

# TAIWAN: AN IMPORTANT BUT NONVITAL U.S. INTEREST

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# Executive Summary

Taiwan is the most likely flashpoint that could trigger a direct war between the United States and China. It is critical, therefore, to examine whether or not Taiwan constitutes a vital U.S. interest. This brief asserts that Taiwan is an important but not vital U.S. interest. It is not an interest that justifies the United States going to war with China to defend.

A direct war between the United States and China would be cataclysmic and cause extraordinary damage to the global economy. It would risk heavy U.S. military losses and possible nuclear escalation. It is also unclear whether the United States would prevail. Taiwan must be a truly vital interest to justify such risks.

While it is important to deter a Chinese attack on Taiwan and prevent a regional war that would destabilize East Asia, proponents of a U.S. defense of Taiwan by *all means necessary* exaggerate Taiwan's strategic value and China's military threat to East Asia.

Taiwan is neither central to America's ability to ensure a stable and prosperous Asia open to U.S. economic and political engagement nor is it a critical location for the United States to oppose Chinese hegemony in Asia. China views Taiwan primarily through a political lens. Beijing has not expressed the intent to use the annexation of the island as a stepping stone toward regional hegemony. Moreover, possession of Taiwan would not give China that capacity.

The United States is not formally obligated to militarily defend Taiwan, in contrast to its security commitments to treaty allies Japan and South Korea. Washington does have a vital interest in maintaining its security commitments to Tokyo and Seoul – two robust economies and major technology innovators that are each more critical geostrategically than Taiwan.

Taiwan does possess considerable value in its high-tech capabilities, producing 60 percent of the world's most sophisticated semiconductors. But replicating this production capacity in the United States and other Western countries would be far less costly than fighting a war with China over Taiwan.

Although Taiwan is not a vital interest justifying war and is not a treaty ally, the United States still has a strong interest in preventing Chinese coercion of this U.S.-aligned democracy. An accompanying brief presents an alternative approach to supporting Taiwan while maintaining U.S. credibility with critical Asian allies.

## Introduction

As the Sino-American relationship becomes ever more competitive, if not adversarial, the issue of Taiwan — as the most likely source of conflict between the two nations — looms ever larger. Taiwan is a close friend of the United States, with a vibrant democratic political system and a successful economy. It is also under threat from undemocratic China, which it has deep historical, cultural, and economic ties with but shares no common political system. The danger exists that an increasingly powerful and autocratic Beijing, seeking to reunify with a wayward former province that had been detached from China through war,<sup>1</sup> will employ force to achieve its objective.

The United States has a clear interest in supporting Taiwan's freedom, prosperity, and overall well-being. But exactly how far does that interest extend? Current trends in U.S.-China relations — more broadly but also in relation to Taiwan — are increasing the likelihood of Chinese military action against the island. This poses the urgent and related questions of whether Washington should, when push comes to shove, go to war with Beijing to ensure Taipei's continued freedom and democracy if China were to attack the island and, if not, what should the United States do to maximize peace across the Taiwan Strait while protecting American interests? This brief argues that Taiwan is an

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Adcock Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation,' Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order," *Pacific Focus* 25, no. 1 (April 2010): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2010.01039.x>.

important but not vital interest for the United States. It does not justify America going to war with China.

As an alternative to the possibility of war, a truly interest-based policy for Washington should include an array of efforts — short of any U.S. military intervention — to support Taipei. These include both deterrence and reassurance policies aimed at China, enhanced military and other forms of assistance for the island, and actions designed to shore up allied confidence in America's security commitments. If these policies are successful, they will likely result in improved Sino–American relations, a period of sustained peace across the Taiwan Strait, and the preservation of Taiwan's freedoms as both China and Taiwan deepen contacts and engage in mutually beneficial actions, progressing toward the day when political changes will permit a resolution of their differences.

Establishing the logic and feasibility of a still-supportive but ultimately noninterventionist U.S. policy toward Taiwan requires convincing answers to three core questions:

- 1) Why is Taiwan not a vital interest for the United States that would justify engaging in a war with China?
- 2) How could Washington successfully transition to a stable noninterventionist policy that still contributes to protecting Taipei without alarming key U.S. allies in the region?
- 3) Why, counterintuitively, would China be less probable to attack Taiwan if the United States removed the possibility of defending the island militarily?

This brief is the first of a two-part series that addresses the above questions. This first brief examines why Taiwan is an important or major but not *vital* national interest of the United States. The second brief details the considerable advantages — and challenges — of transitioning to a noninterventionist U.S. policy toward Taiwan. It also explains why

such a policy would reduce — but not eliminate — the likelihood of a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

## **Vital versus important national interests**

Vital security interests for a nation-state involve threats to its national survival and fundamental well-being. To defend against such threats, a nation-state would be willing to employ every means possible, including the use of military weapons in a major war.<sup>2</sup>

Lesser interests, which one might describe as “important” or “major,” can also involve the use of force, albeit on a limited level, e.g., drone attacks or small-scale warfare against small states or nonstate actors for limited ends.<sup>3</sup> But these uses do not involve wars with major powers over issues of national survival. Under international law, such uses of force are usually associated with a right of self-defense against a pending or actual and illegal attack.

Under the above definitions, defining Taiwan as a vital interest would mean that any threat to the island’s safety and security — such as a Chinese attack — would constitute a threat to America’s survival and well-being, thereby justifying the risk of a major war with China, a nuclear-armed power.

For those who advocate that the United States should go to war with China over Taiwan, the most common argument is that a Taiwan conflict, and a subsequent successful Chinese use of force against the island, would severely undermine vital U.S. interests, including:

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Lowther and Casey Lucius, “Now Hear This: Defining Our National Interests,” *Proceedings* 139, no. 11 (Nov. 2013),

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2013/november/now-hear-defining-our-national-interests>.

<sup>3</sup> Melanie W. Sisson, James A. Siebens, and Barry M. Blechman, eds., *Military Coercion and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Use of Force Short of War* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Bruce Harlow, “The Legal Use of Force Short of War,” *Proceedings* 92, no. 11 (Nov. 1966),

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1966/november/legal-use-force-short-war>.



