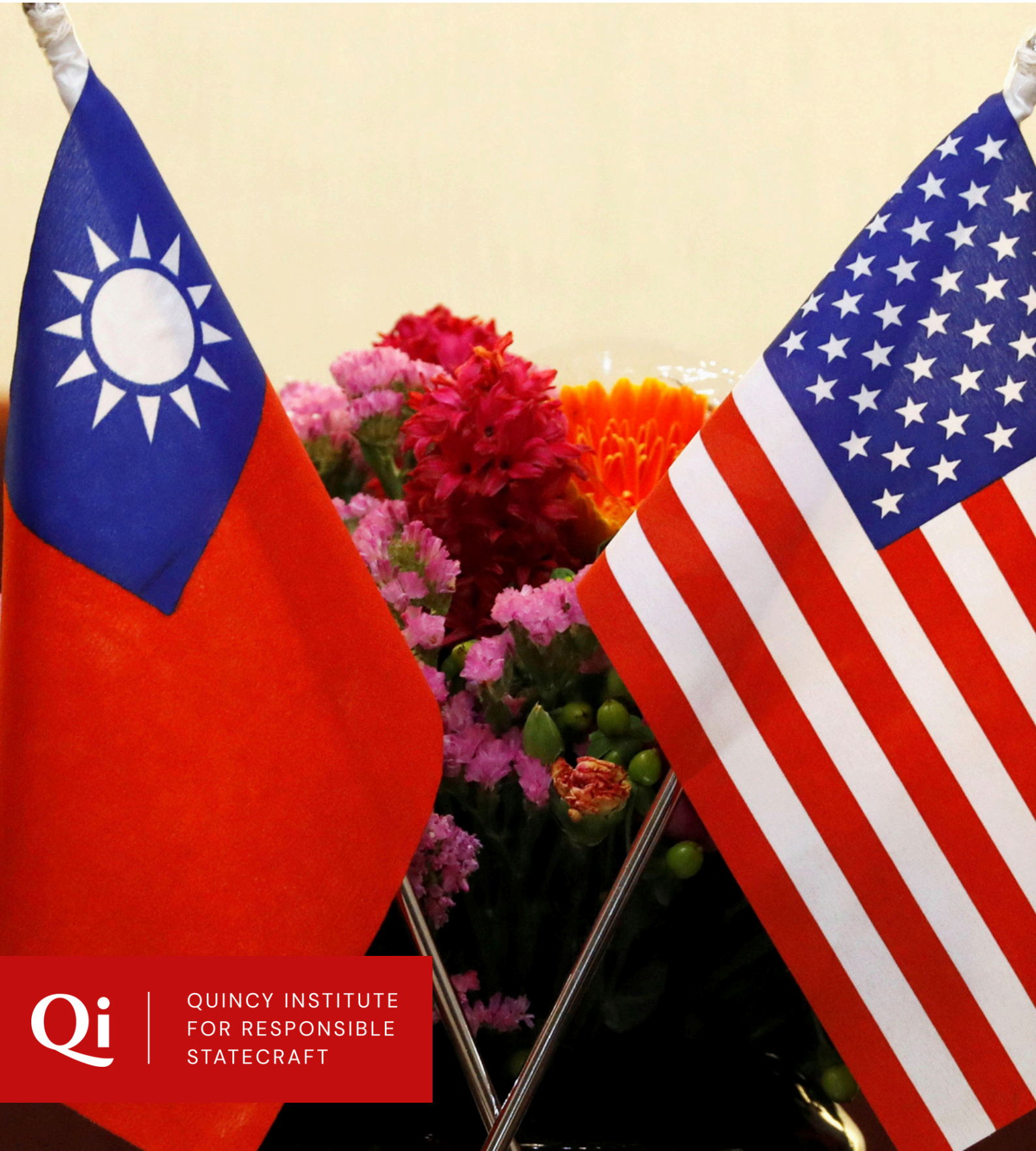


# BEYOND STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY: SUPPORTING TAIWAN WITHOUT A COMMITMENT TO WAR

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# Executive Summary

The first brief in this series made the case that Taiwan is not a vital interest justifying a war between the United States and China. This second brief outlines how Washington can transition from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity in a manner that continues to deter Beijing from coercing Taipei while ruling out direct American military intervention in defense of the island.

This brief recommends that, in the short to medium term, the United States should maintain its standing policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan while also carrying out necessary preparations for a noninterventionist policy shift. These preparations include:

- A clear statement from Washington that it *opposes* any unilateral move by Taipei to achieve formal independence.
- A revitalization of the eroding One China Policy.
- A reaffirmation of U.S. security commitments to Japan and South Korea.
- A bolstering of the self-defense capabilities of Taiwan and nearby treaty allies.
- Encouragement and support for those in Japan who seek to ease tensions with China and wish to cultivate cooperative Sino–Japanese and Sino–American relationships.
- The initiation of a results-oriented strategic dialogue with China.
- The expansion of mutually beneficial trade, investment, and technology exchanges with Taiwanese companies and the offshoring of Taiwanese high-tech capabilities.

Once these necessary, gradual preparations have been made, the U.S. president should explicitly state that America will not go to war with China to defend Taiwan but that the United States will support Taiwan — and the development of an improved cross-strait environment — in every other way possible.

This policy shift is necessary because ongoing military and political trends are eroding the ability of the United States to deter and reassure China, increasing the likelihood of conflict. The One China Policy is deteriorating, the Taiwanese public increasingly rejects any political association with China, and China is expanding its reliance on military displays, which undermines the credibility of the Chinese commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue. More generally, U.S.–China relations continue to worsen. This trajectory renders the standing U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity, which accepts the possibility of a direct U.S. war with China, dangerous and misaligned with U.S. interests.

The above preparatory changes will require considerable diplomatic finesse and sustained attention over a considerable period of time. Given the weakened National Security Council and the virtual collapse of the past interagency coordinating process for policy development under President Trump, these required qualities might be in short supply at present. Hopefully, the Trump administration will be able to correct these deficiencies.

It is unlikely China would respond to the strategy outlined here by attempting to reunify with Taiwan by force. This is because of the still high — and, in some areas, increased — risks confronting any Chinese use of force and because of the fact that this policy shift would likely increase Beijing's confidence in eventually reaching a peaceful resolution of the issue.

## **Introduction**

The first brief in this two-part series examined America's interests in Taiwan. It argued that Taiwan represents an important but not vital interest for the United States. A vital

interest is defined as one that is essential to the security and well-being of the United States, thus justifying the application of U.S. military force, even against another major power.

While an important democratic friend and partner, Taiwan does not meet that definition. It is not a strategically critical location; its economic significance does not justify going to war; its control by China would not constitute a blow to American credibility if properly handled; and the moral importance of militarily defending a friend pales in comparison to unnecessarily risking the lives of thousands or more U.S. soldiers and citizens for a less-than-vital interest.

As such, the United States needs a more reasonable policy toward Taiwan than its current, long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity that includes the possibility — indeed, likelihood — that it will directly fight China in defense of the island. Instead, a modified policy should emerge over time, after significant preparation, that aims to support and defend Taiwan without entertaining the possibility of direct U.S. military intervention while also lowering Chinese incentives to attack the island.

This brief lays out the key features of such a policy transition. This transition consists of three parts:

- A period of preparation to ready U.S. allies and partners for the policy that the United States will not intervene directly in defense of Taiwan. This would involve a range of initiatives that strengthen key elements of existing U.S. policy, along with new actions designed to guard against dangerous or destabilizing future reactions by U.S. allies and partners.
- Deliberate moves to end strategic ambiguity while enhancing other forms of support for Taiwan.



