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14. ABSTRACT The current US policy vis-à-vis Taiwan has been ineffective in countering Chinese aggression in the South China Sea and around Formosa. A policy revisit along the diplomatic, economic, and military levers of national power is necessary for the US to maintain its national security interests in the region and protect the democratic government in Taipei from force or coercion by the People's Republic of China (PRC). These changes to policy should be implemented to strengthen Taiwan economically via free trade with the US and encourage like-minded nations to increase their trade relationship; the US should provide increased military capability to Taiwan to enhance their 'Porcupine Strategy'; if the Chinese government demonstrates an imminent military takeover of Taiwan, the US should immediately recognize Taiwanese independence and encourage other nations to do the same. Taken together, these policy recommendations aim to strengthen Taiwan against China's belligerent behavior and simultaneously demonstrate the commitment of the US government to support a bastion of democracy in the South China Sea.					
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RETHINKING THE US-TAIWAN RELATIONSHIP



A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College

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INTRODUCTION

The US “strategic ambiguity” foreign policy and the current Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) have not deterred China’s aggression in the South China Sea. China continues to seek reunification with Taiwan through intimidation and, potentially, by force using its military. A People’s Liberation Army (PLA) invasion of Taiwan could bring the US and China into direct conflict with one another. Even barring US intervention, a Chinese attack would cause significant economic, diplomatic, and financial costs with negative global impacts. Thus, a deterrence of a military takeover of Taiwan is in the vital national security interests of the United States. The US should seek to modify its support of Taiwan by increasing efforts to strengthen it economically and militarily without violating TRA. As outlined in the Biden Administration’s National Security Strategy, it is in the US national interest to maintain the status quo, “support Taiwan’s self-defense,” and “resist any resort to force or coercion against Taiwan.”¹ As a last resort, if a Chinese invasion is imminent, the US should recognize Taiwan as an independent country and commit to supporting its defense. The status quo has not diminished the risk of conflict, and an exploration of different foreign policy changes that the US should use short of war follows.

THE US-TAIWAN RELATIONSHIP AND THE “ONE CHINA POLICY”

The US has had a complex relationship with Taiwan since the communist takeover of mainland China in 1949. US foreign policy has maintained for decades that there is only one China. Until 1979, the US only recognized the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan as the legitimate government of the Chinese people. During the Korean War, the US Seventh Fleet positioned itself

¹ “National Security Strategy,” *The White House*, October 2022, p 24. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

in the Taiwan Strait to block the PRC from seizing control of Formosa. Following the Korean conflict, the ROC and the US military relationship culminated with a mutual defense treaty in 1954.² This defense treaty was the first in a line of diplomatic, economic, and military ties between the two countries.

While the relationship between the ROC and the US was strong through the 1960s, the US began to court the PRC under President Nixon to shift the balance of power against the Soviet Union. In 1972, at the end of President Nixon's historic trip to the mainland, President Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong established a strategic shift in US foreign policy toward China through the Shanghai Communiqué. This communiqué started the normalization process and communicated that the US did not object to the PRC's position that it is the legitimate government of China.³ Subsequently, the US withdrew its military forces from Formosa and, by 1979, formally recognized the PRC in what has become known as the "One China Policy."⁴ Since the US no longer recognized the ROC as a sovereign government, the U.S.-Taiwan Defense Treaty was nullified.

In response to the formal recognition of the PRC, the US Congress passed the TRA. This law allows the US to maintain ties with Taipei without violating the US "One China" policy. While US policy prohibits establishing embassies between Taipei and Washington, the act allows the US to provide military assistance to Taiwan. The TRA states that "the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means...is considered a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and

² Zhiqun Zhu, "A Unique Trilateral Relationship: The US, the PRC, and Taiwan since 1949," *Association for Asian Studies*, 2012.

³ Michael A. Ridge, Jr, "Shanghai Communiqué." *In World History: A Comprehensive Reference Set*, edited by Facts on File. Facts On File, 2016.