- the security and stability of the entire Asian region – an area deemed critical to America’s survival and well-being;
- American prosperity and well-being, as Taiwan manufactures a high percentage of the world’s memory and logic microchips used in a wide range of military and civilian devices;
- the credibility of the United States as a reliable security guarantor to its allies in Asia and beyond, which is critical to its global security role in defense of its survival and well-being;<sup>4</sup>
- America’s moral reputation and global liberal norms, as defending Taiwan is seen as necessary to uphold America’s position as the defender of democracy, international law, and the norm against wars of aggression – the basic foundation of the so-called liberal international order.<sup>5</sup>

These arguments lead to the conclusion that, not only does the United States have a vital interest in deterring China from attacking Taiwan but, if deterrence fails, it also has

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<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, “Annexation of Taiwan: A Defeat from Which the U.S. and Its Allies Could Not Retreat,” Baker Institute, August 1, 2024, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/annexation-taiwan-defeat-which-us-and-its-allies-could-not-retreat>; Matt Pottinger, ed., *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2024); Michael Cunningham, “The American Case for Taiwan,” Heritage Foundation, March 27, 2024, <https://report.heritage.org/sr280>; Ian Easton, “If Taiwan Falls: Future Scenarios and Implications for the United States,” in *The World After Taiwan’s Fall*, ed. David Santoro and Ralph Cossa (Honolulu: Pacific Forum, 2023), 7–17; Susan M. Gordon and Michael G. Mullen with David Sacks, “U.S.–Taiwan Relations in a New Era Responding to a More Assertive China,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/us-taiwan-relations-in-a-new-era>; Elbridge Colby, “Why Protecting Taiwan Really Matters to the U.S.,” *Time*, Oct. 11, 2022, <https://time.com/6221072>; “Statement by Dr. Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo–Pacific Security Affairs, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Before the 117th Congress Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate,” U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Dec. 8, 2021, [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821\\_Ratner\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821_Ratner_Testimony.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Collins and Erickson, “Annexation of Taiwan”; Pottinger, ed., *The Boiling Moat*; Easton, “If Taiwan Falls”; Michael R. Pompeo, “The United States and Taiwan: Two Beautiful Countries, One Destiny,” Hudson Institute, May 21, 2024, <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/united-states-taiwan-two-beautiful-countries-one-destiny-mike-pompeo>.

a vital interest in preventing China from annexing the island using whatever means necessary, including direct military action.

In reality, although the two objectives of deterring war and preventing regional disruption are commendable and should be fundamental to any U.S. policy toward Taiwan, the potentially unlimited means for achieving them should not be.<sup>6</sup> Deterring a Chinese attack on Taiwan and preventing a cross-strait war from destabilizing Asia are important interests for the United States. However, it is not in the interest of the United States to employ *all means necessary* to achieve those objectives, given the significant negative consequences of such a war and the non-vital nature of America's interests in Taiwan.<sup>7</sup>

A conflict between Beijing and Washington over Taiwan would pose a far greater danger to the United States and East Asia than a more limited – yet still highly destructive – conflict between Taipei and Beijing. A 2024 Bloomberg study revealed that a full-blown U.S.–China war over Taiwan would cause unprecedented damage to the global economy.<sup>8</sup> Potential losses would total around \$10 trillion worldwide – i.e., 10 percent

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<sup>6</sup> Some voices are asking how vital Taiwan really is to the United States. See Charles L. Glaser, “Washington Is Avoiding the Tough Questions on Taiwan and China,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-04-28/washington-avoiding-tough-questions-taiwan-and-china>.

<sup>7</sup> Some observers argue that the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act implies that preserving Taiwan's security is a vital national interest justifying direct U.S. military intervention. But this is by no means clear. The act declares that “peace and stability in the [Western Pacific] are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern” and that “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means . . . [would constitute] a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.” This law states that violence or coercion toward Taiwan would threaten regional peace and security, which is certainly true. But it does not assert that the United States is obligated to militarily defend Taiwan if attacked. In fact, the act states that if the U.S. president concludes that Taiwan's security is under threat, he or she must consult with Congress to determine the appropriate response. This, of course, might not lead to U.S. military intervention; it is left as an open question. In fact, one can argue that avoiding a war with China over Taiwan would lessen the threat to the region. See “Taiwan Relations Act (Public Law 96-8, 22 U.S.C. 3301 *et seq.*),” American Institute in Taiwan, March 30, 2022, <https://www.ait.org.tw/taiwan-relations-act-public-law-96-8-22-u-s-c-3301-et-seq>.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Welch et al., “Xi, Biden and the \$10 Trillion Cost of War over Taiwan,” Bloomberg, Jan. 8, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-01-09/if-china-invades-taiwan-it-would-cost-world-economy-10-trillion>; Matthew P. Funaiolo et al., “Disruptions to Trade in the Taiwan Strait Would Severely Impact China's Economy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/disruptions-trade-taiwan-strait-would-severely-impact-chinas-economy>.

of global gross domestic product, or GDP — easily exceeding damage from the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2008-09 global recession. China alone could lose nearly 17 percent of its GDP due to a likely collapse in trade, sanctions, and the loss of access to advanced semiconductors.<sup>9</sup> Even a yearlong blockade could cut China's GDP by approximately 9 percent. Moreover, a Sino-American war would crush Taiwan's economy — with an estimated 40 percent loss of GDP — stall global manufacturing, and hit major economies like Japan, South Korea, and the United States.<sup>10</sup>

A U.S.-China war over Taiwan would also involve significant casualties. According to a 2023 wargame conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in merely three weeks from the war's outbreak, the United States would "suffer about half as many casualties as it did in 20 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan."<sup>11</sup> Even more frightening, these estimated economic and human costs do not take into account the potential for nuclear escalation, which many experts have warned of as a real and serious possibility in such a war.<sup>12</sup> In the case of nuclear escalation and use, the cost of a war over Taiwan would be unimaginable.

In short, a U.S. war with China over Taiwan would be supremely destructive, regardless of whether Washington was successful in defeating Beijing. The United States must employ all means possible to avoid it.