- An effort to minimize the possibility that China will conclude that it could seize Taiwan by force as a result of the new U.S. policy of nonintervention — a determination that is unlikely yet not inconceivable.

## **A period of preparation: Policy continuity with strengthened assurances**

Under existing conditions, any precipitous, unprepared American move to end the possibility of U.S. military intervention in the defense of Taiwan would generate severe alarm and political blowback in Washington and among U.S. allies and partners. Indeed, for a variety of factors, the common assumption is that the United States is committed to relying on military deterrence as virtually the only means of maintaining stability across the Taiwan Strait. These factors include the decades-long policy of “strategic ambiguity,” which has intentionally left open the possibility of fighting China over the island; Washington’s erosion of its One China Policy; and years of Chinese military and other actions that have undermined Beijing’s apparent support for peaceful reunification.

In this context, a sudden shift from the United States’ current stance could cause U.S. allies and partners to lose confidence in the credibility of the U.S., damaging America’s alliances and other close relations in Asia and elsewhere. Such a move could also lead Beijing to conclude that Washington was significantly reducing its commitments and presence in Asia, and to take a range of destabilizing actions as a result.<sup>1</sup> The United States must guard against these possibilities by conducting extensive consultations

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<sup>1</sup> Syed Munir Khasru, “Treaty Withdrawals and Security Realignments: Potential Impact of U.S. Disengagement in Asia,” University of Pennsylvania, Perry World House, May 19, 2025, <https://perryworldhouse.upenn.edu/news-and-insight/treaty-withdrawals-and-security-realignments-potential-impact-of-u-s-disengagement-in-asia>; Jake Yeager, “U.S. Officials Need to Explain the Stakes in Taiwan,” *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 17, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/01/u-s-officials-need-to-explain-the-stakes-in-taiwan>.

while also executing concrete deterrence and reassurance actions directed at U.S. allies, partners, Taiwan, and China. None of this can be done quickly.

During this near- to medium-term preparatory process, it makes sense for the United States to sustain strategic ambiguity and its related assurances. This means that Washington should maintain or even enhance several elements of its existing Taiwan policy over the next several years while taking actions designed to minimize or eliminate adverse reactions to the eventual cessation of possible U.S. military intervention. This preparatory period should include a combination of military, political, diplomatic, and economic efforts.

## Military efforts

Militarily, Washington should reassert strategic ambiguity as the only viable policy approach at present while continuing to strengthen its defensive, denial-oriented military deterrent capabilities against Beijing relevant to a Taiwan contingency.<sup>2</sup> Equally, if not more important, the United States should strengthen its commitment to formal treaty allies, especially Japan and South Korea. This should occur through a variety of means, including:

- A reaffirmation of the U.S. security treaty commitment to defend Japan and South Korea — including a confirmation of extended deterrence to both powers against any threats of attack by weapons of mass destruction.
- Efforts to encourage allies to develop the self-defense capabilities that they see as necessary to deter and respond to direct military threats to their territory, with

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Esplin Odell et al., “Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia,” Quincy Institute, June 22, 2022, [https://quincyinst.org/research/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/#executive-summary%5D\(https://quincyinst.org/research/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/%23executive-summary](https://quincyinst.org/research/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/#executive-summary%5D(https://quincyinst.org/research/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/%23executive-summary).

the United States providing the defense technology and systems for that purpose.<sup>3</sup>

- In the case of Japan, moves to operationalize the “prior consultations” agreement from 1960,<sup>4</sup> so that Tokyo has a real voice and veto over the use of force by U.S. military forces in the country, and a revision of the U.S.–Japan Status of Forces Agreement so that Tokyo has greater authority over U.S. military bases and their operations in Japan.<sup>5</sup>

As Japan becomes more confident in its ability to defend itself against potential and likely threats, the United States should, in close consultation with Tokyo, begin to streamline its military presence in Japan and return American bases that the Japanese have been seeking for some time.

In addition to these military undertakings, and equal in importance, Washington should support Tokyo’s diplomatic efforts, as well as those of other allies, to reduce tensions with Beijing. The United States should promote an East Asian regional order that enables peaceful coexistence and cooperation with China to address the myriad transnational issues affecting all nations.

During this preparatory period, any efforts to increase Japan’s ability to defend the home islands should be characterized as both a self-defense measure and a form of deterrence vis-à-vis Taiwan. But none of these actions should aim to develop the ability and willingness of Japan or other U.S. allies to fight alongside the United States in direct defense of Taiwan. Such a change would likely face strong public resistance in those

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<sup>3</sup> The author is indebted to Mike Mochizuki for these recommendations regarding Japan.

<sup>4</sup> “Description of Consultation Arrangements under the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security with Japan (Part of Briefing Book Prepared for Secretary of State Herter),” June 1, 1960, doc. 01 in National Security Archive, *The U.S.–Japan Military Alliance: A Documents Primer*, ed. Robert A. Wampler (June 2019), <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/19416-national-security-archive-doc-02-description>.

<sup>5</sup> “Defense, Status of Forces: Agreement between the United States of America and Japan,” April 1, 2022, via the U.S. Department of State website at <https://www.state.gov/japan-22-401.1>; “Agreement Regarding the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan,” Jan. 19, 1960, via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan website at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/2.html>.

allied nations. It would also increase the likelihood of U.S. military intervention in a Taiwan crisis by boosting U.S. confidence in such an action while unnecessarily provoking China. Instead, as indicated, U.S. military support for its allies should focus on increasing their ability to defend their own territories, rather than preparing for a conflict over Taiwan. These efforts would increase confidence in the credibility of U.S. security commitments, as well as U.S. allies' ability to resist and repel aggression, which would pave the way for a U.S. transition away from military intervention in a cross-strait conflict.

Washington should also continue to assist Taipei with strengthening its self-defense capacity and its confidence in countering future military threats from Beijing. However, this should occur without treating Taiwan as a formal security partner or as a critical strategic location. Assistance should include intelligence support, training, significantly higher quantities of anti-air and anti-ship missiles, defensive fortifications to strengthen the resiliency of critical infrastructure and bases, and technologies to protect against Chinese cyber attacks. This assistance should be made conditional on Taipei achieving clearly defined targets in enhancing its independent self-defense capability.<sup>6</sup>

## Other arenas

In the political, diplomatic, and economic arenas, over the short to medium term, Washington should actively work to complement its limited deterrence efforts with a range of actions intended to bolster the credibility of its One China Policy and its support for Taipei and key U.S. allies. First, the U.S. president, in tandem with key allies, should repeatedly affirm the critical importance of maintaining regional peace and stability and the importance of peace in the Taiwan Strait in sustaining that stability. At

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<sup>6</sup> This and the following three paragraphs are heavily drawn from Michael D. Swaine, "Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest," *Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 174–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2478779>. These paragraphs also include insights from Yoshihide Soeya et al., "Asia's Future at a Crossroads: A Japanese Strategy for Peace and Sustainable Prosperity," Asia's Future Research Group, July 2023, <https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/d/3083/files/2023/07/Asias-Future-at-a-Crossroads-English.pdf>.



the same time, the president should make it clear that, while the United States supports Taiwan's self-defense efforts, it will *actively oppose* any unilateral effort by Taiwan to achieve independence, remain open to *any* peaceful and uncoerced resolution of the Taiwan issue, will not regard Taiwan as a strategic node to be kept separate from China, and will more clearly limit its contact with Taiwan to unofficial channels. Washington should also clearly and repeatedly demonstrate its support for mutual accommodation between Beijing and Taipei in the pursuit of a stable *modus vivendi*.

