

Fall 2025 - Marcellus Policy Analysis

## Chinese Reluctance to Invade Taiwan and its Policy Implications

By Luke R. Thompson

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In American foreign policy circles, it is common to hear it suggested that 2027 is the year that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is either planning or will be ready to invade Taiwan (the Republic of China, or ROC). Such pronouncements are accompanied by significant handwringing, consternation, and calls for the United States to take a more active role in defending Taiwan. At the time of writing, April and October 2027, the months of the year in which the weather in the Taiwan Strait is most conducive to an amphibious invasion, are 18 months and two years away, respectively. If the proposed timeline were to prove prophetic, it would no doubt be sufficient cause for panic.

This panic, however, is largely misinformed and runs the risk of igniting the very crisis it is so anxious about preventing. Despite the alleged 2027 date, China has no intention of invading Taiwan any time soon. However, China could feel compelled to invade Taiwan due to actions taken by either Taiwan or the United States. Needless to say, stating that China may be compelled to invade is in no way justifying or condoning an invasion, nor does it agree with Chinese logic in regard to sovereignty over Taiwan. Rather, it is simply recognizing that the Chinese approach to the Taiwan issue is not purely formed based on internal factors. The

---

**Luke R. Thompson** is a Political Research Analyst at Americans for Prosperity and a graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. A Fulbright Scholar and fluent Mandarin speaker, he previously served as an English Teaching Assistant in Kinmen, Taiwan.

The John Quincy Adams Society is a nonpartisan, independent national network of professionals and students focused on U.S. foreign policy, with a centering vision of restraint. The Society does not take specific policy positions and all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be those of the author.

PRC's record of comment on this has been remarkably consistent for more than three decades, the only difference being that post-2027, China will be able to credibly back up its threats, if it does not already have this ability. After 2027, any invasion by the Chinese will still be incredibly risky, and China stands to suffer significantly long-term, even if it successfully takes Taiwan by force.

The United States has a clear interest in preserving peace in the Taiwan Strait and avoiding conflict should war break out. As such, the United States must maintain strategic ambiguity, communicating to China the severe consequences short of war that it will face should it decide to act unilaterally, while at the same time clarifying the limits of American support to Taiwan and being strategic about continued arms sales. In the long-term, the United States should push for deep reforms to the Taiwanese military with the goal of making it better able to defend itself without U.S. assistance.

## **Chinese Actions Reflect Capability, Not Intent**

In his 2021 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) commander Admiral Phil Davidson of the U.S. Navy expressed his view that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be possible by 2027, saying: "I think our concerns are manifest here during this decade, not only on the development, the numbers of, you know, ships, aircraft, rockets, et cetera, that they have put in the field, but the way they are advancing those capabilities as well, in combination with everything that you just cited -- Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, and the line of actual control, and the South China Sea and the East China Sea. I worry that they are accelerating their ambitions to supplant the United States, and our leadership role in the rules-based international order, which they have long said that they want to do that by 2050, I am worried about them moving that target closer. Taiwan is clearly one of their ambitions before then, and I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years."<sup>1</sup>

This assertion was later clarified by then-CIA Director William Burns in a TV interview saying, "President

Xi has instructed the PLA [People's Liberation Army], the Chinese military leadership to be ready by 2027 to invade Taiwan. But that doesn't mean that he's decided to invade in 2027 or any other year as well."<sup>2</sup> Despite this clarification that the 2027 date is less about intent and more about readiness, many members of the foreign policy establishment and policymakers essentially interpreted the concept of 2027 as a firm deadline, with Congress allocating billions of additional funding for defense spending in East Asia.

At the very least, Chinese actions clearly indicate 2027 is a readiness goal. Since 2018, China has constructed four Type 075 landing helicopter docks (LHDs), each capable of transporting 800 troops along with helicopters, armored fighting vehicles (AFVs), and landing craft. China plans to construct four more in the coming years.<sup>3</sup> They are also modernizing their older and smaller Type 071 Landing Platform Docks.<sup>4</sup> Through open-source intelligence, it has also been revealed that China has at least five landing barges, capable of acting as temporary ports that larger ferries could dock at, potentially bypassing the need for China to capture an intact port in the initial days.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, Chinese shipbuilding has rapidly accelerated, technically surpassing the United States in some metrics, with 234 warships to the U.S. Navy's 219.<sup>6</sup> This build-up reflects, at the very least, an increase in capability.