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<sup>9</sup> Welch et al., "Xi, Biden and the \$10 Trillion Cost of War." Also see Peter Wonacott, "Costly Conflict: Here's How China's Military Options for Taiwan Backfire," United States Institute of Peace, Oct. 9, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/10/costly-conflict-heres-how-chinas-military-options-taiwan-backfire>.

<sup>10</sup> Welch et al., "Xi, Biden and the \$10 Trillion Cost of War."

<sup>11</sup> Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2023, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/230109\\_Cancian\\_FirstBattle\\_NextWar.pdf?VersionId=XIDrfCUHet8OZSOYW\\_9PWx3xtc0ScGHn](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/230109_Cancian_FirstBattle_NextWar.pdf?VersionId=XIDrfCUHet8OZSOYW_9PWx3xtc0ScGHn).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, "Confronting Armageddon: Wargaming Nuclear Deterrence and Its Failures in a U.S.-China Conflict over Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2024, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-12/241213\\_Cancian\\_Confronting\\_Armageddon.pdf?VersionId=WyqddCThZRinczNwXHKcOHgOmUP8CH8](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-12/241213_Cancian_Confronting_Armageddon.pdf?VersionId=WyqddCThZRinczNwXHKcOHgOmUP8CH8).



## Taiwan is an important interest

Working to ensure the security and prosperity of Taiwan is certainly an important American interest — for political, economic, and moral reasons. The island has been a prosperous democratic friend of the United States since at least the mid-1980s, when its democratization process began, and before that, it was a force resisting an aggressive, Cold War-era, Maoist regime in Beijing. Today, Taiwan stands as an example of a successful Han Chinese-majority territory upholding liberal democratic values as well as a significant economic power providing essential goods and services to the United States and many other countries.<sup>13</sup> Taiwan thus provides a reassuring example to those in China desiring a democratic future. In addition, the United States has a long track record of supporting Taiwan and providing it with essential defensive arms needed to balance against increasing levels of Chinese military pressure. Indeed, the United States is obligated by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, or TRA, to provide defensive arms to the island.<sup>14</sup>

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that Washington cannot simply abandon Taipei by ending all U.S. political, economic, and military support for the island. Such a sudden, radical action would be seen by many as a betrayal, damaging America's moral standing in the world and its support for democracy, especially if such a policy shift were to result in the subjugation of Taiwan as a result of a destructive Chinese attack. The cessation of arms sales to Taiwan in the face of Chinese threats would also violate the TRA. Thus, Washington has an interest-based and legal obligation to exert major

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Sullivan and Lev Nachman, *Taiwan: A Contested Democracy Under Threat* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2024), 29-48; William Alan Reinsch and Jack Whitney, "Silicon Island: Assessing Taiwan's Importance to U.S. Economic Growth and Security," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Jan. 10, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/silicon-island-assessing-taiwans-importance-us-economic-growth-and-security>.

<sup>14</sup> Susan V. Lawrence, "Taiwan: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, Dec. 26, 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10275>.

efforts to deter Beijing from coercing or attacking Taipei — without provoking it — and to prevent the question of Taiwan from destabilizing the Asia region.

That said, America's strategic, reputational, and moral reasons for supporting Taiwan do not extend to risking a war with China. This is because, in each of these areas, America's interests are not vital, i.e., linked to the defense of America's national survival and well-being.

## Not a vital interest

On the strategic level, Taiwan is not central to America's ability to ensure a stable and prosperous Asia open to U.S. economic and political engagement, which is, arguably, a vital interest, given the region's overall importance to the global economic order and U.S. prosperity.<sup>15</sup> As discussed above, a Taiwan-related threat to that interest would actually arise if the United States were to engage in what would likely be a regionally — and perhaps globally — destructive war with China over the island.

A second supposed strategic reason for defending Taiwan would be if China were to use the island as a stepping stone to dominate Asia economically and militarily and deny America access to the region. Prior to the Korean War, the United States did not regard Taiwan as a strategic location critical to its defense posture in Asia, despite the non-authoritative views of some military leaders such as General Douglas MacArthur.<sup>16</sup> In fact, in the late 1940s, Washington had determined that the island was not strategically vital and was prepared to let Communist China seize it.<sup>17</sup> Following the

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<sup>15</sup> Asia is a global economic powerhouse and the world's biggest trade hub. According to research by the McKinsey Global Institute, "Asia accounted for 57 percent of global GDP growth between 2015 and 2021." Asia also hosts "49 of the world's 80 largest trade routes." Jeongmin Seong et al., "Asia on the Cusp of a New Era," McKinsey Global Institute, September 22, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/asia-on-the-cusp-of-a-new-era#>.

<sup>16</sup> James I. Matray, "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 28–55, [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs22\\_1art04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs22_1art04).

<sup>17</sup> *China: U.S. Policy since 1945* (Ann Arbor: Congressional Quarterly, 1980), 88; Cheng-yi Lin, "The Legacy of the Korean War: Impact on U.S.–Taiwan Relations," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 11 (1992): 40–57, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03023495>.

outbreak of the Korean War, however, that view changed. President Truman deployed the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait,<sup>18</sup> and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff asserted that Taiwan had become strategically important as a critical location along the first island chain stretching from the Kuril Islands to Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> This view was repeated by President Eisenhower and the Joint Chiefs after the first Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954 and the signing of the U.S.–Taiwan Mutual Security Treaty in December of that year.<sup>20</sup> For most of the Cold War – until the diplomatic normalization of relations with China and the abrogation of the U.S. defense treaty with Taiwan in 1979–80 – the United States, at various times, deployed nuclear weapons, tens of thousands of troops, and an array of air defense forces on Taiwan.

Under normalization, however, Washington again shifted its strategic stance regarding Taiwan, abrogating the defense treaty with Taipei and withdrawing all military personnel from the island while merely stating in the TRA that Taiwan's security was linked to the peace and stability of Asia. By that time, Taiwan was again no longer regarded as a critical strategic location for the U.S. defense posture in the region and a bulwark against communist expansion. Indeed, at the time of normalization, President Nixon apparently believed that Taiwan was a part of China.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, as the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing has deepened in recent years, a growing number of analysts have revived the argument that Taiwan is a crucial, militarily strategic location for the United States and that its loss

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<sup>18</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman: Years of Trial and Hope, 1946–1952* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 333–39.