In addition, Washington should take steps to improve its strategic relationship with Beijing by convening a results-oriented strategic dialogue aimed at identifying and stabilizing — through mutual, verifiable levels of clarification and accommodation — the issues that produce the most contention in the relationship. Washington and Beijing should communicate clear red lines — and the consequences of violation — for issues that cannot be stabilized through strategic dialogue, in order to prevent them from harming the broader bilateral relationship. This process will take time and could prove contentious but is necessary nonetheless. At present, no such dialogue exists between Beijing and Washington.

Economically and culturally, the United States should expand mutually beneficial trade, investment, and technology exchanges with Taiwanese companies, extensive people-to-people and unofficial government contacts to promote greater levels of friendship and mutual understanding, and rhetorical and institutional support for Taiwan's democratic system and civil society. These moves would confirm Taiwan's value to the United States and its support for Taiwan's democratic freedoms. The United States should also work to improve economic and trade relations with China by resolving trade and tariff disputes and reinforcing multilateral economic agreements and organizations — including, for example, the World Trade Organization.

To bolster military deterrence, the United States and other countries should continue to increase their ability and willingness to impose sanctions and other punishments

against Beijing if China were to attack Taiwan, including United Nations censure and even the suspension of diplomatic relations.<sup>7</sup> U.S. allies that are the most dependent on China economically should be encouraged to further diversify their supply chains to reduce their resistance to applying sanctions against Beijing. An additional economic punishment worth considering is an “avalanche decoupling” — a long-term strategy designed to apply maximum economic constraints on China without damaging the United States or other major economies.<sup>8</sup> It would enable states to rapidly yet safely decouple, almost entirely, from Beijing in the event of China initiating a major war over Taiwan.

Although the United States will continue to support Taiwan, renew its commitment to the One China Policy, and work to reassure allies, it should avoid specious arguments relating to Taiwan, including the supposed strategic elements of the island, Taiwan’s importance as a measure of U.S. credibility, or the apparent moral requirement to defend a democratic friend. It is particularly important, as part of its effort to revitalize the One China Policy, that Washington actively discourages alliance managers in Tokyo from regarding Taiwan as a critical strategic location that must be kept separate from China.

Ultimately, sanctions and similar punishments are unlikely to fully deter Beijing from using force in the Taiwan Strait. The assurances outlined above are also needed, as well as other diplomatic efforts, to reassure Beijing that it will not be backed into a corner over Taiwan and has time to resolve the issue peacefully.

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<sup>7</sup> Regarding sanctions, see Charlie Vest and Agatha Kratz, “Sanctioning China in a Taiwan Crisis: Scenarios and Risks,” Atlantic Council and Rhodium Group, June 21, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/sanctioning-china-in-a-taiwan-crisis-scenarios-and-risks/>; Susan M. Gordon and Michael G. Mullen with David Sacks, “U.S.–Taiwan Relations in a New Era: Responding to a More Assertive China, Task Force Report no. 81,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 2023, 78–85, <https://live-tfr-cdn.cfr.org/cdn/>. Regarding diplomatic costs, see Jude Blanchette and Gerard DiPippo, “‘Reunification’ with Taiwan through Force Would Be a Pyrrhic Victory for China,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Nov. 22, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reunification-taiwan-through-force-would-be-pyrrhic-victory-china>.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Freymann and Hugo Bromley, “The Case for ‘Avalanche Decoupling’ from China,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 29, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/case-avalanche-decoupling-china>.

## Why nonintervention reduces the likelihood of a Chinese attack

The policy measures advocated for in this brief are deemed feasible and preferable because of the low likelihood that China will challenge U.S. deterrence by applying force against Taiwan during this preparatory time period.<sup>9</sup> This is so for two reasons: a) the enormous risks and costs involved with using military force against Taiwan, and b) the absence of any pressing need to undertake such forceful actions. In addition, contrary to the views of some observers who argue that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could encourage China to use force against Taiwan, Russia's struggles and Ukraine's resiliency throughout the war have likely taught Beijing that absorbing Taiwan by force would be more costly and challenging than previously imagined.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, numerous simulations of a Taiwan conflict and assessments of relative U.S., Japanese, and Chinese military capabilities indicate that any near- to medium-term use of force by Beijing would likely fail.<sup>11</sup> Even if it were successful, such a use of force would likely result in significant, long-term political and economic costs for the People's Republic of China, or PRC, in the form of Western sanctions and containment-like efforts, as well as severe international opprobrium and disruption. In addition, despite the United States' erosion of the One China Policy in recent years,<sup>12</sup> it has not yet taken actions that would fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of the PRC regime as the defender of China's territorial integrity by backing Taiwan's permanent separation. Such a move would compel Beijing to react with force despite the significant costs China

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<sup>9</sup> Barring unprecedented provocations by Beijing.

<sup>10</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Potential Lessons from Ukraine for Conflict over Taiwan," *Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2023): 7–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2023.2260141>.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see the Taiwan simulations contained in 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, 83–95, [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). See also Odell et al., "Active Denial," 310–13.

<sup>12</sup> Michael D. Swaine, "Stabilizing the Growing Taiwan Crisis: New Messaging and Understandings Are Urgently Needed," Quincy Institute, March 12, 2024, <https://quincyinst.org/research/stabilizing-the-growing-taiwan-crisis-new-messaging-and-understandings-are-urgently-needed>.

would incur.<sup>13</sup> This is the case despite Beijing's belief that Washington's actions often facilitate movement toward such an outcome.

Of course, it is possible that, even without provocative triggering actions by Taipei or Washington, Beijing concludes that the opportunity to resolve the Taiwan issue peacefully has passed and decides to instead use force. Alternatively, some observers have argued that China has a deadline for unification with Taiwan, as Chinese President Xi Jinping may be motivated to resolve the issue before he leaves office in order to burnish his legacy.<sup>14</sup>

However, there is no conclusive evidence that China believes that the "window of opportunity" to reunify with Taiwan is closing. President Xi's only clear reference to a possible date for resolving the Taiwan issue has occurred in the context of the long-term goal of 2049 for "rejuvenating" the Chinese nation, chosen to mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC.<sup>15</sup> Xi has stated several times that the completion of rejuvenation by that time should include a resolution of the Taiwan issue.

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<sup>13</sup> This and the following paragraph are heavily drawn from Swaine, "Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest," 174–75. See also Andrew J. Nathan, "Beijing Is Still Playing the Long Game on Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, June 23, 2022,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-06-23/beijing-still-playing-long-game-taiwan>.

<sup>14</sup> In a 2022 survey of experts by the Center for Strategic and International Studies China Power team, 44 percent of respondents believed "Beijing has a hard internal deadline to unify Taiwan by 2049." See Bonny Lin et al., "Surveying the Experts: China's Approach to Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Sept. 12, 2022, <https://chinapower.csis.org/survey-experts-china-approach-to-taiwan>. One of the most well-known examples is the so-called "Davidson Window" — former commander of U.S.

Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phil Davidson's speculation that China intends to seize Taiwan by 2027. See Mallory Shelbourne, "Davidson: China Could Try to Take Control of Taiwan in Next Six Years," *USNI News*, March 9, 2021,

<https://news.usni.org/2021/03/09/davidson-china-could-try-to-take-control-of-taiwan-in-next-six-years>;

Noah Robertson, "How D.C. Became Obsessed with a Potential 2027 Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," *DefenseNews*, May 7, 2024,

<https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/05/07/how-dc-became-obsessed-with-a-potential-2027-chinese-invasion-of-taiwan>; Kyle Amonson and Dane Egli, "The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing's Calculus for Invading Taiwan by 2030," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (March–April 2023): 37–53, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3371474>.

<sup>15</sup> Jude Blanchette, Briana Boland, and Lily McElwee, "What Is Beijing's Timeline for 'Reunification' with Taiwan?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 26, 2023, <https://interpret.csis.org/what-is-beijings-timeline-for-reunification-with-taiwan>.