## **Chinese Statements and Actions on Cross-Strait Relations Reflect a Different Reality**

Despite China's improving capabilities, it is much more tenuous to argue that, based on its actions, 2027 represents a firm deadline by which China intends to invade. From an official policy perspective, China's position on the use of force to take Taiwan remains unchanged. Since 1993, China has regularly published a series of white papers on the Taiwan issue, and its language has been remarkably consistent over the years. In the 1993 white paper, China said: "The Chinese Government conceived a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question as early as in the 1950s. In May 1955 the late Premier Zhou Enlai said at a NPC Standing Committee meeting that two alternatives were open to the Chinese people for the solution of the Taiwan question -- by resorting to war

or by peaceful means. The Chinese people would strive for a peaceful solution wherever possible, he affirmed. In April 1956 the late Chairman Mao Zedong put forward thoughts for policymaking such as ‘Peace is the best option’, ‘All patriots are of one family’ and ‘It is never too late to join the ranks of patriots.’ However, those wishes have not come to fruition for reasons such as interference by foreign forces.”<sup>7</sup>

China released a second white paper in 2000 with similar language, saying, “China will do its best to achieve peaceful reunification, but will not commit itself to rule out military force...”<sup>8</sup> The third white paper, released in 2022, raised alarms in the West due to its more aggressive tone, which explicitly blamed the United States and the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan for promoting secessionist ideas and suggested that Taiwan would need to be re-educated after unification. Nonetheless, the language on unification is remarkably consistent with the previous two white papers: “We will work with the greatest sincerity and exert our utmost efforts to achieve peaceful reunification. But we will not renounce the use of force, and we reserve the option of taking all necessary measures. This is to guard against external interference and all separatist activities. In no way does it target our fellow Chinese in Taiwan. Use of force would be the last resort taken under compelling circumstances. We will only be forced to take drastic measures to respond to the provocation of separatist elements or external forces should they ever cross our red lines.”<sup>9</sup> The takeaway is clear: China prefers peace but will likely feel compelled to use force if Taiwan officially secedes or the United States makes firm defense commitments to the island.

Proponents of the view that China has a firm deadline in mind and has abandoned peaceful reunification will argue that white papers such as these are merely a facade that will be dropped as soon as China feels it is militarily capable of taking Taiwan. They argue that analysts should judge China not by what it says, but by its actions, pointing to the increase in monthly intrusions by Chinese aircraft across the unofficial median line that separates China and Taiwan. Indeed, since 2021, Chinese intrusions have increased significantly from 69 in September 2020 to 325 in June 2024.

Yet, this increase alone paints an incomplete picture.

Intrusions have ebbed and flowed since 2021, with January 2024 nearly returning to 2020 levels with 72 intrusions. Months with high numbers of intrusions correspond directly to actions taken by Taiwan and the United States that China deemed provocative. The highest number of monthly intrusions occurred in August 2022, almost certainly in reaction to a high-profile visit by a U.S. congressional delegation that included former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Interestingly, intrusions declined precipitously from September 2023 to January 2024 in the run-up to Taiwan’s presidential election. After the DPP secured an unprecedented third term in the presidency, intrusions ramped up almost immediately.<sup>10</sup>

## **A PLA Invasion will be a Reaction to a Perceived Provocation.**

When taken together, China’s official policy statements regarding the use of force to unify Taiwan and the ebb and flow of its ADIZ intrusions reveal a few clear red lines for the use of military force. These are:

- A unilateral declaration of independence by Taiwan.
- The United States recognizes Taiwan as independent or provides an explicit security guarantee.

A unilateral declaration of independence by Taiwan would be the most likely event and most likely justification for China to use force. It is also the most dangerous, given that the U.S. government has limited control over decision-makers in Taipei. Chinese policy on this is clear. In addition to independence being explicitly mentioned as a justification for using force in all three of the above-mentioned white papers, Article 8 of the 2004 Chinese Anti-Secession law requires the use of military force in the event of a declaration of independence from Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> Fortunately, DPP leadership, including former President Tsai Ing-Wen and current President William Lai, has thus far successfully avoided such declarations, upholding the position that Taiwan and its outlying islands are already de facto independent as the ROC, making a formal declaration unnecessary.<sup>12</sup> While this is not the preferred rhetoric for Beijing, it is substantively similar to the more China-friendly Kuomintang’s (KMT) position, which holds that the ROC is the legitimate government of all of China, with

the mainland under the control of rebel forces.

## **Domestic Politics-Driven Independence is Possible**

The DPP is the leading party of the Pan-Green coalition, a collection of left-of-center parties that generally hold pro-independence views. This coalition also includes a small but vocal group from the Taiwan Statebuilding Party, Taiwan Solidarity Union, and minority elements of the DPP that advocate for a de jure Taiwanese state.<sup>13</sup>

Polling in Taiwan suggests that support for independence is less fringe in broader Taiwanese society than the current intra-party dynamic indicates. According to polling conducted by the Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation (TPOF), support for Taiwanese independence surpassed that for unification and maintaining the status quo as the majority consensus in 2016, following Tsai's landslide victory. Support gradually declined to a relatively low 35 percent by 2019, likely due to Chinese economic pressure in response to the DPP's governance. However, support for independence spiked again immediately following the 2019 crackdown of protests in Hong Kong against an extradition law many view as the end of the "one party, two systems" framework under which China has frequently said Taiwan would be allowed to retain its autonomy following a peaceful reunification. Since then, support has consistently hovered around the 50 percent mark.<sup>14</sup>

Polling conducted by National Chengchi University further breaks down the options into:

- unification as soon as possible.
- maintain status quo and move toward unification.
- maintain status quo and decide at a later date.
- maintain status quo indefinitely.
- maintain status quo and move toward independence.
- independence as soon as possible.

