

**To Challenge China in the South China Sea, Invite Taiwan to Participate in RIMPAC 2020**

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**“In short, China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States.”<sup>1</sup> – Admiral Philip Davidson, INDOPACOM Commander**

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) seeks nothing less than complete control of the South China Sea, consistent with the infamous “Nine-Dash Line” created by the former Kuomintang government of China in the late 1940’s.<sup>2</sup> Dominance of the South China Sea offers China uncontested access to fisheries and hydrocarbons, control of international trade routes, domestic political benefits, and significant military advantages. Most importantly, it signals China’s return to great power status. Inviting Taiwan to participate in RIMPAC 2020 is a measured approach that begins to challenge China’s return to dominance in the South China Sea.

South China Sea claimants and the United States should not be surprised by China’s actions or the results of their efforts. As early as 2010, Secretary of State Clinton identified the governing principles of U.S. policy in the South China Sea to reassure U.S. allies that China’s claims would not go unnoticed.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, China began laying dredge spoils on the reefs of the Spratly Islands.<sup>4</sup> In 2018, despite a pledge by China’s President Xi Jinping to the contrary, China placed anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missiles on the islands.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jamie Seidel, “US Admiral warns: Only war can now stop Beijing controlling the South China Sea,” news.com.au, April 22, 2018, <https://www.news.com.au/world/us-admiral-warns-only-war-can-now-stop-beijing-controlling-the-south-china-sea/news-story/Of8f99c3fb4492366cec09d234937ab2>. Accessed September 25, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Bader, “The U.S. and China’s Nine-Dash Line: Ending the Ambiguity,” Brookings.com, February 6, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-u-s-and-chinas-nine-dash-line-ending-the-ambiguity/>. Accessed September 25, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> China Island Tracker, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>. Accessed on October, 6 2019.

<sup>5</sup> OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, 2019 Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, ii.

In 2016, a United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) tribunal ruled against China's claims of territorial seas and exclusive economic zone privileges based on the development of the Spratly Islands.<sup>6</sup> China has since chosen to ignore the UNCLOS tribunal ruling and continues to challenge U.S. and partner nation freedom of navigation passes in the disputed waters. China's actions force the United States to confront a situation that has been years in the making; what to do with an economic juggernaut and rising military power capable of challenging U.S. influence in China's own backyard? Taiwan, China's long-time thorn may hold the answer.

There has been tension between China and Taiwan since 1949 when the Republic of China (ROC) government fled to Taiwan after losing the civil war to Mao Tse Tung's communist army.<sup>7</sup> From Taiwan, the ROC was recognized by the United Nations as the ruling government for all of China until 1971. Eventually, the U.S. recognized the People's Republic of China and in 1979, stated "the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China."<sup>8</sup> While the United States ceased to recognize Taiwan as an independent entity, the policy of "strategic ambiguity" was initiated with the passing of the Taiwan Relations Act.<sup>9</sup> The Act stated, "It is the policy of the United States to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character and to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort of force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan."<sup>10</sup> In 1992, the long-time ruling party

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Elenor Albert. "China-Taiwan Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, June 27, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-relations>. Accessed on September 25, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> United States. Congress. Conference Committees 1979. Taiwan Relations Act: Conference Report to Accompany H.R. 2479. [Washington] :[U.S. Govt. Print. Off.], 1979.

of Taiwan, Kuomintang (KMT), signed an agreement with the PRC stating that there is only “one China.”<sup>11</sup> This agreement, known as the “1992 Consensus,” acknowledged that Taiwan would not seek independence from China.