<sup>16</sup> Yet Xi and other senior Chinese leaders have asserted that 2049 is not a firm deadline for unification.<sup>17</sup> As with numerous statements issued by Chinese leaders, Beijing’s “deadline” rhetoric concerning unification more likely represents a political device directed at a domestic audience to demonstrate leadership and resolve. Rather than signaling Beijing’s move toward unification by force, the gradual increase in Chinese military, economic, and diplomatic pressure on the island suggests a long-term strategy of strategic patience and flexibility designed to induce Taipei to accept political talks and to deter Washington from intervening.<sup>18</sup>

As Washington prepares to transition to a noninterventionist policy, it makes sense for the United States to maintain its military deterrent capabilities against a Chinese attack on Taiwan over the near to medium term — as part of strategic ambiguity — in order to avoid alarming or provoking allies. But what if Beijing decides, despite the absence of any clear provocation, to employ force against Taipei during this period in order to

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<sup>16</sup> Xinhua News Agency, “Xi Says Taiwan Question Will Be Resolved as National Rejuvenation Becomes Reality,” PRC State Council Information Office, Oct. 9, 2021, [http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2021-10/09/content\\_77797973.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2021-10/09/content_77797973.htm); “习近平在《告台湾同胞书》发表40周年纪念会上的讲话” [“Xi Jinping’s speech at the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the publication of ‘The Message to Compatriots in Taiwan’”], PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jan. 2, 2019, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ziliao\\_674904/zt\\_674979/dnzt\\_674981/qtzt/twwt/xipzsjstzyjh/202206/t20220606\\_10698873.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/dnzt_674981/qtzt/twwt/xipzsjstzyjh/202206/t20220606_10698873.html).

<sup>17</sup> In his summit with then-President Biden in Dec. 2023, Xi reportedly told his U.S. counterpart that, although China remains committed to the goal of unification, speculations about deadlines to invade Taiwan were “wrong” and that he had not set a time frame. Kristen Welker et al., “Xi Warned Biden during Summit that Beijing Will Reunify Taiwan with China,” NBC News, Dec. 20, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/china/rcna130087>; Sarah Zheng, “China Envoy Denies U.S. Claim of Faster Timeline for Taking Taiwan,” Bloomberg, Nov. 3, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-03/chinese-envoy-denies-beijing-has-timeline-for-taiwan-unification>. See also Blanchette, Boland, and McElwee, “What Is Beijing’s Timeline?”

<sup>18</sup> One recent source that examines China’s approach to the use of force against Taiwan presents both sides of this argument but ends up stressing the many costs and risks involved in any Chinese attack over the near to medium term and Beijing’s overall preference for a long-term strategy. See Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *China’s Quest for Military Supremacy* (Hoboken: Polity Press, 2024), 160–83. Another source analyzes China’s 2022 Defense White Paper and finds that it “maintains the stance that time is on China’s side when it comes to Taiwan.” Shannon Tiezzi, “China’s New White Paper Lays Out Vision for Post ‘Reunification’ Taiwan,” *The Diplomat*, Aug. 11, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/chinas-new-white-paper-lays-out-vision-for-post-reunification-taiwan>. See also Nathan, “Beijing Is Still Playing the Long Game”; Isaac Kardon and Jennifer Kavanagh, “How China Will Squeeze, Not Seize, Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-china-will-squeeze-not-seize-taiwan>.



resolve the issue once and for all? Although unlikely absent a clear provocation, under current conditions of strategic ambiguity, an unprovoked Chinese invasion of Taiwan would very likely result in U.S. intervention to defend the island directly. A U.S. decision not to intervene would likely be seen — in the absence of adequate preparations for such a move — as a major failure of will and blow to U.S. credibility with formal treaty allies, as well as a betrayal of Taiwan.

Thus, two fundamental U.S. interests would come into conflict under the scenario of an unprovoked Chinese invasion in the near term: the desire to maintain American credibility as a security partner and the need to avoid a war with China over a non-vital interest. However, since American leaders at present do not recognize that Taiwan is a non-vital interest, they would be blind to this conflict of interests, thinking instead that U.S. credibility and the defense of a democratic friend are all that is at stake, thus necessitating military intervention.

But this would be an erroneous judgment. On balance, even if the preparations to transition to a noninterventionist policy were incomplete, the dangers involved in entering a full-scale conflict with China over Taiwan would supersede any concerns relating to possible blows to American credibility resulting from a U.S. decision to not intervene directly. While maintaining strategic ambiguity in the absence of a Chinese attack on Taiwan is a necessary interim policy to reassure allies as the United States transitions to nonintervention, American interests are best served by avoiding a war with Beijing — now and in the future.

## **Adopting a noninterventionist policy: Why it is necessary and when to do it**

One might ask why Washington needs to adopt a policy of nonintervention if strategic ambiguity and the One China Policy have, thus far, worked effectively to avoid a war over Taiwan. As indicated in the first brief in this series, Taiwan was historically only

considered a vital U.S. interest justifying the risk of a major war with China during the 1950s and 1960s due to the politics of the Cold War and the struggle against global communism. It is not a vital interest today. Moreover, ongoing military and political trends are eroding the ability of Washington to deter and reassure Beijing, making the likelihood of a future crisis or conflict over the island much greater. In short, strategic ambiguity is an increasing risk not worth taking.

## An ongoing shift in the military balance against the United States

Militarily,<sup>19</sup> it is likely that, despite current economic difficulties, China will continue to sustain increases in military spending and apply the majority of that growth to acquiring greater capabilities relevant to a war over Taiwan. Numerous reputable sources have projected that China's economy will continue to grow at or above 3 percent for years to come,<sup>20</sup> making it very possible for Beijing to sustain and, if necessary, increase its long-standing level of defense spending of approximately 2 percent of gross domestic product, or GDP.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This and the following three paragraphs are drawn from Swaine, "Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest," 174–77.

<sup>20</sup> Forecasts by numerous financial institutions consistently project that China's GDP growth will stay above 3 percent per annum for at least the next several years and, in many cases, into the next decade. Even under more conservative projections, 3 percent and above remains the floor. See "IMF Staff Completes 2024 Article IV Mission to the People's Republic of China," International Monetary Fund, Press Release No. 20/184, May 28, 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2024/05/28/pr24184-china-imf-staff-completes-2024-art-iv-mission>; Kevin Chua et al., "Unlocking Consumption: China Economic Update," World Bank, June 2025, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/06/13/unlocking-consumption-to-sustain-growth-in-china-world-bank-economic-update>; "Our 2025 Outlook for China's Economy," UBS, Feb. 2025, <https://www.ubs.com/global/en/investment-bank/insights-and-data/2024/outlook-for-china-economy.html>; "China's Economic Outlook for 2025 and Beyond," FocusEconomics, April 11, 2025, <https://www.focus-economics.com/blog/chinas-economic-outlook>; "OECD Economic Outlook, Vol. 2025/1: Tackling Uncertainty, Reviving Growth," OECD, June 3, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1787/83363382-en>; Ken Wattret, "Global Economic Outlook: July 2025," S&P Global Market Intelligence, July 17, 2025, <https://www.spglobal.com/market-intelligence/en/news-insights/research/global-economic-outlook-july-2025>.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of China's near-term plans to continue increasing military spending, see Huizhong Wu and Christopher Bodeen, "China Raises Defense Budget by 7.2% as It Pushes for Global Heft and Regional Tensions Continue," AP, March 5, 2024, <https://apnews.com/9e751a41c9a1ffe8c0cf9775797750e3>; Kathrin Hille, "China's Military Budget Outpaces Other Spending in Shift to Security," *Financial Times*,