This survey paints a different picture, with 22 percent supporting gradual moves toward independence and 4 percent supporting immediate independence for a total of 26 percent, while the majority (62 percent) support either maintaining the status quo

indefinitely (35 percent) or maintaining the status quo and deciding at a later date (27 percent).<sup>15</sup> Even if the Chengchi survey is correct and the TPOF oversamples pro-independence elements, a quarter of the country supports independence at some point. Assuming this cohort aligns predominantly with the DPP and the current near 50-50 split in the legislature reflects society as a whole, back-of-the-envelope math suggests that about half of DPP supporters favor independence, with 8 percent supporting independence as soon as possible.

In the TPOF survey, support for independence breaks down essentially along party lines, with 80 percent of DPP supporters in favor of independence and 16 percent supporting the status quo. If the TPOF polling is accurate, it can be concluded that the moderate position currently held by DPP leadership is nowhere near the consensus of the base and is even a minority viewpoint in the country at large. It stands to reason, then, that the DPP may be one crisis or political candidate away from embracing de jure independence. It is not fantasy to envision a scenario in the near future where the DPP, facing electoral defeat, makes such a declaration a key part of its platform to appeal to its base, especially if it perceives support from an aggressively anti-China United States. As stated, such a declaration of independence would be a red line for China, likely forcing it to act.

## **American Strategic Clarity Sparks Conflict**

Another scenario that would likely spark conflict would be if the United States abandoned its longstanding policy of strategic ambiguity in favor of an explicit guarantee to defend Taiwan with its own forces. Though the United States has maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity since recognizing the PRC in 1978, there has long been tension over explicit support for Taiwan between the presidency and Congress, regardless of party. Indeed, when the Carter Administration recognized the PRC, it also sent a legislative package to Congress that would maintain economic ties with Taiwan. Congress ultimately decided this was not good enough and passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which, in addition to maintaining economic ties, included language that required the United States to provide defensive

weapons to Taiwan and an ambiguous commitment to preserve peace in the region. With the notable exception of missteps by President Joe Biden that his office quickly walked back, Congress has carried out the bulk of the inflammatory actions historically taken by the U.S. government since. Arguably the most damaging action for cross-strait relations this decade was Speaker Pelosi's delegation to the island, which prompted a significant increase in Chinese ADIZ violations and snap drills. The action was a purely political stunt that did not do anything to enhance Taiwan's security and only worsened relations with China.

Tensions similarly grew in 1995 when Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui accepted an invitation to deliver a speech at Cornell University, triggering the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Although the U.S. Secretary of State assured his PRC counterpart that Lee would not be issued a visa to enter the country, the pro-Taiwan lobby successfully lobbied Congress to pass a resolution demanding that the State Department issue a visa to Lee. The resolution passed 396-0 in the House and 97-1 in the Senate.<sup>16</sup> The State Department ultimately relented and issued the visa, thus allowing Lee to visit the United States.

China's responses to both these incidents demonstrate that it does not distinguish between congressional and executive action. This is problematic for the prospects of peace in the region, as although a pragmatic administration may be able to placate China, it could all be undone by a particularly inflammatory congressional action. Worse still would be if a presidential administration ever abandoned the strategy of reining in a pro-Taiwan Congress and instead amplified the legislature's maximalism. A presidency and Congress working in tandem regarding Taiwan, with disregard for China's response, could do incalculable damage. In such a scenario, the United States could deploy troops to Taiwan, enter into a defense agreement, or even recognize Taiwan's independence. Any one of these actions would cross a red line for China and invite conflict.

## **Common Objections Overstate Deterrent Value of Clarity**

Supporters of firm U.S. defense commitments to

Taiwan note that, prior to 1979, the United States did formally guarantee Taiwan and even had troops stationed on the island. This, they claim, deterred the PRC from invading Taiwan. However, this argument ignores the fact that the PRC lacked a navy strong enough to capture outlying islands miles off the coast of mainland China, despite several attempts, such as the Battle of Guningtou in 1949, let alone Taiwan proper. In fact, according to a 2003 U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) assessment of the Chinese navy, an amphibious invasion of Taiwan was never seriously considered, and the navy was consistently underfunded compared to the other branches.<sup>17</sup>

This argument also ignores that conflict between Taiwan and the mainland did occur during this time, notably during the second Taiwan Strait Crisis, when the outlying islands of Kinmen and Matsu were shelled in 1958. Though the crisis settled down by the end of the year, the two sides began shelling each other every other day with propaganda-filled rounds. Interestingly, this practice did not end until 1979, after the United States terminated its defense agreement with Taiwan and recognized the PRC. It was also after this that China began to moderate its stance on Taiwan, moving away from an emphasis on its liberation and adopting a focus on peaceful reunification. In the 1979 Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, China stated, "Our state leaders have firmly declared that they will take present realities into account in accomplishing the great cause of reunifying the motherland and respect the status quo on Taiwan and the opinions of people in all walks of life there and adopt reasonable policies and measures in settling the question of reunification so as not to cause the people of Taiwan any losses."<sup>18</sup> As such, it appears that, contrary to arguments that U.S. defense commitments prevent conflict, history shows the opposite to be true.