<sup>19</sup> "Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Johnson)," July 27, 1950, doc. 224, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, East Asia and the Pacific, Volume VI*, ed. Neal Petersen et al. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1976), 391–94, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d224>.

<sup>20</sup> Robert J. Watson, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Volume V: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1953–1954* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Joint History, 1998), [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Policy/Policy\\_V005.pdf#page=265.00](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Policy/Policy_V005.pdf#page=265.00).

<sup>21</sup> Alan D. Romberg, *Rein in at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy toward Taiwan and U.S.–PRC Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, 2003), 42–44.

would be a fatal blow to the U.S. regional alliance structure.<sup>22</sup> Such concerns, however, greatly exaggerate Taiwan's military value, even under the conditions of a potentially more assertive China.

## Strategic value

Militarily, Chinese control of Taiwan would provide Beijing with specific advantages it does not currently possess, including easier access for Chinese submarines and surface ships to the open ocean beyond the first island chain, greater sonar and other intelligence capabilities, enhanced projection of sea-based nuclear capabilities, and closer proximity of its forces to the Philippines and Japan.<sup>23</sup> Yet none of these capabilities would, on their own, prove decisive for China in a conflict with the United States or in any Chinese effort to militarily subjugate and dominate Asia.<sup>24</sup> Achieving regional dominance by force in that manner would require China to acquire far greater and more integrated naval, air, cyber, space, and intelligence capabilities than it currently possesses. Meeting that requirement would prove especially challenging for China if it were to militarily conquer Taiwan, as such an effort — even without direct U.S. military intervention — would almost certainly result in the loss of a considerable portion of its military capabilities.<sup>25</sup>

Equally important, if China were to gain control of Taiwan by force, the United States and its formal Asian treaty allies (especially Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines)

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<sup>22</sup> Collins and Erickson, "Annexation of Taiwan"; Elbridge Colby, "A Strategy of Denial for the Western Pacific," *Proceedings* 149, no. 3 (March 2023), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/march/strategy-denial-western-pacific>; Easton, "If Taiwan Falls."

<sup>23</sup> Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *International Security* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2022): 7–45, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00437](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00437).

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan D. Caverley, "So What? Reassessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2025): 28–53, <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/60742>; Mike Sweeney, "How Militarily Useful Would Taiwan Be to China?" *Defense Priorities*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/how-militarily-useful-would-taiwan-be-to-china>.

<sup>25</sup> Military specialists assess that China would lose a good amount of its key assets, including amphibious ships and aircraft, even in a scenario where Taiwan stands alone against a Chinese invasion. See Canician, Cancian and Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War," 96–97.

would almost certainly develop the combined military and economic capabilities — in addition to their already significant geographical advantages along the first island chain — to deter China if it were to attempt to use Taiwan as a stepping stone to conquer the entire region.<sup>26</sup> In other words, even if China ended up controlling Taiwan, it would be possible for the United States and its regional allies to develop and maintain a competitive force posture to deter and counter an aggressive Beijing.<sup>27</sup>

Even so, there is little evidence to suggest that China would actually use Taiwan in such a manner. No Chinese official has suggested that Taiwan could or should serve as a critical location in support of a strategy designed to achieve regional dominance. The Chinese interest in Taiwan is primarily political, linked to the nationalist desire to reunify the island. Although some in the Chinese military might argue for the broader strategic value of Taiwan to China, there is little evidence that such a view drives Beijing's policy toward the island. However, one condition that might lead Beijing to view the island through a strategic lens would be if Washington chooses to do so.

Arguments regarding China's military threat to the rest of Asia rely primarily on shaky applications of offensive realist theories and ideological assumptions that are largely divorced from Beijing's actual modern-day historical attitude and experience regarding the use of force.<sup>28</sup> However, Beijing might decide that it needs to seize Taiwan and use it

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<sup>26</sup> Steven Kosiak, "The Conventional Wisdom about the Chinese Military Challenge: Incomplete and Unpersuasive," Quincy Institute, Nov. 6, 2023, <https://quincyinst.org/research/the-conventional-wisdom-about-the-chinese-military-challenge-incomplete-and-unpersuasive>; Jeffrey W. Hornung, "Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency," RAND Corporation, Dec. 14, 2020, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA314-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA314-1.html); Mike Mochizuki, "Tokyo's Taiwan Conundrum: What Can Japan Do to Prevent War?" *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2022): 81–107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2127881>; Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 128–69, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00313](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00313).

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan D. Caverley, "The Taiwan Fallacy: American Power Does Not Hinge on a Single Island," *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 7, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwan-fallacy>.

<sup>28</sup> "In the vast majority of cases occurring since 1979, China has employed military force only to address specific territorial disputes along its borders or to protect itself against what it viewed as a direct military threat to its established territory, not to subjugate other powers for presumably grand strategic or ideological reasons." See Michael D. Swaine, "Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest," *Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2025): 170, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2478779>.



to subjugate Asia if it were to conclude that Washington and its allies were clearly committed to a more aggressive form of regional containment designed to weaken China and overturn the regime.

For instance, if, for strategic considerations, Washington abandoned its long-standing One China Policy and pursued a policy to keep the island permanently separate from China — as some now advocate<sup>29</sup> — that would reinforce Beijing's conviction that the United States is using Taiwan to contain China.<sup>30</sup> In such a scenario, Chinese leaders would be further convinced that taking over Taiwan by force and asserting clear dominance over the region is necessary to break U.S. containment and ensure China's continued prosperity.

One possible and partial exception to the above points regarding Taiwan's limited strategic value to the United States has arisen as a result of a shift in some Japanese thinking about the island. A growing number of Japanese defense analysts and politicians have come to believe that a Chinese takeover of Taiwan, whether done forcibly or peacefully, would threaten Japan's security.<sup>31</sup> From the perspective of these individuals, Chinese control over Taiwan would greatly facilitate potential future Chinese

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<sup>29</sup> Erickson and Collins, "Annexation of Taiwan"; Colby, "Strategy of Denial"; Easton, "If Taiwan Falls."

