiwan has faced economic and technical challenges here, the Chingshui Geothermal Field provides U.S. funding with a sound financial and technical blueprint.<sup>77,78,79</sup>

## **Offshore Wind Energy Serves Multiple Purposes**

Second, offshore wind energy can function as a turbine for clean power generation in peacetime and double as a line of defense against Chinese ships in wartime. The Taiwan Strait is a particularly blustery area.<sup>80</sup> Winds can surpass 10 m/s off the coast of Taoyuan City, which is slightly southwest of Taipei. Shown below, turbines in this area can generate ~780 W/m<sup>2</sup>. Compared with geothermal and nuclear energy, wind power already enjoys ample political favor in Taiwan.<sup>81</sup> U.S. investment could immediately accelerate the sector's development. Moreover, these structures can perform multiple functions at once, such as serving to enhance early warning detection systems and to obstruct PLA naval operations. Both of these functions would help Taiwan win the second order temporal advantage.



Data Source: Global Wind Atlas<sup>82</sup>

## Next-Generation Nuclear Energy is Stable & Decentralized

Third, next generation small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs) address the safety and logistical concerns that have fueled anti-nuclear sentiment in Taiwan.<sup>83</sup> Due to their smaller size, SMRs are faster and easier to construct than traditional nuclear facilities. Smaller models also offer added choice and flexibility in the build site location. In terms of civilian safety, SMRs significantly reduce the already-low chance of accidents because they naturally operate at lower power, pressure, and heat levels than larger models.<sup>84</sup> In terms of defense against a PLA military operation involving amphibious beach landings or missile bombardment, this model's resilient logic of small size and decentralized production fits perfectly with the asymmetric concept. SMRs and microreactors are capable of surging to support Taiwan's infrastructure and weapons systems once an attack begins. In particular, this model has the potential to shorten supply lines significantly, which saves time and reduces risk of fuel supply disruptions.

## Clean Energy Supports the Practical Defense of Taiwan

Together, these three advanced energy sources meaningfully affect the security of Taiwan. The ability to produce energy domestically, and to rely less on imports, will keep Taiwan fueled in a protracted conflict when it otherwise would deplete its strategic reserves.

Electrified infrastructure and machinery that is powered by mixed and decentralized sources would give Taiwan a tactical boost on the battlefield. Lastly, each of these energy sources are climate-positive in both substantive and symbolic terms. With climate change posing a severe threat to global security, and with Beijing compelled to act on the climate issue in order to maintain its pursuit of global influence, turning Taiwan into a beacon of climate hope would significantly raise the political costs of Chinese aggression.

## Taiwan Can't Fight on an Empty Stomach

While Taiwan's food consumption is not nearly as dependent on imports as its energy consumption, the food system is still vital and vulnerable enough to warrant proactive problem-solving. Taiwan's active military members, as well as its citizens and reservists, would struggle to mount a serious defense of the island if they become undernourished. The U.S. can offer research grants to universities in Taiwan with academics working on agricultural and aquacultural innovation. American enterprises can also be incentivized via R&D tax credits to explore these areas and share any breakthroughs with stakeholders in Taiwan.

Instead of the U.S. investing further in defense spending, which is a commitment that would entail critical opportunity costs at home and risks of triggering an arms race with China, it should increase spending on projects that would make Taiwan more self-sufficient.<sup>85</sup> If the U.S. can help Taiwan to resource an asymmetric defense and to build the capacity for domestic production of critical resources, it will have provided Taiwan with the means to counter China's primary direct and indirect military options. For China, these counters raise the real costs of aggression. These costs, paired with a lower threat perception, would be sufficient to convince the wiser voices in Beijing to maintain the status quo.

## The Modern Colossus: A Grand Bargain for Peace

### Restraint in Emergency Planning

All that has been described in the first two sections constitutes the wisest U.S. approach to Taiwan. However, it is necessary to consider that even the best laid

plans may be insufficient for the island's defense. It is within the realm of possibility that Beijing does not react rationally to U.S. restrained engagement. Perhaps such irrationality leads Beijing to declare an attack before Taiwan has the time to fully develop its asymmetric defense capabilities or its domestic energy infrastructure. These factors would leave Taiwan ill-prepared for an invasion and critically vulnerable to the blockade gambit of a starvation strategy. Taiwan's fighting force would likely be both cut off from vital fuel resources and reliant upon improper military resources. In time, the island nation would be overwhelmed by the PLA.