## **Unprovoked Invasion is Unlikely**

More hawkish analysts often state that China is ready to invade Taiwan and has a firm date in mind after which it will act to take Taiwan, regardless of whether there has been a provocation. Although this sentiment runs counter to everything China has publicly stated, as well as the fact that its hostile actions in the Strait have almost exclusively been in response to perceived provocations, it maintains

that China's public statements regarding its desire for peaceful reunification are merely a facade. Even if policymakers assume this sentiment to be correct, there are still very real, practical reasons that make an imminent invasion incredibly unlikely. Simply put, an amphibious invasion carries significant risk, offers no guarantee of success, and would pose long-term challenges to China's economic growth, even if it were to succeed.

## **Chinese Amphibious Invasion is Incredibly Risky**

Looking solely at the balance of power between China and Taiwan, China's advantage on paper seems insurmountable. According to the Pentagon's 2024 report, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," China's Eastern and Southern Theater Commands enjoy a significant numerical superiority over Taiwan's forces on land, air, and sea. China has four times the number of ground forces; twice as many artillery pieces; twice the number of naval ships (not taking into account China's substantial advantage in ship size), and more than double the number of fighters.<sup>19</sup> However, to fully capitalize on these advantages, China must overcome several formidable challenges.

### **Obstacles to an Invasion**

In 2023, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conducted more than thirty iterations of a war game simulating a conflict over Taiwan. In the four iterations using base assumptions, which assumed that the United States would come to Taiwan's aid, Chinese losses were heavy, and China ultimately failed to capture the island. The PLA was only able to land 37,000 troops, suffered 7,000 casualties, and the remainder surrendered after it became impossible to resupply them. In only one of these scenarios were the Chinese able to capture an intact port, which was eventually destroyed in counterattacks. China also lost an average of 155 aircraft and 138 ships, accounting for significant portions of its air force and navy. In scenarios where the assumptions were adjusted to be more favorable to China, though still assuming U.S. intervention, Chinese casualties were even greater due to the prolongation of the conflict. In these 18 pessimistic iterations, China landed 60,000 troops, losing 17,000,

with the remainder surrendering. They also lost 327 aircraft and 113 ships. China was victorious in a scenario that assumed the U.S. military would not intervene and Taiwan stood alone, though determined to resist. However, China still suffered greatly after more than two months of combat. Beijing succeeded in landing 230,000 troops but took 70,000 casualties. In this iteration, Taiwan destroyed 17 amphibious landing craft and 17 escort ships, and, despite destroying the Taiwanese air force on the ground by an opening missile attack, the Chinese lost 240 aircraft to ground-based anti-air.<sup>20</sup>

The report on the war game mentioned above does not delve into the operational details of each iteration; however, it is clear that China faces several obstacles in the event of an invasion. Although this simulation ended in defeat for Taiwan, it is likely that China still has very good reason to pause and rethink the prospects of invasion. First and foremost, despite its numerical superiority, China still faces a logistical bottleneck in transporting its forces across the Taiwan Strait and landing them successfully. Even if it is assumed that the Taiwanese Navy and Air Force are destroyed in an opening missile salvo, China will have to contend with mobile anti-ship and anti-air systems. Using its amphibious landing ships and helicopter carriers, China could conservatively land 20,000 troops per wave from its amphibious assets, plus several thousand additional troops via helicopter. The 20,000 figure is generous, as China would need to rely heavily on manpower and use fewer vehicles to reach this figure. China can significantly augment this number by utilizing smaller coast guard and army maritime vessels, adding 100,000.<sup>21</sup>

However, if China loses even a small number of its purpose-built amphibious landing craft, it would be a substantial blow to the operation. China currently has 27 modern landing craft and 12 helicopter transports. Amphibious capability is not fungible across types of landing craft, and losing just a handful of these purpose-built ships would severely degrade their ability to land armor and mechanized infantry. Relying on light infantry ferried over on coast guard or civilian fishing vessels without armor, but supported by air power, is risky, considering Taiwan has ample smaller anti-air systems that would be difficult to destroy in the opening missile salvo. Furthermore, even pessimistic analyses assume the Taiwanese can knock

out 20 percent of the landing force per transit. In practice, this means that by the fourth wave, China's dedicated amphibious assets could be reduced by half if Taiwan can maintain this rate.<sup>22</sup>

To succeed, China would have to feel confident that it could capture a seaport, bypassing the bottleneck of moving armor and mechanized infantry by vulnerable amphibious landing craft. This would be no easy feat, as the need to capture one intact would allow Taiwan to concentrate forces in and around them. Additionally, facing an existential threat, Taiwan could choose to destroy its ports at the outset of the conflict intentionally.<sup>23</sup> China has made efforts to counteract this by developing large landing platforms capable of acting as temporary ports on otherwise austere beaches.<sup>24</sup> Exact numbers vary, but it is understood that there are roughly 14 beaches in Taiwan suitable for this purpose. However, these beaches are open with limited cover and face elevated roadways and forested terrain that make for excellent firing positions. Above all, these locations are well-known to Taiwan and would likely be mined and otherwise fortified in the lead-up to war.<sup>25</sup>