<sup>30</sup> "Taiwan Affairs Office: Any Attempts to Play the 'Taiwan Card' Are Doomed to Fail, Dismissing U.S. Lawmakers' Taiwan-Related Act," *Global Times*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202503/1330893.shtml>.

<sup>31</sup> Kantaro Komiya, "Japan Ex-PM Aso's 'Fight for Taiwan' Remark in Line with Official View, Lawmaker Says," Reuters, Aug. 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-ex-pm-asos-fight-taiwan-remark-line-with-official-view-lawmaker-says-2023-08-10/>; "Abe Hints at Japan's Possible Military Role in Taiwan Contingency," *Kyodo News*, Dec. 14, 2021, <https://english.kyodonews.net/articles/-/29944>; Isabel Reynolds, "Japan's Aso Draws China Anger for Comments on Defending Taiwan," *Bloomberg*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-06/japan-u-s-must-defend-taiwan-together-deputy-pr-emier-aso-says>; "Tokyo Says Taiwan Security Directly Connected to Japan: Bloomberg," Reuters, June 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/japan-taiwan-china-security/tokyo-says-taiwan-security-directlyconnected-to-japan-bloomberg-idUSL3N2064E5>.

threats to nearby Japanese islands, including Okinawa, and allow Beijing to threaten Tokyo's sea lines of communication more effectively.<sup>32</sup>

This viewpoint is not official Japanese policy and runs counter to the views and assurances regarding Taiwan that Tokyo provided to Beijing during the Japan–China normalization era of the 1970s, when Japanese leaders actually admitted in conversations with their Chinese counterparts that Taiwan was a part of China.<sup>33</sup> In more recent years, Japanese leaders and policy documents have stated that peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are critical to the security and prosperity of Japan and the broader region.<sup>34</sup> However, while indicating a preference for preserving the status quo – implying Taiwan's separation from China – Japanese government sources have not indicated that the island must permanently remain separate from China or is a vital location critical to Japanese security.

If those notions were to become official Japanese policy, or were at least consistently expressed by Tokyo, Washington would be more likely to accept the idea that Taipei is a critical strategic location for the United States worth fighting over, given its apparent importance to America's most important ally in Asia. The United States must effectively counter such hardening Japanese views regarding Taiwan in order to transition to a successful noninterventionist U.S. policy toward the island.

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<sup>32</sup> Mataka Kamiya, "China's Takeover of Taiwan Would Have a Negative Impact on Japan," in *The World after Taiwan's Fall*, ed. Santoro and Cossa, 29–40.

<sup>33</sup> The 1972 Japan–China normalization communiqué confirmed the two governments' mutual understanding of China's position that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People's Republic of China." For more details, see "Joint Communiqué of the Government of Japan and the Government of the People's Republic of China," Sept. 29, 1972 via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan website at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/joint72.html>. See also "Meeting between Foreign Minister Ohira (Masayoshi)–Foreign Minister Ji Pengfei (Records)," Sept. 26–27, 1972, via the Wilson Center Digital Archive at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/meeting-between-foreign-minister-ohira-masayoshi-foreign-minister-ji-pengfei-records>.

<sup>34</sup> Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy stressed that "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is an indispensable element for the security and prosperity of the international community." Mochizuki, "Tokyo's Taiwan Conundrum," 83–85; "Tokyo Says Taiwan Security Directly Connected," Reuters.

## Economic value

Economically — although Taiwan is an important trader, investor, and high-tech producer and innovator — it is not influential enough within the region and beyond to play a critical strategic economic role if placed under Chinese control. Though Taiwan has a high GDP per capita, its aggregate GDP — ranked at 22nd — is less than half the size of South Korea's economy and several times smaller than that of Japan. Similarly, Taiwan's share of global exports is lower than the other two Asian economies,<sup>35</sup> while Taipei's military expenditures are several times smaller than those of Tokyo or Seoul.<sup>36</sup>

The greatest economic strategic value of the island for China resides in its high-tech capabilities.<sup>37</sup> Taiwan fabricates roughly 60 percent of the world's most sophisticated semiconductors,<sup>38</sup> and some have argued that fact alone justifies a U.S. military defense of Taiwan and other efforts to keep the island out of Beijing's hands.<sup>39</sup> But attempts to keep Taiwan's high-tech facilities away from Chinese control on an essentially permanent basis would certainly produce more harm than good.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jose Sanchez, "Leading Export Countries Worldwide in 2024," Statista, Aug. 6, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264623/leading-export-countries-worldwide>.

<sup>36</sup> Chad de Guzman, "Taiwan Is Extending Conscription. Here's How Its Military Compares to Other Countries," *Time*, Jan. 6, 2023, <https://time.com/6245036>.

<sup>37</sup> Some analysts argue that China's acquisition of Taiwan would enable it to control access to the Taiwan Strait, thereby giving Beijing coercive power over countries that rely heavily on the strait for their commercial transit. Such concerns may be overblown. While the Taiwan Strait is a critical regional commercial route, alternative routes do exist, particularly the Luzon Strait, situated between Taiwan and the Philippines. Disruptions of regional commercial transits through the Taiwan Strait would also hurt China's own economy, thus limiting Beijing's coercive capability. For an example of such arguments, see Collins and Erickson, "Annexation of Taiwan."

<sup>38</sup> "Taiwan's Dominance of the Chip Industry Makes It More Important," *Economist*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/03/06/taiwans-dominance-of-the-chip-industry-makes-it-more-important>.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, Gabriel B. Collins, and Matt Pottinger, "The Taiwan Catastrophe," *Foreign Affairs*, February 16, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/taiwan-catastrophe>; Steve Clemons, "The U.S. Would Destroy Taiwan's Chip Plants if China Invades, Says Former Trump Official," *Semafor*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.semafor.com/article/03/13/2023/the-us-would-destroy-taiwans-chip-plants-if-china-invades-says-former-trump-official>; Easton, "If Taiwan Falls."

<sup>40</sup> Swaine, "Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest."