⁴ "Milestones in Relations between the U.S., China and Taiwan," *Reuters*, August 2, 2022.

of grave concern to the United States.”⁵ The law also embodies the “strategic ambiguity” that the US may defend Taiwan if China attempts reintegration via military means.⁶

The US and PRC issued a joint Communiqué in 1982 to settle Chinese concerns over military arms sales to Taiwan. The PRC restated that it was committed to a “peaceful reunification” with Taiwan, and the US reciprocated by stating that it would “gradually” reduce its military assistance. The communiqué created great anxiety with Taipei, as it appeared that the US was sacrificing its security in a trade-off for better relations with Beijing. President Reagan issued the “Six Assurances” to reassure Taiwan that the US was not abandoning them.⁷ It clarified that the US has not agreed to any timetable to end arms sales, change the TRA, or any change regarding sovereignty over Taiwan.

From the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996 following Taiwan’s first direct presidential election and continuing to the present day, the US-PRC relationship has steadily declined. China has become more assertive in the South China Sea, violating its neighbors’ Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), building artificial islands equipped with military assets, and routinely ignoring international norms outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁸ Despite the US adhering to its “One China” policy, the PRC has amplified its intimidation campaign against Taiwan. Chinese military aircraft have entered Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone more in the last three years than during the previous 40 years combined. Additionally, the PRC Coast Guard has claimed that it can inspect shipping unilaterally around

⁵ “H.R.2479 - 96th Congress (1979-1980): Taiwan Relations Act,” *US Congress*, April 10, 1979.

⁶ Lindsay Maizland, “Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 3, 2022.

⁷ *President Reagan’s Six Assurances to Taiwan*. CRS in Focus, CRS Report 2020.

⁸ Nguyen Thanh Trung and Le Ngoc Khanh Ngan, “Codifying Waters and Reshaping Orders: China’s Strategy for Dominating the South China Sea,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, September 27, 2021.

Taiwan.⁹ Keeping Taiwan in an unofficial diplomatic status to appease Beijing has not proven effective at reducing potential conflict or easing tensions between the US and the PRC.



Source: BBC, April 6, 2023. *China and Taiwan: A really simple guide - BBC News*

STRENGTHENING TAIWAN ECONOMICALLY

The US should seek trade policies and advocate for Taiwanese inclusion in trade deals throughout the Far East and Europe. An economically strong Taiwan will enable it to resist economic and diplomatic strangulation by China. Money builds international influence, and as the second-largest economy in the world, China has systematically used its economic power to pressure other countries to sever connections with Taipei. Since 2016, China has effectively influenced nine countries away from Taiwan.¹⁰ To counteract the PRC, the US needs to lead efforts

⁹ David Brown, "China and Taiwan: A Really Simple Guide to a Growing Conflict," *BBC*, April 6, 2023.

¹⁰ "Honduras establishes ties with China after ending recognition of Taiwan," *PBS*, March 26, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/honduras-establishes-ties-with-china-after-ending-recognition-of-taiwan>.

to include Taiwan in international trade agreements that will strengthen its economy and empower it to thwart the PRC's diplomatic isolation campaign.

Only 13 countries in the world recognize Taiwan as a sovereign country.¹¹ In March 2023, Honduras was the latest country to break off diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of China. The Honduran government asked Taiwan for \$2.45 billion in addition to debt relief. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen was unable to agree to this request. Shortly after, the Honduran Foreign Ministry stated that Beijing "is the only legitimate government that represents all of China."¹² The PRC rewarded Honduras for echoing China's "One China" policy by receiving investment and loans for infrastructure projects. China's economic largesse has proven to be a highly effective tool in reducing the number of countries friendly to Taiwan, especially in developing countries.

To reverse this trend, the US must advocate to the more than 100 countries with informal diplomatic ties with Taiwan to include them in international trade agreements. To demonstrate support for Taiwan's economic growth, the US should include Taiwan in its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Thus far, 13 countries that account for 40 percent of the global economy have joined the IPEF talks, though the US has left Taiwan out so as not to antagonize the PRC.¹³ The exclusion of Taiwan from the IPEF is a mistake if the US desires to diminish Chinese economic influence. One of the pillars of the IPEF is supply-chain resiliency. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) produces 50% of the world's semiconductors.¹⁴ Incorporating Taiwan into the IPEF would strengthen its economy and give it economic influence

¹¹ "Countries That Recognize Taiwan 2020," *World Population Review*, accessed on April 30, 2023, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-that-recognize-taiwan>.

¹² "Honduras establishes ties with China after ending recognition of Taiwan," *PBS*, 2023.