From 1979 on, China and the United States have been engaged in a unique conflict over Taiwan’s future based on the “strategic ambiguity” principle. For many years, maintaining the status quo was to the advantage of the United States and Taiwan. Geographically separated from mainland China by more than 100 miles, armed with assurances from the world’s lone superpower, and boasting a technologically superior military, Taiwan’s independence was believed to be ironclad. However, in the past decade, China has invested heavily in its military with a 2018 defense budget that is 14.5 times greater than that of Taiwan’s and largely focused on the ability to reunify by force if necessary.<sup>12</sup> The 2019 Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report states, “China is using a steady progression of small, incremental steps in the “gray zone” between peaceful relations and overt hostilities to secure its aims, while remaining below the threshold of armed conflict. Such activities can involve the coordination of multiple tools, including: political warfare, disinformation, use of A2/AD networks, subversion, and economic leverage.”<sup>13</sup> These gray zone activities include the development of a robust Coast Guard and The People’s Armed Forces’ Maritime Militia that harass non-Chinese flagged vessels engaged in fishing, hydrocarbon exploration, and other peaceful pursuits.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Elenor Albert. “China-Taiwan Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 27, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-taiwan-relations>. Accessed on September 25, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, 2019 Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 90-91.

<sup>13</sup> THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region, June 1, 2019, 8.

<sup>14</sup> OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 54.

Today, the 1992 Consensus and Taiwan's reunification with China are in question. China's Nine-Dash Line claims in the South China Sea certainly are one factor. So too is the tension and unrest in Hong Kong and the assumption of power by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan. Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, from the DPP, has rejected the "one country, two systems" framework, drastically shifting relations with China. This has resulted in the end of formal communications between Taiwan and China as the PRC will not negotiate unless Taiwan accepts the 1992 Consensus as the foundation for future negotiations.<sup>15</sup>

Reunification with Taiwan is a fundamental PRC goal and an important piece of the 2049 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The U.S. Department of Defense Annual Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019 states, "China continues to view the Taiwan issue as the most important and sensitive issue between the United States and China."<sup>16</sup> The report states that China may use force in the event of the following: "Formal declaration of Taiwan independence; Undefined moves toward Taiwan independence; Internal unrest in Taiwan; Taiwan's acquisition of nuclear weapons; Indefinite delays in the resumption of cross-Strait dialogue on unification; Foreign intervention in Taiwan's internal affairs; and, Foreign forces stationed on Taiwan."<sup>17</sup>

Enter RIMPAC 2020. The Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) is a biannual exercise conducted by the United States and 45+ partner nations from late June to early August. First begun in 1971, RIMPAC offers participants the opportunity to improve interoperability while testing emerging technology. In 2018, 25,000 personnel and 52 ships from 26 countries

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 83.

participated.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. Third Fleet describes RIMPAC as “the world’s largest international maritime exercise (which) includes rehearsal scenarios that cover disaster relief, amphibious operations, anti-piracy work, missile shots, mine clearance, maritime security, anti-submarine warfare and air defense operations.”<sup>19</sup>

Initially, China was invited to participate in RIMPAC 2018 but was disinvited in response to the arming of the Spratly Islands. Department of Defense spokesman Lt.Col. Christopher Logan clarified the U.S. position by stating that “China’s behavior is inconsistent with the principles and purposes of the RIMPAC exercise. We have strong evidence that China has deployed anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missile systems and electronic jammers to contested features in the Spratly Islands region of the South China Sea.”<sup>20</sup>

The decision to remove China’s invitation to RIMPAC was codified into law in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act and required China do the following before it would again be invited to participate: “(A) ceased all land reclamation activities in the South China Sea; (B) removed all weapons from its land reclamation sites; and (C) established a consistent four-year track record of taking actions toward stabilizing the region.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite its strategic alliance with the United States and critical location, to avoid heightening tensions with China, Taiwan has never been invited to join RIMPAC. Taiwan, however, has been eager to participate for some time. After China was disinvited in 2018, Taiwan asked to join the exercise with Taiwan’s Minister of Defense Yen De-fa stating, “We

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<sup>18</sup> Ben Werner, “47-Ship RIMPAC Exercise Begins Tomorrow,” USNI News, June 26, 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/06/26/rim-of-the-pacific-2018-participation>. Accessed on September 25, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Wyatt Olsen, “China Out. Vietnam and Israel In for RIMPAC 2018,” Stars and Stripes, May 30, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/navy-china-out-vietnam-and-israel-in-for-rimpac-2018-1.530220>. Accessed on September, 25 2019.

