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Maintaining Taiwan's Democracy

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Introduction

China has relentlessly pursued its objective of absorbing Taiwan. While the unification was once advocated by both the mainland and Taiwan, in recent decades the two have grown apart. Taiwan has become a thriving democracy while China has increased its intolerance of free speech, thought, religion, and association. The current policy of ambiguity, by which the unification issue is left for the future, is under stress as China ratchets up its political warfare and military threats against Taiwan. It is time for a thorough review of options to keep the

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current commitment to peaceful resolution of the unification issue and to determine how best to assure survival of Taiwan's democracy.

Options

With Taiwan's unambiguous rejection of the "one country, two systems" policy, and the seeming failure of Beijing's influence operations to increase the chances for peaceful reunification, the risks of armed confrontation have become greater. This risk is amplified by other factors—China's large-scale military buildups in the China Seas and its increased willingness to use economic and political clout to achieve objectives sooner rather than later.

Some might argue that inaction would be safest, much akin to the period of ambiguity that prevailed over the past few decades. However, the time for laying low and hoping for the best may be over. As President Tsai said in answer to a question in early 2020 about whether ambiguity is the best approach vis-a-vis China:

The situation has changed. The ambiguity can no longer serve the purposes that it was intended to serve. So, we're facing a very different situation now and the type of ambiguity that the previous governments wanted to use to preserve some sort of space for both sides is no longer there. And this is the time for us to think about this situation—the people's expectations, the changes in international politics, and also the potential regional tensions. So 'cross-strait' is no longer cross-strait relations *per se*. It's part of the regional situation. So it's a much more complicated situation now.¹

What else can be done to bolster the prospects for continued peace and for democracy's survival on Taiwan? Some options that may help achieve these objectives include: increase deterrence of military assault by China; reinforce that any resolution must be peaceful; and preserve the robust democracy that has grown in Taiwan.

1. *The United States and Taiwan should work to garner international support for peaceful resolution with the assent of the Taiwanese people.*

It is U.S. policy that resolution of Taiwan's status must be peaceful and, as President Bill Clinton clarified in 1998, must be done with the assent of its people. The policy was reiterated at the outset of the Biden Administration: "The United States will continue to support a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues, *consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people on Taiwan.*"² (emphasis added)

This should not be the policy of the United States alone, but should be enunciated by other nations as well, especially those in East Asia and Europe that have strong and growing



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economic ties with China. Both the United States and Taiwan should work to ensure that these nations sign up to a diplomatic commitment that resolution should be peaceful. But what should that resolution contain?

One model would be to use China's own words that support self-determination and peaceful resolution of conflicts. For example, China declared in the Shanghai Communiqué:

All nations, big or small, should be equal; big nations should not bully the small and strong nations should not bully the weak. China will never be a superpower and it opposes hegemony and power politics of any kind. The Chinese side stated that it firmly supports the struggles of all the oppressed people and nations for freedom and liberation and that the *people of all countries have the right to choose their social systems according to their own wishes and the right to safeguard the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of their own countries and oppose foreign aggression, interference, control and subversion.*³ (emphasis added)

These very words could be used in resolutions in every fora and situation possible to reaffirm international commitments to Taiwan's right to choose its form of government and status. While China would probably argue that Taiwan is not a country and therefore does not have the right to self-determination, the case for self-determination should still be made. After all, as proven by the one-China campaign, getting sign-on by other nations to a principle builds a case, over time, for that principle to be a guiding one. Statements matter.

2. The United States should faithfully fulfill all commitments made in the Taiwan Relations Act.

In recent years, the United States has bowed to Chinese pressure to reduce the quantity, quality, and pace of arms transfers under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). As a result, arms sales have become less predictable while the balance of power has dramatically shifted in favor of China. Meanwhile China's region-wide military build-up over the past few years has been alarming, as has its bullying of Taiwan.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2020, signed into law in December 2019, called for the U.S. Secretaries of Defense and State to review the TRA to determine whether Chinese coercion is affecting: a) the security or social and economic system of Taiwan; b) the military balance of power between China and Taiwan; or c) the expectation that the future of Taiwan will continue to be determined by peaceful means. The NDAA suggested that the review develop guidelines for new defense requirements (including related to information and digital space), high-level exchanges with Taiwan, and regular transfer of defenses articles that would most effectively deter attacks and support Taiwan's asymmetric defense strategy.⁴ It further stated that arms should be provided to Taiwan solely on the basis of Taiwan's needs



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and that they should be made more predictable by ensuring timely review and response to Taiwan's requests.⁵

This review was not completed and is not mentioned in the 2021 NDAA. But it is a good idea and should be undertaken. And it should be done with Taiwan's support and input. Taiwan should take every opportunity to participate, to include high-level meetings.

3. To assure peaceful resolution, the United States should maintain a strong, regular regional military presence, in addition to continued economic and cultural ties with both China and Taiwan.