¹³ Inu Manak, "Unpacking the IPEF: Biden's First Big Trade Play," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/article/unpacking-ipef-bidens-first-big-trade-play>.

¹⁴ "Semiconductor Manufacturing by Country," *World Population Review*, accessed on April 30, 2023, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/semiconductor-manufacturing-by-country>.

through a multilateral international trade framework. A stronger economy would translate to having more resources available for investment abroad. Therefore, IPEF inclusion could enable Taiwan to reinvigorate its investment opportunities in Central America.¹⁵ Over time, more developing countries may realize that PRC investments are debt traps that do not serve their long-term national interests and may become more inclined to more equitable investment terms from a democratic Taiwan.

Additionally, the US should use the U.S.-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership (EPPD) to establish a free trade relationship with Taiwan to raise GDP for both Taiwan and the US simultaneously. A free trade agreement on superconductors would have a worldwide impact on the global tech trade. The global market share between these two partners would be 62% of chip manufacturing. It would enable manufacturing technology transfer which would provide some resiliency to the chip-making market if China eventually takes control of Formosa. Just as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) free trade agreement is expected to raise GDP and employment in North America,¹⁶ a similar deal with Taiwan would provide economic growth and manufacturing advantages.

An economically strong Taiwan is in the national interests of the US. China is actively influencing countries worldwide to sever ties with Taiwan. If Taipei is isolated diplomatically, it will enable the PRC to exert even more pressure on the Taiwanese to accept reintegration with the mainland. A strong economy with robust trade ties with international partners decreases the likelihood that China will completely cut Taiwan off from the global economy. Incorporating

¹⁵ "Honduras establishes ties with China after ending recognition of Taiwan," *PBS*, 2023.

¹⁶ Kimberly Amadeo, "Pros and Cons of Free Trade Agreements," *The Balance*, 2022
<https://www.thebalancemoney.com/free-trade-agreement-pros-and-cons-3305845>.

Taiwan into the IPEF and developing a free trade agreement via the EPPD will be effective policies that will grow Taiwan's resilience against China's economic coercion.

US MILITARY SUPPORT TO TAIWAN'S 'PORCUPINE' STRATEGY

Taiwan's defensive strategy is a three-layered approach: "resist the enemy on the opposite shore, attack it at sea, destroy it in the littoral area, and annihilate it on the beachhead."¹⁷ The idea is to make the idea of a military assault so costly that China will be deterred from mounting an attack in the first place. For this to occur, Taiwan must have a strong defensive capability only the US can provide. Under the existing TRA and with updated legislation such as the Taiwan Policy Act, the US should provide material and training, similar to the support that the US is providing to Ukraine, to make a PRC amphibious operation extremely challenging.












One of the lessons learned from Russia's invasion of Ukraine is that the US should have provided substantially more material and training support before the invasion. The ad hoc nature of US support in the opening phase of the war did not deter Russia, nor did the Ukrainian forces have the requisite material stockpiles to conduct major counterattacks once the invasion was underway. While the Ukrainians ultimately stopped the initial Russian advances, this had more to do with incompetent Russian leadership and poor logistic management.¹⁸ For Ukraine to force Russia out of its territory, it will require superior weapons from the US and its NATO partners.

¹⁷ "Taiwan: how the 'porcupine doctrine' might help deter armed conflict with China," *The Conversation*, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/taiwan-how-the-porcupine-doctrine-might-help-deter-armed-conflict-with-china-169488>.

¹⁸ Jack Watling, "The War Will Grind On: Reflecting On a Year of War in Ukraine," *War on the Rocks*, February 27, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/02/the-war-will-grind-on-reflecting-on-a-year-of-war-in-ukraine/>.

Similarly, Taiwan will need substantially more weaponry from the US than is currently provided if the PRC ever launches a military assault.