Assuming China was able to transit the strait, make the landings, secure a beachhead, and capture an intact port, it would then need to deal with terrain that favors the defenders. The west coast of Taiwan is highly urbanized, with a more or less unbroken chain of cities running from Kaohsiung in the south to Taipei in the north. Assuming the Taiwanese maintain the will to fight, China's advantages in manpower and equipment will be significantly degraded in close-quarters, street-by-street fighting. Taiwan's interior is a spine of mountains, the tallest in Asia outside the Himalayas, further lending itself to a defensive edge. While a Chinese victory may be all but guaranteed once it establishes a foothold that allows it to reliably move weapons and troops to the island, the fighting will likely be prolonged and could take months to resolve. During this time, China is likely to begin feeling the negative economic impacts of the conflict and run the risk of foreign interference.

As such, even if China can overcome these obstacles, it remains an open question whether it can counter all of them successfully in real-world scenarios. At each stage, China is making a gamble, and failure at any stage means failure for the whole operation, while

success in one stage does not guarantee victory. It is worth asking, then, why the Chinese leadership would voluntarily put itself into such a difficult situation, even if it felt somewhat confident about the prospects of success.

## **Even in Victory, China Gains Little**

A Chinese amphibious invasion of Taiwan is not only operationally risky, but will also be damaging to China long-term, even if it is successful. After a successful invasion, Taiwan would likely be in ruins, and China would have the unenviable task of rebuilding its infrastructure and integrating a hostile population. As mentioned, Taiwan's west coast, where much of the fighting would take place, is heavily urbanized. Any amphibious invasion would likely be preceded by air and rocket attacks. Even if these were focused exclusively on military targets, unlikely considering the need to degrade Taiwan's infrastructure, there would still be significant collateral damage. The subsequent fighting after a beachhead was established would be equally destructive, especially if landings occurred in the south and the Taiwanese carried out a fighting retreat up the coast all the way to Taipei in the north, destroying bridges, tunnels, and other infrastructure as they went.<sup>26</sup>

Some argue that one potential Chinese benefit from such an invasion would be control over Taiwan's semiconductor industry. However, even if the fabricators were not destroyed in the fighting or sabotaged by the Taiwanese, capturing an intact facility would not mean control of the industry. Without the human capital of Taiwan Semiconductor's (TSMC) employees, who could be whisked away to the United States before or during the fighting, it is unlikely China could simply restart production immediately. China currently gets 60 percent of its computer chip imports from Taiwan. An invasion would immediately disrupt this, and the likely destruction of the fabricators would have long-term adverse effects for the Chinese economy. One study found that the disruption caused by an invasion would result in a 10 percent decline in global GDP, with China standing to suffer significantly more than the United States, its main competitor.<sup>27</sup>

Following the invasion, China's relations and economic ties with advanced Western countries,

particularly the United States, could also be severed. China hawks in Congress would likely feel vindicated, and there would be broad bipartisan support for decoupling the U.S. economy from China's, with similar actions expected by other G7 powers, whose collective economies are 65 percent larger than China's. Although China may be able to continue to feed its population with imports from developing countries and keep its economy supported by energy from Russia, it would no longer be the "factory of the world" that it is today. Thus, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ability to deliver economic results for the Chinese people, a core pillar of its legitimacy, would come under fire in the aftermath.<sup>28</sup>

Another concern for China would be the reactions by its neighbors. Countries with border and maritime disputes with China, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, and India, would be most alarmed by Chinese aggression, especially if it were unprovoked. China exacerbated this situation when, in 2015, it broadened its definition of "Core National Interests," a category previously reserved for Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, to now include the South China Sea, the Senkaku Islands, and Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>29</sup> In response, Japan may abandon its commitment to pacifism and maybe even develop its own nuclear capabilities if it felt the U.S. military could no longer provide credible deterrence. India and Vietnam could also abandon their longstanding neutrality. These countries may either band together or, worse for China, fall firmly into the U.S. sphere of influence.

Regardless of the outcome of the conflict, Chinese military action over Taiwan would have immediate implications for the global economy, with China being particularly disadvantaged. As it currently stands, Taiwan is a high-risk, low-reward gamble for the Chinese, as they stand to lose much in the event of failure and gain little or still lose in success, making an unprovoked invasion unlikely. In light of this, the 2027 date that China set for itself is not a deadline by which it needs to invade. Instead, it likely desires the ability to credibly threaten military action as a last resort in the event of unacceptable provocation. For China to attack Taiwan, it would need to be pushed to such a point where Beijing would view economic ruin as a preferable outcome to the status quo. If China were ever at this level of commitment, then the United States would need to seriously consider its own level

of resolve before it decided to become involved in the conflict, as China would likely be willing to take much higher losses than the United States would.