If this scenario unfolds, the U.S. ought to propose and lead negotiations for a grand bargain designed to both maintain regional stability and protect Taiwanese human rights. Negotiations should take place at a moment in time appropriate to ensure that an agreement could be reached prior to major casualties occurring but also that the deal would be enacted only as a diplomatic failsafe. A moment of last resort would entail clear Chinese air and naval superiority as well as a clear inability of Taiwan to implement and sustain an asymmetric defense. Only at such a point should a grand bargain be considered by U.S. policymakers.

## **Summarizing National Interests**

When developing the specifics of any such bargain, it is useful to identify and rank each nation's interests at stake. The deal described below would optimize each nation's pursuit of their respective interests. Though priorities vary, each nation shares the interest in avoiding bloodshed and escalation.

U.S. interests at stake in the Taiwan Strait are clear, limited, and best advanced through diplomacy. Foremost, the U.S. benefits economically from peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, as this region holds six of its top ten trade partners – China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, India, and Taiwan.<sup>86</sup> Second, the U.S. has interests in preventing China from developing regional hegemony.<sup>87</sup> For these reasons, the U.S. alliance system in Asia represents its most important set of relationships for the 21st century, so the U.S. has interest in the security of these states. Lastly, the TRA establishes that the U.S. has interest in preserving the human rights of all citizens in Taiwan.

For China, national interests in the Taiwan Strait are primarily geostrategic. First, Beijing equates the annexation of Taiwan to the elimination of potential future security threats to the Chinese mainland. Second, the island is seen as the key to advancing China's economic agenda in the maritime domain. The CCP has a simple deal in place with the PRC — as long as the government delivers broadly inclusive economic prosperity, the people allow a centralized concentration of political power.<sup>88</sup> China's economic rise to this point has enhanced this arrangement's legitimacy. However, a combination of societal aging, ecological precarity, and unsustainable investment practices suggests that genuine human progress in China could soon falter.<sup>89,90,91</sup> To reinforce these structural weaknesses, Beijing will seek to secure natural resources and trade routes in the seas.<sup>92,93</sup> For this reason, the CCP figures that seizing control of Taiwan is necessary to create a path for sustainable economic development and maintain its political power. Third, controlling Taiwan would give China a marginally greater opportunity to navigate ships and submarines beyond the first island chain.<sup>94</sup> Essentially, Chinese aggression here is less about reunifying with the people of Taiwan and is more about reclaiming the island as territory.

In Taiwan, national interests are clear and simple, yet tend to exacerbate the security dilemma. Taiwan aims to ensure physical safety, maintain political autonomy, deliver economic prosperity, and steward its unique culture. In other words, Taiwan seeks agency and the freedom to make its own choices. Taiwan's current president, Tsai Ing-Wen, has emphasized "a firm belief that the future of Taiwan is to be decided by the Taiwanese through democratic means."<sup>95</sup>

## **The Bargain: China Takes the Island, the U.S. Takes In the Taiwanese People**

Keeping these three sets of interests in mind, one viable diplomatic failsafe would have the U.S. dually create a path to U.S. citizenship for every Taiwanese person and accommodate China's interest in annexing the island. In return, China would allow the peaceful exodus to occur uninterrupted and would formally acknowledge the U.S. right to a military presence in the South and East China Seas in its capacity as the security guarantor for U.S. allies. If all three nations accept, this solution would achieve several goals

— prevent war over Taiwan, stabilize China’s rise, strengthen the U.S. domestically, and secure human rights for the people of Taiwan. Each nation would make sacrifices, yet each would become more secure in the long-run.

First, the prospective benefits of this deal would put the U.S. in a stronger position economically, demographically, and politically. Immigration has often been an incendiary issue in American politics, but this is largely a product of misplaced anxieties and of framing the issue in a binary moral sense of responsibility. To solve both problems, the U.S. immigration debate should spotlight how a system that is more welcoming to newcomers can function as a tool of statecraft to meet strategic ends. In the 21st century, the primary strategic concern for the U.S. is how to prosper in a period of great power competition with China.

This competition is fueled by Beijing’s perception that China is rising while the U.S. is declining in power. The 2008 financial crisis likely sparked this impression, but it has since been strengthened by observations of U.S. populism, racism, cultural disputes, and the exhaustion from endless war in the Middle East.<sup>96</sup> In *War & Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin determined that “decline is accompanied by lack of social cooperation, by emphasis on rights rather than emphasis on duty, and by decreasing productivity.”<sup>97</sup> Welcoming the people of Taiwan could rejuvenate the U.S. in each of these areas.