In addition, as the Chinese military's inventory of weapon systems, doctrine, and training advance, the U.S. military's ability to operate effectively in the water and airspace around Taiwan — fewer than 100 miles off the coast of China — are likely to continue to erode.<sup>22</sup> It is already widely recognized that the U.S. military's capabilities in this respect have declined markedly over the past several decades, particularly since China began increasing its rate of defense spending following the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to see why this trend would not continue as the Chinese military continues to mature. Indeed, those predicting a near- or even medium-term collapse of the Chinese economy that could upset defense spending offer weak evidence.<sup>24</sup>

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March 5, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/66790beb-bd5b-4025-b12e-5d0e7dd8bbfb>; M. Taylor Fravel, George Gilboy, and Eric Heginbotham, "China's Defense Spending: The \$700 Billion Distraction," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 2, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/09/chinas-defense-spending-the-700-billion-distraction>. For projections of longer-term Chinese defense spending, see "Feature: Shifting Geopolitics Impacts Asia-Pacific Defence Spending," *Janes*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-and-national-security-analysis/feature-shifting-geopolitics-impacts-asia-pacific-defence-spending>.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas D. Anderson and Daryl G. Press, "Access Denied? The Sino-American Contest for Military Primacy in Asia," *International Security* 50, no.1 (2025): 118–151, <https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.7>; Sam Roggeveen, "China's Military Is Now Leading," *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 3, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/09/03/china-military-parade-technology-pla-weapons/>.

<sup>23</sup> According to RAND's interactive "U.S.–China Military Scorecard," in 1996, the U.S. military had an advantage over the Chinese in seven of nine "operational areas" (e.g., air superiority, airspace penetration, and anti-surface warfare) relevant to a Taiwan scenario (including a "major advantage" in six operational areas), while the Chinese military had an advantage in only one area. By 2017, according to these estimates, the number of operational areas in which the U.S. military had an advantage had fallen to only three (and included no areas of "major advantage"), while the number of operational areas in which the Chinese military had an advantage had increased to two. The author is indebted to Steven Kosiak for pointing this out. See Eric Heginbotham et al., "The U.S.–China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017," RAND Corporation, 2015, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR392.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html). See also John Culver, "China, Taiwan, and the PLA's 2027 Milestones," Lowy Institute, Feb. 12, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-taiwan-pla-s-2027-milestones>.

<sup>24</sup> Austin Jordan, "China's Economic Slowdown Is Slowing Down: As Arthur Kroeber Tells It, That Was Always Part of Xi's Plan," Harvard University, Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Oct. 17, 2023, <https://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/research/blog/china-economic-slowdown>. Some observers have been predicting China's economic collapse for many years — citing accumulating debt, a housing crisis, excess production, inadequate consumption, and other factors — while serious economic institutions predict continued Chinese economic growth, albeit at reduced levels. See Gordon G. Chang, "China's Economy Is in Deep Trouble," *Newsweek*, Feb. 27, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/2037177>; Jason Ma, "Temu's Woes Are Fresh Signs of the Doom Loop Headed for China's Economy," *Fortune*, Aug. 31, 2024, <https://fortune.com/2024/08/31/temu-parent-pdd-china-economy-outlook-doom-loop-xi-jinping>.

There is also little evidence to suggest that the U.S. military will develop a game-changing new technology, operational concepts, or other capabilities that would allow it to reverse this long-term trend and restore its capacity to deter China at the levels of even the relatively recent past. Some observers believe that the United States' use of large numbers of drones would effectively counter China's military gains in a Taiwan conflict. But China has an equal, if not superior, level of drone capability and other means to counter a U.S. drone attack.<sup>25</sup>

Taken together, these factors — the increasingly rivalrous nature of Sino–American relations, a progressively unfavorable U.S.–PRC military balance relative to Taiwan, and a weakening of the One China Policy — are courting levels of unacceptable and unjustified military risk to the United States. This situation presents a serious domestic political problem for Washington, as a clear majority of the American public is extremely disinclined to risk a major war with China over Taiwan.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, one cannot ignore the fact that China enjoys a significant geographical advantage in deploying forces against Taiwan. Taiwan is only 100 miles from China, while the United States faces steep logistical and other obstacles confronting the deployment of its relatively distant military forces — in, for example, Guam (1,700 miles from Taiwan) or Hawaii (around 5,000 miles) — to supplement its limited forces based

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<sup>25</sup> John S. Van Oudenaren, "Taking Flight: China's Military Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Industry," China Aerospace Studies Institute, May 12, 2025, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Infrastructure/2025-05-05%20UAV%20Industrial%20Base.pdf?ver=RSER\\_w6coqZoVa9L11dghw%3d%3d](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Infrastructure/2025-05-05%20UAV%20Industrial%20Base.pdf?ver=RSER_w6coqZoVa9L11dghw%3d%3d); Tom Porter, "China Is Menacing Taiwan with a Drone Swarm Attack — and the U.S. Is Playing Catch-Up," *Business Insider*, Oct. 8, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-taiwan-drone-swarms-uav-us-playing-catch-up-production-2024-10>.

<sup>26</sup> Craig Kafura, "On Taiwan, Americans Favor the Status Quo," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Oct. 8, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/taiwan-americans-favor-status-quo>. Another, less recent poll indicates that, while 51 percent of respondents said it is more important for the United States to "take a strong stand so that China does not take over Taiwan by force" rather than prioritize good relations with China, only 37 percent said the U.S. should help defend Taiwan with military force. See Taylor Orth, "More Americans Prefer Taking a Strong Stand to Protect Taiwan than Would Choose Good China Relations," YouGov, March 1, 2023, <https://today.yougov.com/international/articles/45329>.

in Japan, South Korea, or the Philippines.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it is not at all clear that Tokyo,<sup>28</sup> Seoul,<sup>29</sup> or Manila<sup>30</sup> would be willing to become embroiled in a conflict over Taiwan by granting the U.S. use of its forces based in their country if they were not directly threatened by Beijing. Washington might still deploy those forces in the absence of local approval but doing so would severely damage its relations with all three allies.

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<sup>27</sup> Maximillian K. Bremer and Kelly A. Grieco, “The Four Tyrannies of Logistical Deterrence,” Stimson Center, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-four-tyrannies-of-logistical-deterrence>.

<sup>28</sup> “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, 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>. All of these polls reflect a consistent trend that a large majority of the Japanese public do not support Japan’s direct involvement in combat in a war over Taiwan.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Yeo and Hanna Foreman, “Is South Korea Ready to Define Its Role in a Taiwan Strait Contingency?” Brookings Institution, March 28, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/is-south-korea-ready-to-define-its-role-in-a-taiwan-strait-contingency>. A recent South Korean survey showed that, while a plurality (42.3 percent) of South Koreans would be willing to support U.S. Forces Korea, or USFK, serving a limited and noncombat rearview role (logistics and intelligence, etc.) in a Taiwan contingency, only a small minority (6.3 percent) would endorse the USFK’s military intervention. Regarding the South Korean military’s role in a Taiwan contingency, the same survey showed a strong opposition to military involvement. Almost half, 49.3 percent, approved only humanitarian support, and 15.8 percent opposed assistance or involvement of any kind. About 26 percent endorsed military involvement of some form (6.1 percent approval of sending combat troops, 6.8 percent approval of sending noncombat troops, and 13 percent approval of sending weapons). “2025 EAI Public Opinion Poll on East Asia: Overall Perception, United States, China, Japan, and North Korea,” East Asia Institute, June 23, 2025, <https://eai.or.kr/new/en/pub/view.asp?intSeq=23339>.