There is no question that the role of the United States has been and remains pivotal in restraining Chinese aggression toward Taiwan. The more the United States convinces China that it will come to the aid of Taiwan in event of conflict, the less likely China will be to initiate any conflict. Thus, it is imperative that the U.S. message of support for Taiwan be strong, clear, and unambiguous. The Biden Administration is off to a strong start, stating that "Our commitment to Taiwan is rock-solid and contributes to the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and within the region."⁶ Some helpful measures currently provided for in U.S. law might be fulfilled in a timely and complete fashion in order to reinforce deterrence and peaceful resolution.

Until recently, the United States self-imposed restrictions on high-level visits of U.S. officials to Taiwan.⁷ This did not result in less military or political threat to Taiwan from China. The sense of the U.S. Congress is that official visits between the United States and Taiwan should henceforth take place at all levels, "including Cabinet-level national security officials, general officers, and other executive branch officials" and to allow high-level Taiwanese official visits to the United States.⁸ The Trump administration took steps in this direction by sending two high-level officials to Taipei in 2020—U.S. Health & Human Services Secretary Alex Azar in August, and U.S. Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs Keith Krach in September.

The Biden Administration has signaled that this is likely to continue. Incoming President Biden invited Taiwan's representative to the United States to attend his inauguration, the first such invitation since 1979. Further, at his confirmation hearing, incoming Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in reference to Taiwan, said that he wanted to "...create more space for contacts."⁹

While political contacts are important, military exchanges are crucial also. The 2020 and 2021 NDAAs call for exchanges between senior defense officials and general officers of the United States and Taiwan, consistent with the Taiwan Travel Act, especially for the purpose of enhancing cooperation on defense planning and improving the interoperability of U.S. and Taiwanese forces.¹⁰



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It is also important for the Department of Defense to continue regular transits of U.S. Navy vessels through the Taiwan Strait not only as a signal of support to Taiwan, but to bolster the freedom to sail and operate anywhere international law allows. The United States should also encourage allies and partners to conduct such transits.

4. Taiwan should turn itself into a “poison pill.”

As recently as 1996, China’s military spending was barely twice Taiwan’s.¹¹ Now, Taiwan’s military capabilities are vastly outweighed by China’s. Taiwan’s defense budget is \$10 billion; China’s is \$154 billion. The Peoples Liberation Army has about a million active-duty soldiers versus Taiwan’s 140,000 ground troops. Taiwan’s fighter jets are outnumbered (420 versus 1490) as well as its ships (23 versus 240).¹²

The David vs Goliath nature of the relationship has led to an evolving defense strategy that places less emphasis on war-fighting and more on making Taiwan a less easy target, referred to by some as the “porcupine defense.”¹³ The idea is to make taking the island by force costly and difficult by using intelligent sea mines, a variety of missiles, and measures to prolong and possibly preserve its capabilities to resist. These latter “force preservation” measures include mobility, deception, camouflage, concealment, jamming, redundancy, rapid repair, and reconstitution.¹⁴

A similar strategy to the porcupine defense should be considered to reinforce Taiwan’s civilian capabilities to resist forceful absorption by China. The Taiwanese people need to subsist in the event of a cutoff of utilities, communications, and sustenance. Switzerland perhaps provides an example. Towns throughout that country have fountains fed by natural springs to provide water in the event of central distribution failure, stockpiles of foodstuffs, citizens who are trained and armed, multi-layered communications capabilities, bunkers to enable survival of attacks, and hidden libraries containing instructions on how to build all manner of things to facilitate “rebooting civilization.”¹⁵

Sweden also provides an example. In 2018, the government sent a booklet to all citizens informing them about personal preparations for crisis or war. It instructs on how to assess disinformation and highlights, “If Sweden is attacked by another country, we will never give up. All information to the effect that resistance is to cease is false.”¹⁶

5. Taiwan should more effectively counter disinformation.

Chinese influence activities in and against Taiwan amount to political warfare and they deserve high-level, concerted countermeasures. While some efforts at fact-checking and public diplomacy are underway by the Taiwanese government, more can be done.



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The U.S. Congress proposed a study be conducted on the nature and extent of the disinformation campaign by China.¹⁷ While studies are useful, they take time and may delay action. It is clear now what would help in Taiwan: a broader public discourse on information warfare as well as an action plan.

Much research on the how's and what's of active measures, particularly disinformation, is already available, but not necessarily in Chinese and accessible to the Taiwanese public. This should be remedied, and it should be made a topic of education at the university level, perhaps even at secondary school, so that the citizenry can be alert and questioning. For example, *The New York Times* did an excellent 3-part video series that describes disinformation, how it is conducted, and what its effects can be.¹⁸ Because the video focuses on Russia, the lessons provided would be relatively de-politicized and provide balanced instruction. Translating the video into Chinese and making it available to educational institutions would be simple.

6. The United States should quickly conclude a trade agreement with Taiwan and encourage others to engage with Taiwan economically as well.

Trade agreements are important economically of course, but they are also powerful political symbols. Taiwan has only a handful of free-trade deals, mostly with South American countries, but also one with Singapore and another with New Zealand.¹⁹

Trump Administration trade negotiators were reticent to pursue an agreement with Taiwan for fear of upsetting negotiations with China in the same arena. Nevertheless, there is bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress for some action in this arena: the "Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019" calls for "further strengthening bilateral trade and economic relations between the United States and Taiwan."²⁰ It is time to work toward either a bilateral agreement with Taiwan or a broader regional one.