<sup>21</sup> H.R. 5515 — 115th Congress: John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, 424

have always wanted to take part and our ongoing efforts have nothing to do with the U.S. decision to disinvite China this year.”<sup>22</sup> As recently as September of this year, Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen publicly indicated that she too would like her nation to participate in RIMPAC 2020.<sup>23</sup>

The United States also appears to be considering an invitation to Taiwan. In 2018, the Taiwanese online journal Focus Taiwan stated, “According to Democratic Progressive Party lawmaker Tsai Shih-ying (蔡適應), the U.S. has wanted to invite Taiwan to RIMPAC for several years but has been unable to do so due to Chinese objections and Beijing's threat to quit the exercise if Taiwan is invited.”<sup>24</sup> U.S. interest in inviting Taiwan to participate is also evident in draft House and Senate National Defense Authorization Act legislation from as early as 2014. The 2017 NDAA went so far as to authorize the Department of Defense to grant Taiwan RIMPAC observer status.<sup>25</sup> The current version of the FY2020 NDAA lacks specific language concerning Taiwan’s inclusion but does state, “the United States should continue to strengthen defense and security cooperation with Taiwan to support the development of capable, ready, and modern defense forces necessary for Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability, including capabilities in support of an asymmetric defense strategy.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Liu Lee-jung and Joseph Yeh, “Taiwan Eyes Golden Opportunity to Participate in RIMPAC Exercise: MND,” Focus Taiwan News Channel, May 30, 2018, [focustaiwan.tw/news/aipl/201805300010.aspx](https://www.focustaiwan.tw/news/aipl/201805300010.aspx). Accessed September 30, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> KG Chan, “After F-16 deal, Taiwan aims to join RIMPAC 2020,” Asia Times, September 16, 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/09/article/after-f-16-deal-taiwan-aims-to-join-rimpac-2020/>. Accessed September 30, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Liu Lee-jung and Joseph Yeh, “Taiwan Eyes Golden Opportunity to Participate in RIMPAC Exercise: MND,” Focus Taiwan News Channel.

<sup>25</sup> H.R.4909 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/4909/text#toc-H7469FC5C4CC54E84A30EA2C1A859F93F>. Accessed September 30, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> S.1790 - National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020. SEC. 1248. SENSE OF CONGRESS ON TAIWAN. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1790/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22ndaa+2020%22%5D%7D&r=2&s=6#toc-H02ED7527E78F42F79D9A9F2D08A3B5D0>. Accessed on September, 30 2019.

With China out of RIMPAC, there are now three reasons why the U.S. should invite Taiwan to RIMPAC 2020. The first reason is to demonstrate to China that the U.S. does not intend to cede the South China Sea. For the past four decades, the United States has avoided taking new action with regards to Taiwan. In doing so an uneasy balance was struck. The United States sold Taiwan military equipment but would not recognize Taiwan as an independent nation. Since 2001, the United States has sold Taiwan more than \$30B worth of military equipment.<sup>27</sup> Recently these sales have included advanced technology such as M1A2T Abrams tanks, Stinger surface to air missiles and modernized F-16 fighter jets.<sup>28</sup> In response to the recent sales, China has threatened sanctions but has yet to take significant action towards the United States and Taiwan.

The status quo also includes freedom of navigation passes by U.S. and other nations' warships. In accordance with UNCLOS, navies may transit territorial seas under innocent or transit passage. In alignment with the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal ruling, the United States refuses to recognize China's claims to extended territorial seas as the result of man-made islands. Therefore, the United States and other nations transit the international waters without invoking innocent or transit passage rights. This too has generated little response from the Chinese.