<sup>30</sup> A March 2024 survey by WR Numero Research found that around 86 percent of Filipinos wanted their country to remain neutral if China and Taiwan enter into conflict. The majority preferred maintaining distance over picking sides. See Raissa Robles, “Most Filipinos Say They Support Neutrality over Taiwan, Want Manila to Focus on Home Front,” *South China Morning Post*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3264470/most-filipinos-say-they-support-neutrality-over-taiwan-want-manila-focus-home-front>. For differing views, see Rebecca Tan, Frances Mangosing, and Pei-Lin Wu, “The Philippines Is Quietly Working with Taiwan to Counter China,” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/07/14/philippines-taiwan-security-ties-china/>; Derek Grossman, “The Philippines Is Ever More Focused on Taiwan,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 29, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/29/us-philippines-china-taiwan-military-defense-security-alliance>.



## An overall undermining of political incentives to reassure, reengage, and cooperate

Politically, Washington's efforts to reduce Chinese incentives to use force against Taiwan are falling short, for several reasons. Over several years, the credibility of the One China Policy — the basis for reassuring Beijing — has eroded considerably, as the United States and numerous hawkish defense advisors to the U.S. government move closer to Taiwan. This has led Beijing to severely doubt Washington's willingness to accept even a peaceful process of unification. In fact, the author's discussions with Chinese scholars over recent years and recent statements by Chinese officials suggest that a large number of Chinese believe that the United States seeks to maintain the cross-strait separation indefinitely and will block political and other efforts toward unification.<sup>31</sup>

Chinese concerns are magnified further by political developments on Taiwan that show a growing number of Taiwan's citizens have rejected any kind of political association with China, instead favoring what they regard as indefinite de facto independence.<sup>32</sup> From Beijing's perspective, Washington has done little, if anything, to discourage incremental movement by the Taiwanese pro-independence Democratic Progressive

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<sup>31</sup> For a typical example of recent Chinese remarks, see Joe Cash and Ben Blanchard, "China Urges U.S. to 'Correct Its Mistakes' after State Department Website Removes Taiwan Independence Reference," Reuters, Feb. 17, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-says-website-update-routine-after-removal-reference-taiwan-independence-2025-02-17>. At a May 2024 press briefing, Beijing accused Washington of "using Taiwan to contain China," of hollowing out the One China principle, and of emboldening separatist forces, calling such shifts a breach of U.S. commitments and joint communiqués. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on May 15, 2024," PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530\\_11347756.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347756.html). For similar Chinese statements as of 2021, see Michael D. Swaine, "Recent Chinese Views on the Taiwan Issue," *China Leadership Monitor* no. 7 (Winter 2021), <https://www.prcleader.org/post/recent-chinese-views-on-the-taiwan-issuedownload>.

<sup>32</sup> Christine Huang and Kelsey Jo Starr, "Most People in Taiwan See Themselves as Primarily Taiwanese; Few Say They're Primarily Chinese," Pew Research Center, Jan. 16, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/01/16/most-people-in-taiwan-see-themselves-as-primarily-taiwanese-few-say-theyre-primarily-chinese>.

Party toward international recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign, independent nation.<sup>33</sup>

Partly in response to these developments, China has dramatically increased its military intimidation of Taiwan through an array of exercises and deployments around the island as well as a growing number of simulations of amphibious landings.<sup>34</sup>

All these developments are occurring against the backdrop of a steady deterioration in Sino–American relations. Political leaders in both countries now routinely regard one another as *de facto* adversaries – if not overt enemies – with each country seeing itself as locked in a deep-seated strategic competition with the other. Under President Trump, this trend has intensified despite his occasional expression of good will toward Xi.<sup>35</sup> The U.S. trade war and the inclusion of strong China hawks in the administration at senior levels are particularly to blame. Many members of Congress also routinely employ hostile language to describe Beijing and its policies while the Chinese use increasingly sharp, contentious language to describe the behavior and attitude of Washington.<sup>36</sup> As a

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<sup>33</sup> Lily Kuo, “Tsai Ing-wen Says China Must ‘Face Reality’ of Taiwan’s Independence,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 15, 2020,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/tsai-ing-wen-says-china-must-face-reality-of-taiwans-independence>; Paul Heer, “Taiwan Seeks to Escape Its History,” *National Interest*, July 6, 2024,

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/taiwan-seeks-escape-its-history-211750>. Joel Wuthnow and Philip Saunders observe that, over the years, Beijing has become increasingly “concerned about a perceived shift in U.S. policy. Whereas U.S. officials had discouraged [Taiwanese presidents] Lee [Teng-hui] and Chen [Shui-bian] from pursuing legal independence, Beijing saw Washington encouraging Taiwan independence as part of a broader strategy to permanently separate the mainland from Taiwan.” Wuthnow and Saunders, *China’s Quest*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> For an analysis on China’s escalation of “gray zone” campaigns against Taiwan over the years, see Wuthnow and Saunders, *China’s Quest*, 161–65. See also Amrita Jash, “China’s Military Exercises around Taiwan: Trends and Patterns,” Global Taiwan Institute, Oct. 2, 2024,

<https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/10/chinas-military-exercises-around-taiwan-trends-and-patterns>; Richard Bush, “From Persuasion to Coercion: Beijing’s Approach to Taiwan and Taiwan’s Response,” Brookings Institution, Nov. 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/from-persuasion-to-coercion-beijings-approach-to-taiwan-and-taiwan-s-response>.

<sup>35</sup> Cate Cadell and Ellen Nakashima, “Trump Appointees Signal a New Hawkish China Policy,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 2024,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/11/12/trump-appointees-china-hawks-rubio-walz-stefanik/>; “U.S.–China Relations in the Trump 2.0 Era: A Timeline,” China Briefing, Jan. 21, 2025, updated Aug. 12, 2025,

<https://www.china-briefing.com/news/us-china-relations-in-the-trump-2-0-implications>.

<sup>36</sup> For examples, see “Wicker: Americans Underestimate China Threat,” website of U.S. Senator Roger Wicker, April 28, 2025,

<https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2025/4/wicker-americans-underestimate-china-threat>; Cate Cadell, “At

result, public and elite distrust on both sides has increased, bilateral dialogues have atrophied,<sup>37</sup> and a growing number of defense analysts in the United States now seem to convey an expectation that war with China is virtually inevitable.<sup>38</sup>

The above factors demonstrate that the risks of indefinitely pursuing the existing policy of strategic ambiguity — a policy that does not accurately reflect an assessment of America's interest in avoiding a war with China over Taiwan — have increased significantly. Strategic ambiguity, which accepts the possibility of a U.S. war with China, is becoming too dangerous in the face of existing military and political trends and the growing movement toward a crisis over Taiwan. It should be replaced by a policy of strategic clarity that excludes the possibility of a Sino–American war over Taiwan, *once the necessary preparations have been completed*.

## The transition to a noninterventionist policy

The preparations for the transition to a noninterventionist U.S. policy outlined above are intended to eliminate alarm among allies, discourage reckless actions by Beijing or by

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House Hearing on Chinese Communist Party, Bipartisan Show of Concern,” *Washington Post*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/03/01/select-committee-ccp-china-gallagher>. For Chinese sources, see “林剑：搞“麦克风外交”不会给中美关系带来任何好处” [“Lin Jian: Engaging in ‘microphone diplomacy’ will not bring any benefits to Sino–U.S. relations”], Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States, March 4, 2025, [http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/zmgx\\_1/zxxx/202503/t20250305\\_11568600.htm](http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/zmgx_1/zxxx/202503/t20250305_11568600.htm); “外交部发言人办公室 2025年7月18日外交部发言人林剑主持例行记者会” [“Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian’s regular press conference on July 18, 2025”], Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt\\_673021/jzhsl\\_673025/202507/t20250718\\_11673005.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202507/t20250718_11673005.shtml); Deng Yuwen, “如何理解王毅说的“好自为之”，中国会解除对卢比奥的制裁吗？” [“How to understand [Foreign Minister] Wang Yi’s ‘conduct yourself well,’ will China lift sanctions on [Secretary of State Marco] Rubio?”], *DW*, January 27, 2025, <https://p.dw.com/p/4pgiC>.