Chinese and Taiwanese armed forces

	 China	 Taiwan
Total active forces	2,035,000	169,000
Ground forces 	965,000	94,000
Navy 	260,000	40,000
Air force 	395,000	35,000
Reserves 	510,000	1,657,000
Tanks 	4,800	650
Aircraft 	3,348+	691+
Submarines 	59	4
Naval ships* 	86	26
Artillery 	9,550	2,093

*Only includes ships classified as principal surface combatants, such as aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and frigates

Source: BBC, April 6, 2023. [China and Taiwan: A really simple guide - BBC News](#)

Another lesson from Ukraine is that the type of weapons the US provides matters. The chart above demonstrates the PRC's gross advantage in numbers and firepower, similar to the large size of the Russian military vis-à-vis Ukraine. Any PRC military operation would likely quickly destroy the Taiwanese Air Force and maritime forces. However, the Taiwan Defense Forces could be very effective in defending the littorals and their shoreline through asymmetric weaponry if adequately equipped by the US. The weapons that need to be prioritized and stockpiled are sea mines, mobile artillery such as High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), anti-ship cruise missiles, anti-tank missiles such as the Javeline, and air

defense systems.¹⁹ A Taiwan equipped with a trained, mobile defense force and equipped with modern weapons would have a significant deterrence effect on PLA plans to seize Formosa.

As the Ukraine war has shown, Taiwan must have the equipment and training now rather than when conflict is imminent. Unlike Ukraine, Taiwan cannot be sufficiently re-armed following an invasion by the PRC. As of late 2022, the US has a \$19 billion backlog of munitions for Taiwan, including Javelins and Stinger short-range air defense missiles.²⁰ This backlog needs to be reduced as efficiently as possible. Harpoon anti-ship missiles ordered by Taipei are not scheduled for shipment till 2026, only one year before the US predicts that China will have sufficient capability to launch an amphibious operation.

The US Congress can legislatively support Taiwan's Porcupine Strategy by passing the Taiwan Policy Act (TPA). The TPA has several sections of particular importance to the defense capabilities of Taiwan. The act amends the TRA by expanding the types of arms provided to Taipei. It provides \$4.5 billion in Foreign Military Financing and would authorize loan guarantee authority of up to \$2 billion. Additionally, it would fast-track Foreign Military Sales (FMS), helping reduce the backlog of weapons already ordered by Taiwan.²¹ Updating the TRA in the modern era via the TPA would be a legislative boost in enabling Taiwan to have the weapons, training, and military assistance it needs to deter a potential future invasion by the PLA.

¹⁹ Lee His-min and Eric Lee, "Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept, Explained," *The Diplomat*, November 03, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/taiwans-overall-defense-concept-explained/>.

²⁰ Gordon Lubold, Doug Cameron and Nancy Youssef, "U.S. Effort to Arm Taiwan Faces New Challenge with Ukraine Conflict," *WSJ*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-effort-to-arm-taiwan-faces-new-challenge-with-ukraine-conflict-11669559116>.

²¹ U.S. Senate, "The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022," accessed April 29, 2023, [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20(1).pdf).

According to US Navy officials, the PRC will have the capability to seize Taiwan in 2027.²² To deter China from considering an invasion a viable option, the US must provide Taiwan with sufficient asymmetric weaponry to mount an effective defense. The lessons from Ukraine have demonstrated that the “Porcupine” strategy will require large amounts of artillery, missiles, air defense, drones, and mines. The US will need to accelerate efforts to reduce the weapons acquisition bottleneck, fast-track FMS for Taiwan, and modify the TRA in the era of Great Power Competition. If Taiwan is to deter a PRC invasion, the US must provide a credible and demonstrated capability before 2027.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS – RECOGNIZE TAIWAN’S INDEPENDENCE

If China is not going to be deterred from military action against Taiwan and an invasion is imminent, the US should abandon the “One China” policy and recognize Taiwan as a sovereign and independent country. An imminent invasion would be defined as occurring within 72 hours, with troops and equipment being moved to debarkation ports. Recognition would be a monumental shift in US foreign policy and would most likely put US-PRC relations on an extremely hostile footing. It would undoubtedly risk war between the US and China, with global consequences.

The US has held to the “One China” policy since 1979 to build a positive relationship and provided unofficial status to Taiwan defined via the TRA. While it has been in the national security interests of the US to maintain the status quo vis-à-vis China and Taiwan, it does not mean that the US should not consider conditions for recognition. Quite the contrary, the US needs a definitive tripwire to change its Taiwan foreign policy if the situation in the Taiwan Strait becomes dire.

²² Mallory Shelbourne, “Accelerated Chinese Timeline to Seize Taiwan Raises Questions on Pentagon Priorities, Says Gallagher,” *USNI News*, October 18, 2022, <https://news.usni.org/2022/10/18/accelerated-chinese-timeline-to-seize-taiwan-raises-questions-on-pentagon-priorities>.