## Policy Recommendations

An unprovoked invasion of Taiwan by the PRC is highly unlikely due to the island's status as a high-risk, low-reward target. Thus, any American policy that further increases the risk and lowers the reward for China is one that ought to be seriously considered. However, this does not imply that the United States should definitively state it would come to Taiwan's aid in a conflict, given Beijing's rhetoric.

### Short-term Maintenance of Strategic Ambiguity

Although Taiwan is not a first-order priority for the United States, explicitly telling China Washington would not defend it is a mistake. Even restraint-oriented analysts recognize Taiwan's economic importance as the producer of 60% of the world's advanced computer chips.<sup>30</sup> Even if the U.S. economy were to adjust long-term in the event this were lost, an invasion's short-term effects would still harm the economy.

Some argue that strategic ambiguity increases the risk of miscalculation, running the risk that China may pre-emptively strike U.S. forces in Japan and Guam. However, in wargames focusing on the Chinese side of a conflict, participants quickly found that they were reluctant to pre-emptively strike the United States, as doing so has historically guaranteed a wider war that would be even more difficult for China to win. It is likely that China would not strike the United States, at least initially, and would instead wait to see how the U.S. military reacts.<sup>31</sup> A Defense Priorities survey of foreign policy experts yielded similar results, finding that only 30 percent felt it was likely that China would preemptively attack U.S. bases in the region.<sup>32</sup> Even if Chinese leaders had decided, for one reason or another, to preemptively strike the United States, abandoning Taiwan is likely to have little effect on this calculus at this point.

As mentioned, Beijing responds to congressional provocations as if they are U.S. policy. It understands

that Congress is much more pro-Taiwan than the presidency, and it likely would have doubts about the credibility of U.S. statements of neutrality from the executive branch, believing U.S. entrance into the war to be only a matter of time, regardless of any statements by the administration. Given that the United States has little to lose from maintaining ambiguity, it may as well continue the policy of creating doubt in the minds of Chinese policymakers about their likelihood of success.

The most likely catalyst for conflict is a unilateral declaration of independence by Taiwan, pursued by the DPP as a means to appeal to its base and maintain power. The United States should state clearly to Taiwan and the world that any attempts to do this would force the United States to renounce the use of force to defend Taiwan publicly. In private communications with Taiwan, it should go beyond this to cause the Taiwanese leadership to doubt that the United States would come to Taiwan's aid in the event of an unprovoked attack. Doing so could prompt the Taiwanese to take their own defenses more seriously.

## **Long-term Off-ramp from Strategic Ambiguity**

Although it makes sense to continue pursuing strategic ambiguity in the short term, it is in the long-term interests of the United States to move toward a situation in which Taiwan is fully responsible for and capable of its own defense. Any inkling of a U.S. defense commitment, no matter how ambiguous, carries the risk of creating a moral hazard in which the Taiwanese may feel more emboldened than they otherwise would be.

Furthermore, despite the United States' military strength, coming to the aid of Taiwan poses significant challenges. Geographically, Taiwan is 90 miles from mainland China, but 5,000 miles from Hawaii and 6,900 miles from the continental United States. As Lyle Goldstein points out in *Target Taiwan: Challenges for a U.S. Intervention*, the United States faces significant challenges in defending Taiwan over such distances. Although U.S. troops on Taiwan could be decisive in repelling a Chinese attack, this type of intervention is likely the easiest for China to prevent due to its area denial capabilities. In the air, the United States likely enjoys significant technological

superiority and could have kill ratios ranging from the optimistic 10:1 to the more conservative 3:1 in dogfights with Chinese fighters. However, the United States would need to rely on airbases in friendly countries all within range of Chinese ballistic missiles, not to mention that it would need time to surge its air power to the region while China would be able to bring its entire air force to the fight immediately. Lastly, the ability of the United States to confront China at sea is also in question despite its superiority in technology and overall naval tonnage. Like the Air Force, the Navy would need time to bring its full force to bear on the West Pacific. Once there, Taiwan's proximity to the mainland means it would have to contend with China's land-based anti-ship missiles.<sup>33</sup> Losing just one aircraft carrier would represent the largest single loss of life for the United States in war since World War II.

The first step in moving away from strategic ambiguity is clearing the massive backlog of arms sales to Taiwan. As of November 2025, \$21.5 billion worth of weapons have been ordered by the Taiwanese but not yet delivered. Half of the current backlog consists of traditional defense platforms ill-suited to Taiwan's defense needs, including \$8 billion worth of F-16 fighters and \$2 billion worth of Abrams tanks. Taiwan's desire for these systems reflects an outdated view of what war with China would look like, with these platforms intended to complement U.S. intervention rather than ensure Taiwan's ability to defend itself on its own. Large, expensive systems such as these would likely be destroyed on the ground in the opening Chinese attack. Orders for these systems should be revisited. Unfortunately, with these deals already signed for, outright cancellation, though not impossible, is incredibly difficult. Much more likely is the potential to modify these deals to deliver fewer platforms but more munitions and replacement parts, though doing so would require Taiwanese acquiescence. Thirty-eight percent of the backlog consists of so-called asymmetric capabilities such as Harpoon anti-ship missiles, unmanned drones, and components for air defense systems.<sup>34</sup> These should remain a priority for delivery, with the United States doing everything in its power to expedite the process.

