

## Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 313: Let Taiwan Defend Itself

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### Executive Summary

During his trip to China, President Clinton changed U.S. policy on Taiwan in a subtle but significant way. Washington's position since 1972 had been that the United States did not challenge the assertion of Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait that there is one China and Taiwan is part of China. Clinton went much further, signaling U.S. hostility to the possibility of an independent Taiwan or even Taiwanese membership in international organizations.

Clinton thus took a major step toward the position advocated by those Americans who want Washington to mollify Beijing by such measures as terminating U.S. arms sales to the island. Yet the president also implied that the United States would intervene militarily to defend Taiwan from attack. That "accommodationist" approach combines the worst, most dangerous features of appeasement and firmness.

Nearly as dangerous is the policy of all-out support for Taiwan that many American conservatives suggest. A U.S. security guarantee to Taiwan would lack credibility and, given the emotional determination of mainland Chinese to pursue reunification, could easily entangle the United States in a war with a nuclear-armed great power. That is all the more likely because enthusiasm for formal independence is growing in Taiwan, and the United States would be pressured to back that bid.

The only solution is for the United States to allow increased arms sales to Taiwan, thus enabling the Taiwanese to build a self-sufficient defense and an effective deterrent to coercion by Beijing. At the same time, U.S. officials must make it clear that Taiwan is not a vital American interest and that under no circumstances will the United States intervene in a war between the island and the mainland.

### Introduction

An especially controversial aspect of President Clinton's June 1998 trip to China was his statement, following meetings with Chinese president Jiang Zemin, that "we don't support independence for Taiwan, or two Chinas, or one Taiwan, one China. And we don't believe that Taiwan should be a member in any organization for which statehood is a requirement." <sup>[1]</sup> Administration officials subsequently insisted that U.S. policy had not changed, but those assurances were greeted with widespread disbelief in both the United States and Taiwan. <sup>[2]</sup> That skepticism is understandable. Although Clinton stopped short of accepting Beijing's position that Taiwan is nothing more than a renegade province of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the opposition not only to Taiwanese independence but to Taiwan's hopes for lesser forms of international recognition confirmed a major change in Washington's position. <sup>[3]</sup>

Previous U.S. policy was encapsulated in the deliberately ambiguous language of the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué at the end of President Richard Nixon's historic journey to China: "The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves." [\[4\]](#)

Clinton's statement drew condemnation from the Senate GOP leadership and from sources as politically diverse as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*. [\[5\]](#) The *Post* argued that the president had significantly reduced Taiwan's bargaining power in any cross-strait negotiations and questioned the propriety of the United States' ruling out "independence or any other option the Taiwanese people might choose." [\[6\]](#) The *Journal* was more caustic, contending that Jiang "got his number one priority, Mr. Clinton carving the next slice of salami toward the Chinese goal of getting the U.S. to coerce Taiwan to join China, or alternatively, to stand aside while China invades." And Parris Chang, a member of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan and the head of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party's mission in the United States, bitterly accused Clinton of "selling out" Taiwan. [\[7\]](#)

Although concern about the president's comments is justified, such criticisms misidentify the primary danger arising from Washington's policy shift. The *Journal's* interpretation is certainly overstated; Clinton explicitly reiterated those portions of the Shanghai Communiqué and other U.S. policy statements that emphasize America's insistence that the Taiwan issue be settled peacefully. There is little evidence that Washington will pressure Taiwan to accept Beijing's rule, and the Taiwanese would ferociously resist such pressure in any case. [\[8\]](#) Nor is it likely that the United States would remain aloof if the PRC attacked Taiwan.

The real problem is that Clinton's policy has a built-in, extremely dangerous contradiction. His statements in Shanghai indicate that the United States now considers Taiwanese independence an illegitimate option. That is a far cry from merely acknowledging that most Taiwanese and mainland Chinese endorse the theoretical goal of "one China." The implications of that change in language go far beyond the escalation of U.S. opposition to Taipei's bid to join the United Nations and other international bodies.

More tangibly, Clinton's policy shift presages a reduction and eventual elimination of arms sales to Taiwan--as already suggested by several East Asia experts. [\[9\]](#) Indeed, there are persistent news reports in the East Asian press that Chinese leaders received "private pledges" by "senior U.S. officials" to cut or downgrade arms exports to Taiwan. [\[10\]](#) That is not a trivial matter, for a cutoff of arms sales could leave Taiwan highly vulnerable to PRC intimidation or outright military coercion within a decade.