US foreign policy needs to prepare for hostilities across the Taiwan Strait and a unilateral declaration of independence. President Biden recently stated in an interview, “Taiwan makes their own judgments about their independence...that’s their decision.”²³ Popular opinion in Taiwan may one day shift towards independence, leading to indications and warnings that PRC forces are within 72 hours of invading Taiwan. In that case, the US should reciprocate by clearly messaging to the Chinese that the US will recognize Taiwan if the PLA attempts to land troops. If the PRC is intent on a military option to take Formosa, then the original purpose of maintaining the “One China” policy is outdated. The US should then proceed with official diplomatic recognition of its endangered democratic partner.

COUNTERARGUMENT – LEAVE THE TAIWAN RELATIONS ACT ALONE

The US should not seek to modify the status quo of the “One China” policy. Any adjustment of the Taiwan Relations Act could be construed as recognition of Taiwan’s independence by China and would not improve security in the South China Sea. Instead, it would increase the risk of a military invasion of Taiwan, potentially leading to a military conflict between the US and China. It is in the vital national security interests of the US to avoid hostilities with China. While US advocacy of Taiwan’s economy is unlikely to elicit a significant response from the PRC, arms shipments similar to the ones provided to Ukraine could be destabilizing. If the US seeks to improve its relationship with the PRC, providing defensive weapon systems en masse will not have the desired effect.

²³ David Sacks, “While Pledging to Defend Taiwan from China, Biden Shifted on Taiwan Independence. Here’s Why That Matters,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/while-pledging-defend-taiwan-china-biden-shifted-taiwan-independence-heres-why-matters>.

Additionally, the US should not recognize Taiwan's independence under any circumstances. The pretense of changing the status quo has provoked China to send warships and aircraft into the Taiwan Strait and conduct ballistic missile tests over and around Taiwan, as shown by the former US House Speaker's visit.²⁴ China has been clear that any declaration of independence by Taiwan is a vital national interest and will have a forceful response, including a military invasion.²⁵ US recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign nation will dramatically increase the likelihood of war with China, with unpredictable and catastrophic global consequences.

REBUTTAL

While adjustments to the Taiwan Relations Act would upset China, it would not drastically change China-US relations. Previous PRC responses to US economic ties with Taiwan have been limited to muted disapproval. Under the TRA, deliveries of defensive systems to Taiwan is a matter of routine. Typically the rhetoric out of Beijing on arms transfers accuses the US of contributing to regional instability. The only difference now is the lessons learned from the Ukraine conflict: that a smaller nation armed with asymmetric weaponry can resist a stronger power. Modifying the TRA via the Taiwan Policy Act will not destabilize the Taiwan Strait. It will update the TRA to the current geopolitical situation and provide Taiwan's "Porcupine" strategy with the quills its needs.

However, a US recognition of Taiwanese independence has been a long-stated redline of the Chinese government. This massive shift in US-Taiwan relations has the highest risk of direct

²⁴ David Rising, "China's Response to Pelosi Visit a Sign of Future Intentions," *AP NEWS*, August 19, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-china-beijing-congress-8857910a1e44cefa70bc4dfd184ef880>.

²⁵ "China Renews Taiwan Threats, Island Cites 'Wishful Thinking.'" *AP NEWS*. August 11, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-beijing-united-nations-china-taipei-e447cb49e86c15468b618e0fb469d0ce>.

conflict with China. A better way forward would be for the US to prepare for a policy response if the Taiwanese unilaterally declared independence. Suppose the Chinese are committed to a military invasion regardless of US adherence to the “One China” policy. In that case, the US should strongly consider threatening recognition and send forces to the region as a deterrence.

CONCLUSION

Taiwan has been and will continue to be a major flashpoint in the strategic competition between the US and China. The strategic ambiguity policy has not deterred China from aggression toward Taiwan or reduced regional tensions. The US should consider changing the status quo of its Taiwan policy by assisting Taiwanese economic power and military capability. Though the Taiwanese are currently not in favor of declaring independence, public opinion may shift as the geopolitics of the region change. It is in the best interests of the US to prepare for this political change by developing clear criteria for diplomatic recognition of Taiwan if deterrence against a PRC invasion fails.

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