Future sales of asymmetric systems should be contingent on Taiwan not only drastically increasing its defense spending but also making significant

structural reforms to its military. In 2024, Taiwan reversed course in transitioning to an all-volunteer military, extending the conscription period from four months to one year. This is a step in the right direction, but by all accounts, Taiwan is failing to capitalize on the change. Previously planned training for the first cohort in drones, Stinger missiles, and anti-tank rocket usage has been postponed. Anecdotally, morale among conscripts appears to be low, with many treated as merely temporary help and performing menial tasks for the full-time enlisted personnel.<sup>35</sup> Public opinion reflects this crisis, with only 14 percent of the population expressing confidence in the military's ability to defend against an invasion.<sup>36</sup> Taiwan's 2025 Quadrennial Defense Report acknowledges these issues, citing overall poor morale and the inability to retain professional soldiers, who often prefer to pay a penalty to separate early than serve out their full term.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, on paper, Taiwan boasts a reserve force of 1.6 million, composed of former conscripts who have recently completed their mandatory service. However, little training beyond refresher courses in shooting and physical fitness, and a lack of equipment, raises concerns about their effectiveness.<sup>38</sup>

All the military aid in the world will not remedy these institutional problems and poor morale. Thus, the United States should make continued aid contingent on deep, measurable reforms that extend beyond clearing the existing backlog. Steps in the right direction that Washington could measure would include:

- Greater pay for enlisted professional soldiers, who would also play an active role in training conscripts.
- Trimming down the bloated military leadership, as Taiwan currently has a general and flag officer to enlisted ratio 2.5 times higher than the United States military.
- More frequent training for the reserves to include participation in large-scale exercises.<sup>39</sup>

Once these reforms are addressed, continued sales of weaponry should be contingent on an increase in Taiwan's defense spending. In early 2025, Taiwan's President Lai announced an intention to increase defense spending to 3.25 percent that year. However, the opposition KMT-controlled legislature later revised this, cutting it to 2.38 percent. Lai maintains

that defense spending will be 3.25 percent in 2026, with the ultimate goal of reaching the 5 percent threshold that the United States gave to its NATO allies in Europe.<sup>40</sup> Continued military sales to Taiwan should be contingent in some form on Taiwan meeting this goal. Furthermore, the United States should actively encourage Taiwan to develop its own defense industries, rather than continuing to purchase from the United States.

## Conclusion

Despite Beijing's saber-rattling, evidence suggests a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is neither imminent nor the preferred outcome for the Chinese. While observers cannot read the minds of the Chinese leadership or know their plans for sure, it is not an extraordinary leap of logic to suggest that an authoritarian regime's primary goal is self-preservation, not expansion, and the CCP has its hands full with a host of internal problems ranging from a stagnating economy in the short-term to a long-term demographic crisis.

China's capabilities in 2027 and beyond are expected to continue improving, and Beijing has been explicit about its red lines. The United States and Taiwan should take their word for it. There are clear steps the United States can take to preserve peace and make Taiwan a less attractive target, and these actions do not require a more aggressive stance toward China nor the abandonment of Taiwan. Through smart, conditional assistance to Taiwan and clear communication to both sides about the limits of U.S. commitment and the consequences of unilateral action, the United States can avoid conflict through restraint while taking appropriate steps to protect its economic interests.

## Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services. [Hearing to receive testimony on United States Indo-Pacific Command in review of the Defense Authorization Request for fiscal year 2022 and the future years defense program](#). Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Publishing Office. 2021.
- 2 Burns, William J. [“CIA Director William Burns on “Face the Nation with Margaret Brennan.”](#) Interview by Margaret Brennan. CBS News. February 26, 2023.
- 3 Kennedy, Conor, and Daniel Caldwell, [China Maritime Report No. 23: The Type 075 LHD: Development, Missions, and Capabilities](#). Newport, RI. U.S. Naval War College, China Maritime Studies Institute. October 2022.
- 4 Roth, Luke, [“PLA Modernizing Amphibious Combined-Arms Brigades for Joint Island Landing Campaign.”](#) *TRADOC*. July 22, 2025.
- 5 Sutton, H.I. [“China Suddenly Building Fleet of Special Barges Suitable for Taiwan Landings.”](#) *Naval News*, January 10, 2025.
- 6 Palmer, Alexander, Henry H. Carroll, and Nicholas Velazquez. [“Unpacking China’s Naval Buildup.”](#) Center for Strategic and International Studies. June 5, 2024.
- 7 People’s Republic of China, State Council. [The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue](#). Beijing. Taiwan Affairs Office and Information Office of the State Council. 1993.
- 8 People’s Republic of China. State Council. [The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue](#). Translated by Xinhua News Agency. *Interpret: China*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- 9 People’s Republic of China. State Council. [The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era](#). Beijing. Taiwan Affairs Office & State Council Information Office. August 10, 2022.
- 10 Center for Strategic and International Studies, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. [“The Sky’s the Limit: Comparing China’s ADIZ Intrusions.”](#) July 26, 2024.
- 11 People’s Republic of China. [“Anti-Secession Law”](#) [□□□□□□□□]. Promulgated March 14, 2005. Article 8.
- 12 Center for Strategic and International Studies, Pacific Forum. [“What’s at Stake in Upcoming Taiwan Election.”](#) December 8, 2023.
- 13 Collins, Laura. [“Shifting National Identity and Independence-Unification Cleavages in Taiwan.”](#) Northeastern University. July, 1, 2023.
- 14 Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation. [“Special Report: Taiwanese Preferences on Taiwan’s Political Future.”](#) February 14, 2025.
- 15 Election Study Center, National Chengchi University. [“Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland \(1994/122025/06\).”](#) July 7, 2025.
- 16 U.S. Congress. *House Concurrent Resolution 53. 104th Congress. 1995. “Expressing the Sense of the Congress Regarding a Private Visit by President Lee Tenghui of the Republic of China on Taiwan to the United States.”*
- 17 Burkitt, Laurie, Andrew Scobell, and Larry M. Wortzel. [The Lessons of History: The Chinese People’s Liberation Army at 75](#). Washington, DC. U.S. Department of Defense. April 25, 2023.
- 18 Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress. [“Message to Compatriots in Taiwan.”](#) *Interpret: China*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. January 1, 1979.
- 19 U.S. Department of Defense. [Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress](#). Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Defense. December 18 2024)
- 20 Cancian, Mark F., Matthew F. Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham. [The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan](#). Washington, D.C. Center for Strategic and

International Studies, January 9, 2023.

- 21 Goldstein, Lyle. [“Target Taiwan: Prospects for a Chinese Invasion.”](#) *Defense Priorities*. October 16, 2025.
- 22 Ibid
- 23 [“Why China Would Struggle to Invade Taiwan.”](#) Council on Foreign Relations. June 12, 2024.
- 24 Sutton, H. I. [“China Suddenly Building Fleet of Special Barges Suitable for Taiwan Landings.”](#) *Naval News*. January 10, 2025.
- 25 Erickson, Andrew S. [China Maritime Report No. 42: Invasion Plans – Operation Causeway & Taiwan’s Defense in WWII.](#) U.S. Naval War College / China Maritime Studies Institute. October 2024.
- 26 Goldstein, Lyle. [“Target Taiwan: Prospects for a Chinese Invasion.”](#) *Defense Priorities*. October 16, 2025.
- 27 Desch, Zoe. [“Three reasons why China can’t afford to invade Taiwan.”](#) *Responsible Statecraft*. June 11, 2025.
- 28 Blanchette, Jude and Gerard DiPippo. [Reunification with Taiwan through Force Would Be a Pyrrhic Victory for China.](#) Washington, D.C. Center for Strategic and International Studies. November 22, 2022
- 29 People’s Republic of China. [National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China.](#) (Promulgated July 1, 2015). Article 2.
- 30 Swaine, Michael D. [“Taiwan: An Important but NonVital U.S. Interest.”](#) *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*. September 25, 2025.
- 31 Michaels, Jeffrey and Michael John Williams. [“A Wargame to Take Taiwan, from China’s Perspective.”](#) *War on the Rocks*. October 7, 2025.
- 32 Kavanaugh, Jennifer. [“Will the U.S. Go to War over Taiwan? Interpreting the Results of an Expert Survey.”](#) *Defense Priorities*. September 15, 2025.
- 33 Goldstein, Lyle. [“Target Taiwan: Challenges for a U.S. Intervention.”](#) *Defense Priorities*. October 16, 2025.
- 34 Gomez, Eric and Joseph O’Connor. [“Taiwan Arms Sale Backlog, November 2025 Update.”](#) *Taiwan Security Monitor*. December 23, 2025.
- 35 Ko, Patrick. [“Taiwan’s Military Reform Is Failing Where It Matters Most.”](#) *Defense News*. June 13, 2025.
- 36 Hoang, Josh. [“Taiwanese Public’s Confidence in Military Falls.”](#) *Domino Theory*. May 12, 2025.
- 37 Liao, Kitsch. [“Reading between the Lines of Taiwan’s New Quadrennial Defense Review.”](#) *Atlantic Council, New Atlanticist*. March 25, 2025.
- 38 Cancian, Mark F, Matthew F. Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham. [The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan.](#) Washington, D.C. Center for Strategic and International Studies. January 9, 2023
- 39 Yu, Yuster and Michael A. Hunzeker. [“Taiwan’s Biggest Problem in Steeling Itself for War with China Is Cultural.”](#) *War on the Rocks*. April 16, 2025.
- 40 Hoang-Wilkes, Josh and Kris Lih. [“Taiwan Quietly Shelves Three Percent Defense Spending Target for 2025.”](#) *Domino Theory*, August 21, 2025.