In general, immigrants strengthen the U.S. economy in numerous measurable ways. Immigrants increase rates of entrepreneurship, workforce participation, and occupation in essential jobs.<sup>98,99,100</sup> This willingness to work enables greater total consumption, which increases the demand for labor to provide goods and services. This labor demand creates opportunities for all working Americans to be more innovative and more productive.

Immigrants from Taiwan would provide an additional unique benefit in terms of economic security, productivity, and competitiveness — indigenizing the semiconductor supply chain.<sup>101</sup> Taiwan currently produces more than 60 percent of the world’s semiconductors and more than 90 percent of the world’s next-generation semiconductors.<sup>102</sup> This is a process that requires

natural resources, intellectual property, infrastructure, and human capital. The U.S. already possesses the proprietary technology necessary for production, and it can invest in factories, machinery, and materials with relative ease.<sup>103,104</sup>

However, human capital in this sector is not developed easily, quickly, or on discount.<sup>105</sup> It would likely take the U.S. several generations to train a domestic workforce capable of manufacturing semiconductors to meet demand. Immigrants from Taiwan would arrive already possessing the functional expertise necessary for this sector to thrive.<sup>106</sup> So, in this deal, the U.S. would basically be accelerating the on-shore production of technology that enables everyday digital devices, advanced medical and mechanical equipment, and military weapons.

Beyond productivity, mass Taiwanese immigration could reignite American civil society networks. The term “civil society” refers to the constellation of private but generally inclusive institutions such as houses of worship, sports leagues, volunteer groups, book clubs, and after-school organizations. These institutions serve to mediate between public and private life, build and strengthen personal relationships, and form residents into citizens.<sup>107</sup> Under the proper leadership, an influx of immigrants would strongly incentivize communities to invest more time and resources into these civil society institutions as a means to assimilate the newcomers to local norms and traditions. Refurbished civil society would enable all Americans to enjoy greater camaraderie and cooperation.<sup>108</sup> The ensuing rediscovery of trust in one another and in American institutions would also engender a renewed sense of duty and civic pride within Americans.

As Americans become more productive, cooperative, and dutiful, the nation will regain the soft power it has squandered over the course of its stint in post-Cold War global leadership. Going forward, let it be said not that the U.S. goes to great lengths to win wars, but instead that it goes to great lengths to win peace. Let it be known that the U.S. not only succeeded in preserving global stability during an uncertain time, but that this effort made the nation stronger and more prosperous. This is the image of the U.S. that the world must see.

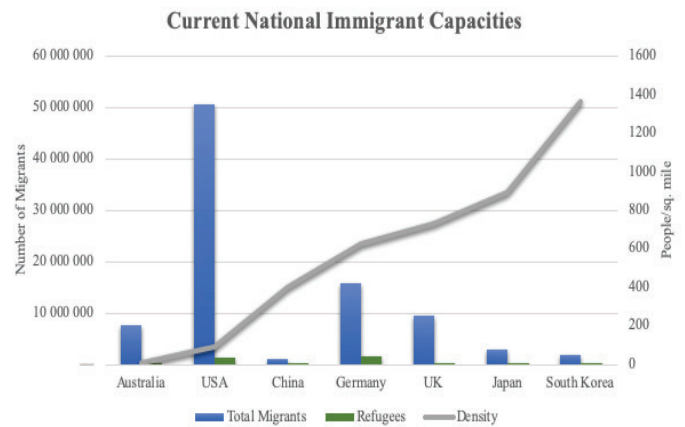


## The Nation of Immigrants

Just as this paper is not the first to call for a grand bargain in the Taiwan Strait, it is neither the first call to use U.S. immigration capacity as a form of statecraft.<sup>109</sup> Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reports from the National Review, American Enterprise Institute, and Atlantic Council all advocated for enticing Russian STEM professionals to migrate to the U.S. as a means to sap Russia of intellectual capital.<sup>110,111,112</sup> Likewise, in response to Beijing's suffocation of civil rights in Hong Kong, a report from the Fletcher Security Review published a plan for "increasing the number of refugees from Hong Kong admitted to the United States, streamlining the visa process, and creating pathways to citizenship" as a means to "signal support for Hong Kong, but also provide tangible assistance to actual Hongkongers and align U.S. policy with core national values."<sup>113</sup>

This is an opportunity that only the U.S. can realistically seize. If there is one matter in which American Exceptionalism may prove true, it is the matter of immigrant capacity and integration. Favorable geographic traits — large territorial size, oceans to the east and west, expansive and friendly countries to the north and south, plentiful natural resources — have created the conditions that have enabled a large and growing population, a diverse and dynamic economy, and a culture of pluralism. This unique combination of characteristics makes the U.S. fit to welcome immigrants at rates and totals that no other country is able to replicate.