Including Taiwan in RIMPAC may elicit a more forceful response from China as it directly challenges the "1992 Consensus" and pushes Taiwan further away from reunification. According to U.S. Navy Captain Tuan Pham, formerly the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence for Commanders, U.S. Naval Forces Japan and Battle Force Seventh Fleet, "There

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<sup>27</sup> Lindsay Maizland, "U.S. Military Support for Taiwan: What's Changed Under Trump?" Council on Foreign Relations, April 3, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/us-military-support-taiwan-whats-changed-under-trump>. Accessed on September 30, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Wong, "Trump Administration Approves F-16 Fighter Jet Sales to Taiwan," New York Times, April 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/16/world/asia/taiwan-f16.html>. Accessed on September 30, 2019.

would be more political value than military value in incorporating Taiwan into RIMPAC initially. The invitation would send a strong and unambiguous signal to Beijing that Washington can and will compete in the ongoing global powers competition.”<sup>29</sup> Disrupting the status quo in this manner pushes back on China’s aggressions in the South China Sea, demonstrates U.S. viability in the region and reassures U.S. allies that we will honor our commitments in the face of a rising China.

A second reason to invite Taiwan to RIMPAC 2020 is to build both U.S. and partner capability in the region. China has conducted a series of maritime exercises with other South China Sea nations. According to the Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, in 2018, China participated in more than 12 bilateral and multilateral exercises and conducted a “large-scale, multi-fleet live-fire exercise in the East China Sea, north of Taiwan.”<sup>30</sup> The report goes on to note that “China hosted the first combined China-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) maritime exercise and participated in the trilateral PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP 2018 naval exercise with Malaysia and Thailand as part of China’s effort to improve ties with Southeast Asian countries and calm tensions in the South China Sea.”<sup>31</sup> Including Taiwan in RIMPAC 2020 will demonstrate that not all South China Sea nations are exercising and aligning with China. The RIMPAC exercise will also enhance system interoperability and will improve coordination between the U.S., Taiwan, and other participants. According to the U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet Deputy Commander, RDML Ted LeClair, “RIMPAC is a useful

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<sup>29</sup> CAPT Tuan Pham, USN. Interview by author. Newport, RI. September 16, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region, June 1, 2019, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 24.

event. It builds interoperability through communications. The more we operate with other navies, the better prepared we all are. Relationships cannot be taken for granted.”<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, Taiwan is in the unique position of operating former U.S. Navy vessels to include Oliver Hazard Perry Frigates and Kidd Class Destroyers. U.S. Navy familiarity with the vessels’ communications, weapons systems and tactical employment will enhance the RIMPAC exercise and help prepare for future conflict. According to Assistant Secretary of Defense for IndoPacific Security Affairs, Randall G. Schriver, “A strong and secure Taiwan can deter aggression, defend the Taiwan people and their hardwon democracy, and engage on its own terms with the PRC.”<sup>33</sup>

The third reason to invite Taiwan to participate in RIMPAC 2020 is to prepare for conflict in the South China Sea. Taiwan is strategically located, both in terms of international trade, and in the event of a U.S. war with China. The Office of the Secretary of Defense Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China states, “The South China Sea plays an important role in security considerations across East Asia because Northeast Asia relies heavily on the flow of oil and commerce through South China Sea shipping lanes, including more than 80 percent of the crude oil to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.”<sup>34</sup>

To take Taiwan by force requires a significant military and political effort on the part of the Chinese. They would have to execute a complex amphibious landing, overcome an entrenched population in urban areas and deal with an enemy prepared for asymmetric warfare in

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<sup>32</sup> RDML Ted LeClair. Interview by author. Telephone. September 18, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region, June 1, 2019, 31.

<sup>34</sup> OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 49.

challenging terrain.<sup>35</sup> As stated in the DoD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, “this kind of operation involves significant, and possibly prohibitive, political risk because it could galvanize pro-independence sentiment on Taiwan and generate international opposition.”<sup>36</sup>

Exercising with Taiwan offers significant advantages in preparation for a future conflict with China. As Taiwan is essentially a fixed aircraft carrier, the U.S. may leverage both Taiwanese aircraft and landing strips for combat operations. Taiwan’s submarine and surface forces would assist the U.S. in conducting area denial operations in the Strait of Taiwan and throughout the South and East China Seas. Taiwan’s radar, surveillance, and intelligence collection networks would also assist U.S. operations in a conflict with China.