First, keeping Taiwan out of Chinese hands would destroy the One China Policy, which deliberately accepts the possibility of peaceful unification of the island with the mainland. Such a development would, in turn, likely end Beijing's commitment to pursuing *peaceful* unification with Taiwan as a top priority. This reciprocal understanding has formed the basis of stability in the Sino–American relationship since the 1970s. The result of its collapse would likely be a conflict that destroys the island's high-tech facilities, either as a direct result of intense combat or through sabotage by Taiwanese authorities. This strongly argues in favor of avoiding a Sino–American war over the island by continuing to credibly uphold the One China Policy.

In addition, Chinese attempts to utilize Taiwan's high-tech facilities to pressure the United States or others could easily backfire. Western countries, as essential suppliers of the software and other inputs the facilities in Taiwan require to operate, would likely deny those inputs, thus hurting all countries, including China. In short, keeping Taiwan's high-tech manufacturing facilities out of Chinese hands by destroying the One China Policy makes little strategic sense, given the limited U.S. stakes, the significant risks of a major war with China, and the damage that would result for China and global high-tech production. It would be far wiser to reduce the significance of Taiwan's high-tech facilities by replicating its capabilities in the West — an effort currently underway.

## The credibility trap

Aside from the above strategic issues involving Taiwan, another reason put forward for employing American forces to defend the island relates to the damage to America's credibility as a security guarantor in Asia and beyond that would supposedly result from a hostile Chinese takeover of the island. From this perspective, America's allies and

partners that rely on U.S. security assistance and support would supposedly lose all confidence in America's defense commitments to them.<sup>41</sup>

Yet this argument is based on false assumptions regarding America's security commitments, the views of U.S. allies and other nations regarding U.S. credibility, and China's attitude toward the use of force against other countries.<sup>42</sup> First, Washington's commitments to its formal treaty allies are qualitatively different from those made to Taiwan. Taipei is not a U.S. treaty ally; hence, unlike the case for Asian allies such as Tokyo, Seoul, and Manila, the United States is not legally obligated to aid in its defense if attacked. The TRA does obligate the United States to maintain the capacity to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion against Taiwan. But such an obligation does not constitute a U.S. commitment to defend the island militarily. The TRA merely obligates the president to consult with Congress as to how to respond if Taiwan's security is under threat.<sup>43</sup>

Second, even though then-President Biden stated four times that the United States would militarily defend Taiwan if China were to attack the island, this statement did not accord with the long-standing and well-established U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity regarding whether and how the U.S. might act to protect Taiwan. Biden's statements cannot be taken as determinative for subsequent administrations, and U.S. officials repeatedly stated, in response to queries regarding Biden's remarks, that the One China Policy – and presumably the strategic ambiguity that stands as a key component of that policy – had not changed.

Third, treaty-based U.S. combat forces of various sizes are deployed to the three aforementioned Asian security allies (currently more in Japan and South Korea than in the Philippines), while only small, temporary contingents of U.S. military trainers exist in

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<sup>41</sup> Collins and Erickson, "Annexation of Taiwan"; Easton, "If Taiwan Falls"; Mike Pence and Ed Feulner, "We Cannot Give into the Isolationists. Taiwan Must Not Fall," *Washington Post*, Aug. 21, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/08/21/pence-trump-taiwan-china-isolationism>.

<sup>42</sup> Swaine, "Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest."

<sup>43</sup> Lawrence, "Taiwan: Background and U.S. Relations."



Taiwan, in what some regard as a violation of the One China Policy. In other words, no U.S. combat forces are deployed to defend the island. This reduces the “trip-wire” effect that exists with formal treaty allies, in which U.S. forces would quickly be engaged in combat with China if they were attacked.

Fourth, it is by no means clear that American allies measure the reliability of the United States as a security partner on the basis of Washington’s loyalty toward third parties. At least one study has shown that “clearly aligned interests [e.g., between the United States and its formal treaty allies] are far more important in estimating the reliability of an ally than any generalized sense of . . . loyalty that some might apply to the American relationship with Taiwan.”<sup>44</sup>

Ultimately, U.S. regional allies, including Japan and South Korea, have a keen interest in avoiding entrapment in a U.S. war with China and are first and foremost concerned about securing Washington’s continued commitment to their respective security alliances. The history of America’s relations with these allies and current public opinion<sup>45</sup> in these countries show that they would be very disinclined to fight a war against

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<sup>44</sup> Swaine, “Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest.”

<sup>45</sup> Extremely high numbers of the Japanese populace express opposition to Japan becoming directly involved in a war with China over Taiwan and high numbers of Japanese believe that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would not threaten Japan’s survival. See “第 17 回 メディアに関する全国世論調査 (2024 年)” [“The 17th national public opinion survey on the media” (2024)], Japan Press Research Institute (Oct. 2024): 17–18, [https://www.chosakai.gr.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/●第17回メディアに関する全国世論調査\(2024年\)報告書.pdf](https://www.chosakai.gr.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/●第17回メディアに関する全国世論調査(2024年)報告書.pdf); Tsuyoshi Goroku et al., “Security, Alliance, and Foreign Engagement Research (SAFER) Project,” University of Tokyo, Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology Open Laboratory for Emergence Strategies (ROLES), Oct. 2024: 15, <https://roles.rcast.u-tokyo.ac.jp/uploads/publication/file/128/publication.pdf>; “台湾メディア、日本人の74%は台湾有事への自衛隊派遣に反対している” [“Taiwanese media report that 74 percent of Japanese people oppose the dispatch of the Self-Defense Forces to Taiwan in an emergency”], *Grand Fleet*, Nov. 16, 2022, <https://grandfleet.info/indo-pacific-related/taiwan-media-74-of-japanese-oppose-dispatching-self-defense-forces-to-taiwan-emergency>. In a 2023 Japanese survey, 56 percent stated that the role of the Self-Defense Forces, or SDF, should be limited to rearguard support for the U.S. military, while only 11 percent favored the SDF using force with the U.S. military. Twenty-seven percent believed that the SDF should not cooperate with the U.S. military in a Taiwan contingency. Taizo Teramoto, “Asahi Poll: 56% Want Only SDF Rear Support to U.S. in Event of a Taiwan Crisis,” *Asahi Shimbun*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14898395>. A 2024 South Korean survey indicated strong public hesitation to become involved in a Taiwan conflict. See Timothy Rich, “South Korean Views on Cross-Strait Tensions,” Global Taiwan Institute, Jan. 10, 2024, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/01/south-korean-views-on-cross-strait-tensions>. In a 2023 South Korean survey, the majority (57 percent) opposed any type of South Korean participation in a Taiwan contingency.