7. The United States should undertake a Policy Review on Taiwan.

There has been no fulsome review of U.S. policy on Taiwan since 1994 and a great deal has changed since. Important fundamental changes include:

- The U.S. engagement with China in the early 1970s was predicated on the expectation that China would become a less hard-line authoritarian regime and the hope that China would become a freer society, one which Taiwan might assent to join. This has not happened; the opposite has.
- Taiwan's democracy has become more vibrant and entrenched. There has been an evolution away from the presumption that unification is inevitable or even desirable. China's military build-up, coupled with its vast Belt and Road Initiative to develop



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infrastructure and relationships worldwide, are creating new boldness on the part of Beijing. Simultaneously, U.S. power and resolve have become more questionable.

These changed circumstances necessitate a reevaluation of U.S. assumptions and past policies. All aspects of the relationship should be considered. U.S. interests in the region remain strong, as is its insistence on peaceful resolution, but some of the attributes and nuances of U.S. policy may need revision in light of 21st century developments.

Conclusion

U.S. policy toward Taiwan has been consistent in requiring that Taiwan not be taken by force. The United States has sent forces to the region in response to Chinese aggression on multiple occasions. The requirement for peaceful settlement as stated in the Shanghai Communiqué has remained U.S. policy across all U.S. administrations since. It was strongly reiterated in the Taiwan Relations Act, which said that the decision to establish diplomatic relations with China rests on the expectation that the Taiwan issue will be resolved peacefully, and that any effort to undermine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means would be a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific and of grave concern to the United States.

As then-candidate Joe Biden stated in his congratulations to the re-elected Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in January 2020, “You are stronger because of your free and open society. The United States should continue strengthening our ties with Taiwan and other like-minded democracies.”²¹

¹ “President Tsai Interviewed by BBC,” Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), January 18, 2020, available at <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/5962>. The question to which the President responded was: “Your predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou, was able to preserve Taiwanese democracy whilst building stronger ties with China, economically and culturally. At a small price, the continued ambiguity over the status of this island, what's not to like about that approach?”

² Ned Price, U.S. Department of State Press Release, January 23, 2021, available at <https://www.state.gov/prc-military-pressure-against-taiwan-threatens-regional-peace-and-stability/>.

³ See “Joint Statement Following Discussions With Leaders of the People’s Republic of China,” February 27, 1972, available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>.

⁴ “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020,” Public Law 116-92, Sec. 1260C (a) and (b), available at <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20191209/CRPT-116hrpt333.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid., Sec. 1260D (4), (5), and (6).

⁶ Ned Price, op. cit.

⁷ “Taiwan Travel Act” Sec.2 (6).



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⁸ Ibid., Sec. 3 (1), (2).

⁹ Shannon Tiezzi, "Biden Makes Early Outreach to Taiwan," *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2021, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/biden-administration-makes-early-outreach-to-taiwan/>.

¹⁰ "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020," op. cit., Sec. 1260D (7) (B)

¹¹ "China's Might Is Forcing Taiwan to Rethink Its Military Strategy," *The Economist*, January 26, 2019, available at <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/01/26/chinas-might-is-forcing-taiwan-to-rethink-its-military-strategy>.

¹² Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, Appendix I: China and Taiwan Forces Data, pp. 115-117.

¹³ William S. Murray "Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 61: No. 3, Article 3, available at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss3/3>.

¹⁴ Drew Thompson, "Hope on the Horizon: Taiwan's Radical New Defense Concept," *War On the Rocks*, October 2, 2018, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/hope-on-the-horizon-taiwans-radical-new-defense-concept/>.

¹⁵ Alex Tabarrok, "Switzerland is Prepared for Civilizational Collapse," Marginal Revolution University, December 12, 2017.

¹⁶ "Sweden Issues Leaflet to Homes Telling People How to Prepare for War," ABC News, May 21, 2018, available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-22/sweden-issues-leaflet-on-how-to-prepare-for-war/9785934>.

¹⁷ "Countering The Chinese Government and Communist Party's Political Influence Operations Act," H.R. 1811-116, introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives March 18, 2019, available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1811/text?r=4&s=6>.

¹⁸ Adam B. Ellick and Adam Westbrook, "Operation Infektion: Russian Disinformation: From Cold War to Kanye," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/video/what-is-disinformation-fake-news-playlist>. (Disclosure: This author participated in the video.)

¹⁹ Bureau of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Taiwan, available at <https://www.trade.gov.tw/english/Pages/List.aspx?nodeID=672>.

²⁰ "Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act of 2019," S. 1678-116, passed the U.S. Senate on October 29, 2019 and was referred to the U.S. House of Representatives, available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1678/textq=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%224754%22%5D%7D&r=2&s=5>.

²¹ Gerrit van der Wees, "What a Biden Presidency Means for Taiwan," *The National Interest*, November 22, 2020, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-biden-presidency-means-taiwan-172927>.

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