Even as the U.S. holds the world's largest number of immigrants by a sizable margin, it maintains a vast unfilled population capacity. Consider that the U.S. currently has a population density of 94.2 people per square mile. Theoretically, if the U.S. were to absorb *all* citizens of Taiwan at once, it would have a population density of 100.1 people per square mile. For context, this latter density figure would rank the U.S. 176th globally, nestled between Palau and Zimbabwe.<sup>114</sup> So while diasporas do settle in concentrations, the U.S. has ample space available. Pacing Taiwanese immigration over the course of a fifteen-year period need not burden the U.S. with strains on infrastructure, natural resources, or labor markets.



Data Source: UN Population Division, World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization<sup>115,116</sup>

Additionally, there is ample precedent for the U.S. taking in civilians who are fleeing from conflict. For example, during the 2010s, the U.S. seamlessly absorbed over 600,000 total refugees from Myanmar, Iraq, the DRC, Somalia, and other fragile states. Broadly, prior to the Trump administration's migration restrictions, the U.S. had been the world leader in refugee resettlement for decades.<sup>117</sup>

The main faults with U.S. refugee policy during the pre-Trump era feature the unnecessary conservatism in the annual admissions ceiling and the complacency in reacting to migrant flows once a conflict began rather than proactively preparing the refugee system to surge in response to future crises. It is predictable that the violence of war will displace civilians, or at least create a powerful incentive for people to flee.<sup>118</sup> Planning the U.S. immigration system with a more appropriate expectation of forced displacement will help to maximize the economic benefits and minimize logistical concerns of immigrant integration.

To be clear, this deal would offer Taiwanese people the choice of whether to stay or emigrate. The freedom that Taiwan seeks is perhaps best represented by the ability and the responsibility to make one's own choices. So, unlike previous grand bargain proposals, the Taiwanese would have agency here. However, if history is any guide, the prospect of being conquered by China would likely be sufficient to convince most Taiwanese that relocation is the best option. After all, this deal offers the Taiwanese citizenship in a secure, prosperous, diverse, liberal democracy, which would technically satisfy most of the nation's interests.

Not only able, the U.S. also appears willing to take in immigrants of Taiwan's profile specifically. Polling shows that 78 percent of Americans support welcoming high-skilled immigrants.<sup>119</sup> As a society, Taiwan is highly educated and highly skilled, extremely low on crime, and culturally hard-working.<sup>120,121</sup> Economic ties between the two nations are already strong, and both publics favor even stronger ties.<sup>122</sup>

Taiwan also has a political system and ideological spectrum that is similar to the U.S. system. As immigrants, the Taiwanese dedication to democracy could help stem the tide of illiberalism rising within U.S. borders.<sup>123,124</sup> At the same time, this political similarity has likely contributed to the affinity and sense of responsibility that Americans feel for the Taiwanese, which has resulted in a majority of Americans now favoring U.S. military support for Taiwan.<sup>125</sup> Ultimately, if Americans are willing to risk starting a great power war for the sake of the people in Taiwan, why should these same Americans not be willing to welcome them as fellow countryfolk?

## PRC Conduct After An Annexation

China has a strong set of incentives to accept this deal. As mentioned, Beijing needs to maintain generally peaceful conduct in order to back up its regional assurances. If China is seen to reject a peace deal and force reunification, this rejection could likely inspire a large and motivated balancing coalition. Moreover, any direct invasion would exact significant costs on China. Even if China prevailed in a bloody conflict, CCP authoritarianism dictates that the liberal democratic society of Taiwan would then need to be suppressed, as is the case in Hong Kong.

A campaign of suppression in Taiwan would likely be lengthy, politically and financially expensive, and not without further PLA casualties. Fully incorporating the island would be much easier if those who wanted to leave were allowed to.