China over Taiwan and would appreciate stronger defense ties with the United States.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that U.S. regional allies would not necessarily oppose — and may in fact support — a U.S. policy that rules out going to war with China over Taiwan while seeking to prioritize and bolster America’s existing political and defense ties with them.

Finally, one can make a compelling case that the United States has a stronger, more inherent interest in maintaining a military-based security commitment to its two major Asian treaty allies, Japan and South Korea, than it does to Taiwan. Maintaining strong alliances with Japan and South Korea — while working to reduce tensions with China — is crucial for U.S. interests in Asia. Both are major political, economic, technological, and military powers and sit in a critical geostrategic location at the entrance to Asia from the Pacific Ocean.

Japan is positioned as a top global economic power — ranking fourth or fifth — with extensive trade and investment ties across the globe, especially in Asia, and is also a major technology innovator. Japan possesses a vibrant, long-standing democracy with extremely close political, social, and cultural ties to the United States. Militarily, Japan is undoubtedly a crucial U.S. partner. Ranked fifth in the world in terms of overall military power, Japan is by far the largest base for U.S. naval and air forces in the Asia region,

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See Son Yeol, Yang-Gyu Kim, and Park Han-soo, “2023 한미동맹 국민인식 분석: 포괄적 동맹에 대한 기대와 우려” [“2023 EAI public opinion poll on East Asia: The U.S. and the ROK–U.S. relations”], East Asia Institute, Sept. 26, 2023, [https://www.eai.or.kr/new/ko/etc/search\\_view.asp?intSeq=22118](https://www.eai.or.kr/new/ko/etc/search_view.asp?intSeq=22118). In 2023, a clear majority of Australians opposed sending the Australian military to support Taiwan. See Kirsty Needham, “Australian Say They Would Support Taiwan If China Attacked, with Limits, Poll Shows,” Reuters, June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australians-say-they-would-support-taiwan-if-china-attacked-with-limits-poll-2023-06-20/>; “Potential Conflict over Taiwan,” Lowy Institute, 2023, <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/charts/potential-conflict-over-taiwan>.

<sup>46</sup> For more details on U.S. regional allies’ reluctance toward the issue of military intervention in a Taiwan contingency, see Clint Work, “Rhetoric vs. Reality: Seoul and Washington’s Strategic Alignment on Taiwan,” *Korea Policy* 1, no. 2 (2023): 130–59, <https://keia.org/publication/rhetoric-vs-reality-seoul-washingtons-strategic-alignment-on-taiwan>; Sarang Shidore, “Defending Without Provoking: The United States and the Philippines in the South China Sea,” Quincy Institute, Feb. 12, 2025, <https://quincyinst.org/research/defending-without-provoking-the-united-states-and-the-philippines-in-the-south-china-sea>; Mochizuki, “Tokyo’s Taiwan Conundrum.”

and it also sits in a critical geostrategic location covering nearly 2,000 miles along the Asian littoral.<sup>47</sup>

South Korea has the 13th-largest economy in the world; is a major trading nation, especially in northeast Asia; has the world's leading shipbuilding industry; and is a top technological innovator with an advanced military-industrial complex.<sup>48</sup> South Korea's aggregate military power is very close in size to that of Japan, and it is also a vibrant democracy with close ties to the United States. Of course, America's commitment to South Korea is heavily bolstered by the two nations' joint defense against North Korea. South Korea is also located in a critical geostrategic position on the Asian continent near China, Russia, and Japan.

In addition, both Japan and South Korea possess the capacity to develop nuclear weapons — a development that would prove highly destabilizing if it were to occur, possibly as a result of a serious weakening of U.S. extended deterrence assurances. This is because such a move would not only constitute a major blow to the global nonproliferation regime, but could also lead to severe tensions between Tokyo and Seoul.<sup>49</sup> The two U.S. allies harbor deep suspicions toward one another for historical reasons, and their possession of nuclear weapons would almost certainly intensify such suspicions, as each would seek to deter the other in the absence of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Moreover, attempts by Seoul and Tokyo to acquire nuclear

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<sup>47</sup> Mary Yamaguchi, "Japan's Military, Among World's Strongest, Looks to Build," Associated Press, Dec. 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/0e89fcb0163b044fc71bc4ae7d87f674>.

<sup>48</sup> Tae-gyu Kim, "Analysis: South Korean Defense Industry Attracts Global Attention," UPI, May 3, 2025, <https://www.upi.com/2241746304293>; Miyeon Oh and Michael Cecire, "Why the United States, South Korea, and Japan Must Cooperate on Shipbuilding," RAND, May 6, 2025, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/05/why-the-united-states-south-korea-and-japan-must-co-operate.html>; Troy Stangarone, "The Role of South Korea in the U.S. Semiconductor Supply Chain Strategy," National Bureau of Asian Research, April 13, 2023, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-role-of-south-korea-in-the-u-s-semiconductor-supply-chain-strategy>.

<sup>49</sup> Both South Korea and Japan disapprove of the other's acquisition of nuclear weapons. A 2023 survey showed that, even if North Korean nuclear threats persist and grow, the majority of South Koreans (about 70 percent) and Japanese (about 60 percent) would oppose the other's nuclearization. Eunil Cho, "여론조사로 읽는 한일 안보관계: 한일관계에서 안보는 중요할까?" ["Public opinion on Korea–Japan security relations: Is security important in Korea–Japan relations?"], East Asia Institute, Dec. 27, 2023, [https://eai.or.kr/new/ko/etc/search\\_view.asp?intSeq=22284](https://eai.or.kr/new/ko/etc/search_view.asp?intSeq=22284).

weapons could trigger aggressive responses from Beijing and Pyongyang, thus further destabilizing the region.<sup>50</sup> All this makes America's close relations with both Japan and South Korea important as a restrainer and mediator for both countries. Finally, unlike Taiwan, neither Japan nor South Korea is involved in a long-term nationalist dispute with China of major proportions.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, both are sovereign, independent nation-states, unlike Taiwan.