Despite the benefits of including Taiwan in RIMPAC 2020, there are strong counterarguments to this course of action. Foremost is concern that the U.S. does not know where China’s red line on Taiwan is drawn. PRC leadership has made reunification with Taiwan a core component of the PRC 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2049. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) relies on a strong economy and nationalism to maintain the support of the people, the CCP must deliver on achieving reunification by 2049.<sup>37</sup> The assumption of power by the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan signals an expanding rift in the future of “One China.” As 2049 approaches, lack of reunification will be viewed by the Chinese population as a failure by the CCP to deliver on a core promise. To meet expectations, China may seek forceful reunification through economic or military means. Would an invitation to participate in RIMPAC therefore trigger a military response from China? If so, would that response ultimately lead to war between the U.S. and China? Would China respond economically and, if so, would U.S. allies

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>37</sup> Center for Naval Analysis Analyst. Interview by author. Telephone. October, 1, 2019.

be targeted, further isolating the U.S.? Are any of these potential responses worth reversing 40 years of strategic ambiguity and hastening conflict between the U.S. and China?

Simply put, we don't know. What we do know is that over the past decade, China has effectively challenged the United States for dominance in the South China Sea while making tremendous military and economic gains. As stated in the 2019 DoD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, "The National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy articulate our vision to compete, deter, and win in this environment. Achieving this vision requires combining a more lethal Joint Force with a more robust constellation of Allies and partners. Increased investments in these imperatives will sustain American influence in the region to ensure favorable balances of power and safeguard the free and open international order."<sup>38</sup>

Ten years of FONOPS, appeals to UNCLOS tribunals, and consternation has not stopped China from building, manning and, arming islands to realize its territorial claims. Adding Taiwan to RIMPAC will not stop China's progress but will signal the intent of the United States to compete in the region as identified in the DoD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. Alternatively, it may lead the PRC to overreach in its attempt to achieve reunification with Taiwan through force. That overreach could result in internal strife, international condemnation and loss of allies which may ultimately improve the U.S. position in the South China Sea.

The RIMPAC invitation is intended to be a scalable tool in the INDOPACOM toolkit. If needed, the U.S. could make the invitation less threatening by slowly modifying Taiwan's role in the exercise. As a first step, the U.S. could announce that it is considering an invitation to Taiwan to gauge the initial PRC response. Next the U.S. could state that Taiwan previously participated as an observer nation and would do so again. To generate a stronger response, the

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<sup>38</sup> THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region, June 1, 2019, Opening Letter.

U.S. could allow Taiwan to participate solely in a Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Response (HA/DR) mission.<sup>39</sup> This would be in line with China's level of participation in previous RIMPACs and could highlight the need for greater HA/DR capability to save lives and protect property.<sup>40</sup> If desired, future RIMPAC exercises could escalate tensions with China by including Taiwan forces in combat exercises, conducting a portion of the exercise in the South China Sea, and ultimately exercising the defense of Taiwan. Alternatively, the U.S. could use a RIMPAC invitation to Taiwan as a means to negotiate changes to the Spratly islands and China's South China Sea claims. If China agrees to desired changes, the U.S. could remove the RIMPAC invitation to Taiwan.

A second counterargument takes the opposite approach. It asks the question: does inviting Taiwan to RIMPAC matter? It is possible that China is no longer threatened by the relationship between the U.S. and Taiwan. If so, a largely ceremonial act such as inviting Taiwan to participate in RIMPAC could be seen by the Chinese as a sign of weakness. China's response could signal to other South China Sea nations and the broader international community that it intends to realize the stated goal of unification on its terms and is no longer concerned about U.S. support to Taiwan. This response could have far reaching consequences as nations may ultimately question the determination and ability of the United States to honor other defense commitments.