For Americans and U.S. allies concerned that Chinese conquest would not stop with Taiwan, making the distinction between enhanced capabilities and intent to use offensive force will be constructive. The former does not necessarily cause the latter. To mistake these two qualities as two aspects of one quality is to fall for the classic trap of the security dilemma in which

false perceptions and uncertainties lead to unnecessary escalations.<sup>126</sup>

In light of the PRC's economic agenda and structural challenges, regional conquest does not appear to be in China's national interest. If free navigation in the maritime domain is necessary to stabilize China's economy, which will be necessary for continued political stability, using Taiwan to instigate war with other Asia Pacific states is counterproductive to its ultimate goal. Threatening the security of Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, or Indonesia would result in the restricting of maritime movement in the South and East China Seas. This is the antithesis of China's maritime ambitions.<sup>127</sup>

In fact, viewing this issue through the lens of China's economic development makes the case for territorial accommodation in a grand bargain even stronger. As more hawkish analysts have noted, a China that cannot sustain a healthy pace of economic development is a China that will likely act more aggressively abroad.<sup>128,129</sup> However, if China sustains economic progress, Beijing's incentives to brazenly plunder resources and to blame its country's poverty on conjured foreign foes would diminish. So, at a moment of last resort, ceding Taiwan's territory to China would make war with other states significantly less likely.

Short of war, China would also appear to have little interest in using Taiwan for coercive statecraft. For example, one fear is that Beijing would use the Taiwan Strait to choke off energy supply shipments to Japan and South Korea in order to gain leverage and earn further geopolitical concessions in the East China Sea. While this would be technically possible, it would also be as strategically unwise as conquest. China is trying to establish an eastern maritime route, the Polar Silk Road, which would make for shorter, faster, cheaper, and simpler shipping.<sup>130</sup> Yet this route forces Chinese vessels to either sail through the waters between Japan and South Korea, which can become a retaliatory chokepoint, or detour deep into the open Pacific Ocean. Currently, China's main maritime trade route heads west through the Malacca Strait, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and finally the Mediterranean Sea. This is a route with many potential retaliatory chokepoints. In short, China's geography simply is not conducive to any further expansion or aggression.

## Preventing Chinese Regional Hegemony

In exchange for a low-cost annexation of Taiwan, China would be required to allow the peaceful exodus to occur over a fifteen-year period before assuming control of the island. This timeline would not function solely for humanitarian reasons. First, it would ease any logistical challenges for the U.S. immigration system. Second, it would give Asia Pacific states a grace period to plan for and adjust to any economic or geopolitical changes that may result from this deal.

Chinese concessions in the bargain would also include the formal acceptance of a U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific that is sufficient to fulfill U.S. security responsibilities to its allies. Given that the U.S. would remain more powerful than China *beyond* the Taiwan Strait, especially when leading a balancing coalition, this deal would prevent Chinese hegemony. With the grace period followed by conventional deterrence, the region will remain stable and prosperous.

In summary, the combination of China's economic interests and vulnerabilities, geographic restraints, the region's adaptive capacity, and U.S. alliance commitments suggests that Beijing's territorial ambitions would end with Taiwan.

## Conclusion

Of the available strategic options, U.S. restraint on the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty has the best chance to replicate the conditions for peace and stability that ambiguity had initially fashioned. Restraint entails a refusal to send armed forces into a conflict region in which the U.S. will have limited interests and undecisive power. An absence of U.S. military power in the Strait would reduce China's sense of urgency on reunification and nudge Taiwan toward its optimal defense strategy. These shifts in cross-Strait thinking would be conducive to maintaining the status quo.

Restraint does not entail a complete lack of U.S. action. After all, military presence is not the only form of power the U.S. possesses. While rejecting intervention, the U.S. can still aid Taiwan in developing the ideal asymmetric defense by selling a steady supply of short-range weapons and by financing domestic energy production projects. These commitments should be formalized by an act of Congress. This is how the

U.S. could responsibly and democratically raise the real costs of unprovoked Chinese aggression.

If Beijing remains rational, these measures will be sufficient to prevent further escalation. If Beijing becomes irrational, the U.S. can remain restrained and pursue trilateral diplomacy to prevent the outbreak of violence. In a moment of last resort, the U.S. should propose a deal in which all people of Taiwan would be allowed to migrate to the U.S. on a path to citizenship and the U.S. would accommodate China's interest in annexing the island of Taiwan. If enacted, this deal would strengthen the U.S. domestically, stabilize the region as China rises, and protect the human rights of Taiwan.

Though the nation of Taiwan has great humanitarian, political, and economic value, its island is absolutely not worth risking a great power war over. With the balance of power shifting in China's favor in the Strait, the U.S. must strike a new balance between rejecting war and protecting Taiwan as best it can. To do so, the U.S. must restrain its militaristic impulses. It must act with greater clarity, consistency, and creativity. If so, the U.S. may finally be worthy of the world leadership role it has long claimed.

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