All of these factors suggest that U.S. regional allies would not necessarily interpret a clear U.S. position to rule out direct military intervention in a cross-strait conflict as indicative of Washington's unwillingness and inability to defend or support them as formal treaty allies. In fact, U.S. treaty allies would more likely be concerned about American reliability if the United States were seen as likely to intervene militarily to defend Taiwan directly and then failed to do so, or was defeated in a war over Taiwan.

## The moral argument

A final factor often cited as a reason for America to defend Taiwan militarily in the event of a Chinese attack is the moral argument that the island's government is a long-standing democratic friend that stands as a major example to China and the world of a successful Han Chinese-majority liberal democracy. Hence, the argument goes, if America were to let Taiwan come under mainland Chinese control through force (or perhaps even peacefully), it would deal a blow to America's moral standing in the world and its reputation as a defender and promoter of liberal democratic nations. The latter

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<sup>50</sup> Sungmin Cho, "How China Views South Korea's Nuclear Debate," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 8, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-china-views-south-koreas-nuclear-debate>; Joshua Byun, "Stuck Onshore: Why the United States Failed to Retrench from Europe during the Early Cold War," *Texas National Security Review* 7, no. 4 (2024): 9–36, <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/56030>.

<sup>51</sup> Although the long-term Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute between Japan and China is serious, it has far less potential for resulting in a major war that would draw in the United States than a Taiwan conflict. The minor territorial dispute that exists between China and South Korea over a submerged rock (Socotra/Suyan) is even less dangerous.

consequence implies that the “loss” of Taiwan to autocratic China would threaten the entire U.S.-led liberal international order.<sup>52</sup>

As indicated above, this argument certainly justifies the United States taking a very strong interest in protecting Taiwan’s security and prosperity – despite the fact that Taiwan is not recognized by the United States as a sovereign nation. However, the limited strategic and credibility-based nature of America’s commitment to Taiwan clearly indicates that the moral obligation involved in assisting in the defense of the island’s security does not supersede the overriding moral obligation of the United States to avoid an unjustified war with China.

Moreover, Chinese control over Taiwan would not deal a decisive blow to democracies around the world, much less to the entire international order. That order is composed of many regimes other than those supporting democracy, ranging from pacts to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to pacts for economic and financial organizations, such as the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank.<sup>53</sup> Taiwan’s importance as a democratic entity would be more significant globally if it were recognized around the world as a sovereign, independent nation, key to the defense of other liberal democracies.

## **Conclusion: Implications for U.S. policy**

Taiwan stands as an important but non-vital American interest. As decades of U.S. policies have indicated, the island has limited, if any, strategic value to the overall U.S. position in Asia, unlike Washington’s formal treaty allies of Japan and South Korea. Moreover, the important distinctions between Taiwan and existing U.S. treaty allies suggest that, if properly reassured, those allies and other nations should not regard the

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<sup>52</sup> Collins and Erickson, “Annexation of Taiwan”; Pottinger, ed., *The Boiling Moat*; Easton, “If Taiwan Falls”; Pompeo, “United States and Taiwan.”

<sup>53</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations,” *International Security* 44, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 9–60, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00360](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360).



so-called “loss” of Taiwan to Chinese control, if it were to occur, as a major blow to American credibility as a security partner.

While the United States has a moral incentive to support Taiwan as much as possible as a long-standing democratic friend, that incentive does not extend to the level of risking an all-out war with China. Such a war, involving the likely loss of thousands of U.S. soldiers, would do far greater moral damage to the United States, given the limited stakes involved in such a conflict, than would “losing” Taiwan. This, of course, would hold to an even greater degree if a Sino–American war over Taiwan were to involve nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, the U.S. policy community and U.S. leaders either implicitly reject or fail to seriously examine all of the above assessments. Their reflexive response is to assume Taiwan is vitally important, and therefore worth going to war over, or to allow for the possibility of such a war, leaving that decision up to the president and Congress. But taking such a momentous decision at the last minute could indeed deal a major blow to U.S. credibility if the United States were to allow itself to be seen as “backing down” in the face of Chinese aggression or were defeated in a war with China over the island. Yet those possibilities would certainly exist if the United States continues indefinitely to pose the prospect of fighting China over Taiwan under existing conditions, which include a steady, likely continuing, loss of relative U.S. military power in the vicinity of the island.

So, the question arises: What is the alternative U.S. policy that can best reflect and support the American interest in a peaceful cross-strait environment, without abandoning Taiwan or provoking China? Such a policy cannot be implemented successfully by suddenly declaring that the United States will not directly defend Taiwan if attacked. Any replacement of the existing formal U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity by a policy of strategic clarity — that supports Taipei while excluding the possibility of a Sino–American war — must be prepared over time. Any such policy must contain

several elements that address the serious political, military, and diplomatic challenges involved. But undertaking such a challenging task would present fewer risks than continuing on the present course, which is taking us toward a future crisis or conflict.

The second brief on this topic will present this alternative, noninterventionist approach to Taiwan.

## About the author

**Michael Swaine** is a senior research fellow in the Quincy Institute's East Asia program and is one of the most prominent American scholars of Chinese security studies. At the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, he worked for nearly twenty years as a senior fellow specializing in Chinese defense and foreign policy, U.S.–China relations, and East Asian international relations. Before that, Swaine served as a senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation.

Swaine has authored and edited more than a dozen books and monographs and many articles, papers, and opinion pieces, including *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy, Past, Present, and Future*, with Ashley Tellis (2000); *Managing Sino–American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis*, with Zhang Tuosheng (2006); *America's Challenge: Engaging a Rising China in the Twenty-First Century* (2011); and “A Restraint Approach to U.S.–China Relations: Reversing the Slide Toward Crisis and Conflict,” with Andrew Bacevich (2023).

For nearly two decades, Swaine directed, along with Iain Johnston of Harvard University, a multi-year crisis prevention project with Chinese partners. He also advises the U.S. government on Asian security issues.

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