This counterargument has merit, however, in the opinion of one defense analyst, "China will definitely take notice of a Taiwanese invitation to RIMPAC on par with a U.S. vessel

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<sup>39</sup> Tanner Greer, "Taiwan's Defense Strategy Doesn't Make Military Sense But It Does Make Political Sense", *Foreign Affairs*, September, 17 2019. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/taiwan/2019-09-17/taiwans-defense-strategy-doesnt-make-military-sense>. Accessed October 2, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Center for Naval Analysis Analyst. Interview by author. Telephone. October, 1, 2019.

conducting a port visit in Taiwan.”<sup>41</sup> Unless China believes it is so well positioned that it can ignore the presence of the U.S. military, it will be forced to respond, even if only to appease its population.<sup>42</sup> It is critical that the U.S. applies the correct amount of pressure at the correct time so as not to box China into a position that can only be resolved with a military response as China is beholden to its population.<sup>43</sup>

A third counterargument questions the value of exercising with Taiwan. The DoD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report states,

“Expanding our interoperability with allies and partners will ensure that our respective defense enterprises can work together effectively during day-to-day competition, crisis, and conflict. Through focused security cooperation, information sharing agreements, and regular exercises, we are connecting intent, resources, and outcomes and building closer relationships between our militaries and economies. Increasing interoperability also involves ensuring our military hardware and software are able to integrate more easily with those of our closest allies and partners.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite the emphasis placed on exercises in the strategy, interoperability and coordination alone do not justify inviting Taiwan to RIMPAC 2020. However, when combined with the other arguments, the opportunity to exercise together is yet another benefit of inviting Taiwan to RIMPAC 2020.

A fourth and final counterargument questions whether the U.S. would go to war with China over the South China Sea. This is an excellent and timely question. With or without further U.S. provocation, the DoD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report assesses that,

“China could pursue a measured approach by signaling its readiness to use force or conduct punitive actions against Taiwan. The PLA could also conduct a more comprehensive campaign designed to force Taiwan to capitulate to unification, or unification dialogue, under China’s terms. China would seek to deter potential

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<sup>41</sup> Center for Naval Analysis Analyst. Interview by author. Telephone. October, 1, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region, June 1, 2019, 21.

U.S. intervention in any Taiwan contingency campaign. Failing that, China would attempt to delay intervention and seek victory in an asymmetric, limited war of short duration. In the event of a protracted conflict, China might choose to escalate cyberspace, space, or nuclear activities in an attempt to end the conflict, or it might choose to fight to a standstill and pursue a political settlement.”<sup>45</sup>

In the face of force-on-force conflict between the U.S. and China, will the U.S. contest the waters within the First Island Chain and will the U.S. fight to defend Taiwan against a Chinese invasion? The DoD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report states, “The Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America’s future.”<sup>46</sup> The report’s conclusion also states, “As great power competition returns, we will continue to invest, act, and orient ourselves to ensure that the principled international order from which all countries in the region benefit endures... The United States will uphold our commitments and will act to defend our interests and those of our allies and partners.”<sup>47</sup>

Based on these statements, observers would infer that the U.S. is prepared to contest China’s claims in the South China Sea and is preparing to defend Taiwan in accordance with commitments made in the Taiwan Relations Act. While this position may be viable today, there may soon come a time when the American people will balk at the sacrifice of blood, resources and economic viability required to maintain influence in the region. If or when that becomes the case, this counterargument will be validated, and the U.S. will concede to Chinese hegemony in the region.

Over the past decade, China’s military and economic initiatives have resulted in significant territorial gains and enhanced their influence in the region. If the United States intends to challenge China in the South China Sea, the status quo is no longer an option. Rather

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 83-84.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 53-54.

than waiting on China to escalate tensions on their terms, the U.S. must be prepared to push back through appropriate measures. Inviting Taiwan to participate in RIMPAC 2020 is a provocative step that challenges norms and provides INDOPACOM with a course of action that can be calibrated to elicit the desired response. By pursuing this and other initiatives, we will demonstrate to China and our partners that we will not cede the South China Sea, that we will enhance U.S. and partner capability/interoperability in the region, and that we are prepared for conflict with China should it arise.

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