<sup>37</sup> Ryan L. Hass, “Designing a New Diplomatic Framework for Dealing with China,” Brookings Institution, Nov. 17, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ryan-L-Hass.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022); Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, “How Primed for War Is China?” *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 4, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/04/china-war-military-taiwan-us-asia-xi-escalation-crisis>; Matt Pottinger and Mike Gallagher, “No Substitute for Victory: America’s Competition with China Must Be Won, Not Managed,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/no-substitute-victory-pottinger-gallagher>.

Taipei, and facilitate Taiwan's own efforts to maximize its defense and maintain its morale.<sup>39</sup> In addition to reducing the possibility of a Sino–American war, these moves may also increase the incentives for both Taipei and Beijing to undertake actions that could reduce tensions across the Taiwan Strait and open the door to political talks over the long term.

Yet at what point, and in what manner, should the United States make the transition to a noninterventionist policy? There is no clear answer to the question of timing, as it will depend on the degree of prior acceptance of the policy shift among U.S. political leaders, allies, and partners as well as Beijing's restraint. Indeed, the resistance to such a shift will be considerable, including strong political opposition by members of Congress and defense analysts and strategists. To mitigate such resistance, the transition proposed herein should not involve a public declaration of nonintervention at an early stage. Initially, the transition process should focus on bolstering the self-defense capabilities and confidence of Taiwan and nearby U.S. allies, particularly Japan. This would help these countries ensure their own security, strengthen their role in resisting and avoiding a war over Taiwan, and enhance their ability to moderate Sino–American rivalry. The early process should also focus on developing the range of nonmilitary deterrence and reassurance actions toward Beijing that were outlined previously. Washington should refrain from explicitly rejecting direct U.S. military intervention in support of Taiwan until these actions are completed.<sup>40</sup>

One major task centers on Japan. A number of Japanese defense analysts and political leaders are taking a harder line toward China, with some arguing in support of more

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<sup>39</sup> Possible reckless actions would include an attempt by Beijing to seize Taiwan by force or an attempt by Taipei to acquire nuclear weapons.

<sup>40</sup> This paragraph is largely drawn from Swaine, "Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest," 179–80. Sources supporting it include: Drew Thompson, "Whole-of-Society Resilience: A New Deterrence Concept in Taipei," Brookings Institution, Dec. 6, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/whole-of-society-resilience-a-new-deterrence-concept-in-taipei/>; Yimou Lee and Ben Blanchard, "Taiwan Defence Spend to Outpace GDP Growth as China Threat Rises," Reuters, Aug. 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-defence-spend-outpace-gdp-growth-china-threat-rise-s-2024-08-22/>; Odell et al., "Active Denial."

explicitly connecting the defense of Taiwan to Japanese security while also calling for deeper Japanese military support to the United States beyond the defense of the home islands.<sup>41</sup> Others have argued that Taiwan must be kept separate from China.<sup>42</sup> Such views, if they become official Japanese policy, or are at least held by a succession of Japanese leaders, could severely undermine U.S. support for a noninterventionist policy toward Taiwan. Any transition to a noninterventionist policy must lower the influence of these hawkish views within Japan. The best way to do this is to convince the Japanese that this shift would considerably reduce the danger of a cross-strait conflict and that current policy trends in the United States and Japan, rather than deterring China, are actually making the possibility of military conflict over Taiwan more likely. The United States should also encourage and support those in Japan who seek to ease tensions with China and cultivate a more cooperative Sino–Japanese relationship. The preparatory steps of reassurance and deterrence recommended above should advance this effort.

It is impossible to estimate how long it will take to complete the necessary preparations to facilitate, at minimum cost or risk, the transition to an explicit noninterventionist policy. The undertaking will require strong and committed political leadership, sophisticated diplomacy, and highly credible statements and actions by the United

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<sup>41</sup> 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>; Isobe Koichi, “Japan’s Perspective on Command and Control Issues in the Japan–U.S. Alliance,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 22, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/japans-perspective-command-and-control-issues-japan-us-alliance>; Ayako Nakada, “[台湾有事は日本の存立危機事態] 麻生氏 米国で抑止力強化訴え” [“‘A Taiwan crisis would threaten Japan’s existence,’ says [Finance Minister Taro] Aso, calling for stronger deterrence from the United States”], *Asahi*, Jan. 11, 2024, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASS1C56K6S1CUTFK004.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Mochizuki, “Tokyo’s Taiwan Conundrum.” See also John Grady, “Taiwan Sovereignty Key to Western Pacific Security, Says Japanese Defense Official,” *USNI News*, June 28, 2021, updated Nov. 22, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/28/taiwan-sovereignty-key-to-western-pacific-security-says-japanese-defense-official>; Hiroshi Sugiyama, “中国が目論む「台湾統一の次は日本のフィンランド化」、台湾有事の地政学から考える日本のエネルギー戦略” [“China’s plan to ‘unify Taiwan and then turn Japan into Finland’: Japan’s energy strategy in light of the geopolitics of a Taiwan emergency”], *JB Press*, April 13, 2024, <https://jbpress.ismedia.jp/articles/-/80434>; Jagannath Panda, “台湾をめぐる日本とクアッドの将来” [“Taiwan in Tokyo’s Growing Security Outlook”], Japan Forum for Strategic Studies, 2021, <https://jfss.gr.jp/article/1438>.



States with support from U.S. allies. Inadequate preparation could prove costly, resulting in a reckless transition that could damage U.S. credibility and America's moral standing. But the failure to transition successfully to a noninterventionist policy, or a decision to simply continue the existing policy of strategic ambiguity indefinitely, will almost certainly run far greater risks and likely produce far greater damage over time.

## Can this begin under Trump?

Unfortunately, the second Trump administration has shown little evidence that it is capable of implementing the challenging preparations necessary for the transition to a noninterventionist Taiwan policy. The transition will require consistent, delicate, and nuanced U.S. diplomatic and military engagement to reassure regional allies, deter China without provoking it, and mediate between Beijing and Taipei. Nevertheless, the Trump administration's regional approach so far has been inconsistent and lacked coherence. For example, Washington has undertaken a variety of actions that risk alienating regional allies and undermining U.S. credibility. The use of coercive tariffs to threaten allies to execute unrealistic increases in defense spending or pressures to clarify their stance on a potential Taiwan conflict have been particularly problematic.<sup>43</sup> Although regional deterrence efforts and security cooperation between the United

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<sup>43</sup> Josh Smith and John Geddie, "Trump Includes U.S. Troop Costs in Tariff Talks with Asian Allies," Reuters, April 17, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-includes-us-troop-costs-tariff-talks-with-asian-allies-2025-04-17/>; David J. Lynch and Hannah Natanson, "Trump Expands Use of Tariffs to Reach National Security Goals," *Washington Post*, Aug. 9, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/08/09/trump-trade-policy-national-security/>; Maria Siow, "'Tactical Move': Why Japan Pulled Plug on U.S. Security Talks amid Defence Spending Row," *South China Morning Post*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3315653/tactical-move-why-japan-pulled-plug-us-security-talks-amid-defence-spending-row>; Demetri Sevastopulo, "U.S. Demands to Know What Allies Would Do in Event of War over Taiwan," *Financial Times*, July 13, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/41e272e4-5b25-47ee-807c-2b57c1316fe4>.

States and its allies have largely remained in place, the image of an unpredictable and potentially unreliable Washington is nonetheless growing.<sup>44</sup>

It is possible that the Trump administration might reverse these trends and eventually lay the groundwork necessary for the transition to a noninterventionist policy. At least one fairly senior member of the administration has expressed the view that Taiwan is not a vital U.S. interest worth risking a major war with China.<sup>45</sup> Initiating such a process over the next three years, rather than waiting for the next administration to take office, would certainly advance U.S. interests *if* undertaken competently. If the administration is unable to provide direction to its Indo–Pacific policy, however, any transition to a noninterventionist policy toward Taiwan, if it occurs, will have to wait until a new administration takes office.

## Core features of the transition

Once these preparations have been completed, the U.S. president should deliver a major speech to mark the transition to a noninterventionist Taiwan policy. Above all, the speech should stress the importance of a peaceful and prosperous Taiwan for American, Chinese, and Asian interests, and the extremely high costs and risks involved in a war between China and the United States over the island. The president should emphasize the importance of reducing the likelihood of such a destructive conflict by matching credible deterrence efforts with equally credible reassurance efforts directed at China, Taiwan, and nearby U.S. allies. In addition, the president should explain that America’s strong interest in peace across the Taiwan Strait should not be defended through a commitment to employ U.S. forces in direct combat with Chinese forces, given the limited nature of U.S. interests in the island. Instead, the president should

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<sup>44</sup> Derek Grossman, “Trump’s Volatility Is Pushing Asia toward Beijing,” *Foreign Policy*, April 30, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/04/30/trump-china-us-allies-geopolitics-tariffs-trade-war-security-alliance>.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Anton, “Why It’s Clearly Not in America’s Interest to Go to War over Taiwan,” *The Federalist*, Dec. 20, 2021, <https://thefederalist.com/2021/12/20/why-its-clearly-not-in-americas-interest-to-go-to-war-over-taiwan>.

make it clear that the United States will enhance every other means of deterrence and reassurance possible to prevent such a conflict, including the major retaliations against Beijing, all described above. The president should express a strong expectation that Beijing will respond to Washington's policy shift by greatly reducing its military activities around Taiwan and developing a more attractive set of policies to encourage a basic improvement in cross-strait relations.

Finally, the president's speech should ideally be coordinated to align with a similar public message from the Japanese prime minister, demonstrating Tokyo's support for a noninterventionist approach to preserving peace across the Taiwan Strait.

## **Preventing dangerous reactions by China and Taiwan**

It is difficult to predict with certainty how Beijing would react to Washington shifting toward a policy of nonintervention. Those who warn of a Chinese attack or major coercive action against Taiwan fail to adequately consider the costs and risks for Beijing of taking such an action, even in the absence of possible U.S. military intervention.

Many analysts believe the Chinese leadership has a strong interest in avoiding a conflict of any kind over the Taiwan issue and over any conceivable time frame.<sup>46</sup> Any level of serious conflict over Taiwan (including a bilateral clash between Taipei and Beijing) would almost certainly wreak havoc on the global economy and severely disrupt China's global economic relations as well as its relations with the West and nearby Asian

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<sup>46</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, "Is China's Military Ready for War?" *Foreign Affairs*, July 18, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-military-ready-war-xi-jinping-taylor-fravel>; Denny Roy, "Why China Remains Unlikely to Invade Taiwan," Lowy Institute, April 17, 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-china-remains-unlikely-invade-taiwan>; Ryan Hass and Jude Blanchette, "The Right Way to Deter China from Attacking Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 8, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/right-way-deter-china-attacking-taiwan>; Jessica Chen Weiss, "The China Trap: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Perilous Logic of Zero-Sum Competition," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition>; "Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait," International Crisis Group, Oct. 27, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/taiwan-strait-china/333-preventing-war-taiwan-strait>.

nations. Indeed, if the deterrence measures described in this brief are fully implemented, Beijing would likely suffer from severe political, economic, and diplomatic blowback for many years. Any conflict would also critically damage Taiwan, killing many of China's Taiwanese "compatriots" while dealing an extensive blow to cross-strait political and economic relations. For China, therefore, the logic of not attacking Taiwan, *despite the shift in U.S. policy to nonintervention*, would remain strong.

More broadly, it is very possible that a U.S. policy shift, when coupled with efforts to improve Western relations with China and positive Chinese actions relating to Taiwan — e.g., substantially reducing saber-rattling around Taiwan and a search for an alternative to the "One Country, Two Systems" model — would create a positive environment conducive to improved cross-strait relations. A major source of conflict would have been removed from the region, producing greater latitude for cross-strait talks. Finally, Chinese restraint toward Taiwan would also be more likely given China's long-standing strategy in favor of a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue.<sup>47</sup> All this suggests that Beijing would be unlikely to respond to Washington's policy shift toward nonintervention by further intensifying coercion against Taipei or attacking the island.

The major obstacle to this scenario is the deep level of distrust between Taiwan and China. Despite U.S. assurances of support, the Taiwanese government and populace could nonetheless become extremely insecure and resist any improvement in cross-strait relations. This would be especially likely if Beijing did not reciprocate Washington's shift and failed to undertake similar reassurance actions. The role of Washington would prove pivotal in encouraging Beijing and Taipei to convey reassuring

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<sup>47</sup> PRC Taiwan Affairs Office, "White Paper: The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," Aug. 10, 2022, via the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States website at [http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202208/t20220810\\_10740168.htm](http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202208/t20220810_10740168.htm); Erik Green, "China's Continued Experimentation for Peaceful Reunification," International Institute for Strategic Studies, Sept. 16, 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/09/chinas-continued-experimentation-for-peaceful-reunification>; Yiyao Alex Fan and Bonnie S. Glaser, "Interpreting Xi Jinping's 'Two Systems Taiwan Plan': An Analysis of a Debate Among Chinese Experts," German Marshall Fund, Aug. 21, 2024, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/interpreting-xi-jinpings-two-systems-taiwan-plan>.

signals to one another. The U.S. objective would be to avoid a cross-strait stalemate that could lead to Chinese frustration and the application of highly coercive measures — or worse.

In an extreme scenario, Taiwan could become so panicked by the prospect of losing American military cover and an increasingly belligerent Chinese stance toward the island that it attempts to acquire nuclear weapons as a deterrent against a Chinese attack. Taipei has attempted to do so in the past but was persuaded or blocked by Washington. It would clearly be in the interest of the United States to block Taiwan from a similar attempt again. Beijing would likely use force to prevent any serious effort by Taipei to acquire nuclear weapons. In other words, Taiwan's attempt to "go nuclear" would itself likely generate a conflict.<sup>48</sup>

Preventing dangerous Chinese and Taiwanese reactions to a U.S. shift to nonintervention would pose a challenge to the United States and Japan. But it is a challenge well worth the effort, given the vast and growing dangers that a major crisis or conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan present, the limited nature of U.S. interests in Taiwan, and the strong incentives for all parties involved to avoid such an outcome. It is fundamentally in the interest of the United States to undertake the range of policy moves described in these two briefs to avoid an unjustified, cataclysmic war than to run the risk of such a conflict by maintaining existing U.S. policy or, worse yet, adopting an unambiguous defense commitment to Taiwan.

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<sup>48</sup> This paragraph is drawn from Swaine, "Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital U.S. Interest," 179–80. It builds off the following sources: David Albright and Corey Gay, "Taiwan: Nuclear Nightmare Averted," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 54, no. 1 (1998): 54–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.1998.11456811>; Cindy Sui, "The Man Who Helped Prevent a Nuclear Crisis," BBC, May 18, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39252502>. For recent discussions of Taiwan acquiring nuclear weapons, including support for such an action, see the "U.S. Defense of Taiwan" special issue of *Strategika*, no. 73 (July 2021), available at [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/issues/resources/strategika\\_webreadypdf\\_2\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/issues/resources/strategika_webreadypdf_2_compressed.pdf).



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**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).

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