The administration is not willing to follow its policy of accommodating Beijing to its logical conclusion, however, for that would require the United States to stand aside if the PRC did use military force. Instead, the president implies that the United States would not tolerate such action and would respond much as it did in early 1996 when China conducted provocative ballistic missile tests in the Taiwan Strait. At that time, Washington dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups to the area and privately warned Beijing against any escalation. There is evidence that the PRC and the United States may have come much closer to armed conflict than Congress or the American people realized at the time. [\[11\]](#)

In short, the administration has embarked on a course that combines the worst, most dangerous features of the competing policies of firmness and accommodation. Washington is committing itself to help isolate Taiwan politically and diplomatically and will come under mounting PRC pressure to help neuter the island militarily. Yet, if Beijing follows up on that advantageous situation and actually seeks to coerce Taiwan, the United States has indicated that it may (and probably will) shield Taiwan with American air and naval forces--at the risk of a disastrous U.S.-Chinese war.

Washington needs to adopt a course that is precisely the opposite of the one it is currently pursuing. The president should have informed Chinese leaders that it is not America's place to tell Taiwan whether or not to opt for independence. The United States should also refrain from making any commitment, either explicit or implicit, to

prohibit arms sales to Taiwan and should "clarify" (renounce) any previous statements that imply otherwise. At the same time, U.S. officials need to make it clear to both Beijing and Taipei that under no circumstances will the United States intervene in a PRC-Taiwanese war.

### **The Taiwan Problem and Its Dangers**

Beijing's missile tests and military exercises in the Taiwan Strait in early 1996 underscored the danger that the United States may someday be pressured to defend Taiwan, at considerable peril to the American people. The tensions of that crisis have receded, and Beijing and Taipei have powerful incentives to cooperate in the near term, submerging their differences and coordinating efforts to prevent the East Asian financial crisis from engulfing their economies. <sup>[12]</sup> Nevertheless, the long-term outlook remains ominous.

### **Taiwan as a "Hot-Button" Issue for the PRC**

Beijing insists that Taiwan is merely a renegade province of the PRC, and officials have consistently refused to renounce the use of force to achieve reunification. Renunciation is an option they will not entertain even in private, off-the-record discussions. That is true even when the concession is presented as part of a quid pro quo for the termination of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan--something Beijing wants very much. <sup>[13]</sup> Taiwan seems to be one of those emotional "hot-button" issues that galvanize mainland Chinese, including those who are less than passionate supporters of the government.

It is often difficult for Americans and other Westerners to comprehend the depth of the determination to get Taiwan to "return to the motherland." <sup>[14]</sup> But to many (probably most) Chinese, Taiwan is one of the remaining symbols of China's long period of weakness and dependence, which began in the early 19th century, and the resulting shabby treatment of China at the hands of various colonial powers. For the Chinese, the inheritors of an ancient and proud culture, that treatment was profoundly humiliating and opened deep emotional wounds that have yet to heal fully. It was during the period of weakness that Britain wrested Hong Kong from China's control; Japan seized Taiwan (and later Manchuria); czarist Russia amputated portions of Chinese territory; and France, Germany, and other countries established colonies or enclaves. The last of those enclaves, Portugal's Macao, is scheduled to return to Beijing's control in 1999. Taiwan will then be the principal piece of traditional Chinese territory that has yet to be recovered.

Most troubling, there are evidently elements in the leadership of the People's Liberation Army that want to threaten to or actually use force to resolve the Taiwan issue. The U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence concluded that the PRC's March 8 to March 28, 1996, naval exercises in the Taiwan Strait were the biggest to date in a series of rehearsals for a future invasion of Taiwan. <sup>[15]</sup> That is not to say that the Beijing leadership has decided on that course of action, but it is equally apparent that it is considered a viable option. Any one of a number of developments might put that strategy in motion: the emergence of a more hard-line PRC government, evidence that pro-independence sentiment on Taiwan was becoming dominant, or simply growing frustration on the mainland with the stalemate. If and when such a confrontation takes place, it would be wise for the United States not to be caught in the middle.

### **Taiwan's Drift toward Formal Independence**

Developments on Taiwan as well as the mainland make an eventual confrontation all too likely. Leaders of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, although officially endorsing the concept of one China, seek expanded international recognition of their government and exude the confidence that comes from Taiwan's substantial economic power and successful democratization. <sup>[16]</sup> It was President Lee Teng-hui's high-profile visit to the United States in the summer of 1995 that led to frosty relations between Washington and Beijing and caused the PRC to conduct missile tests and other military exercises. Lee's decisive reelection in March 1996, generally viewed as a response by Taiwanese voters to Beijing's attempt at intimidation, seemed to further embolden Taipei. More recently, ROC vice president Lien Chan has made unofficial but nonetheless real and prominent diplomatic trips to countries as diverse as Ukraine and Indonesia. Beijing, predictably, has responded to those journeys with shrill condemnation. Taipei's ongoing attempts to get membership in the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other prestigious international bodies also are consistent with the behavior of an independent country.

Moreover, public sentiment for an independent Taiwan is growing slowly but inexorably--especially among younger Taiwanese for whom the mainland is an alien and threatening place. A public opinion survey conducted by the mass-circulation *United Daily News* in July 1997 revealed that 43 percent of Taiwan's residents supported formal independence from China. <sup>[17]</sup> That figure was up from 34 percent in a January 1997 survey and 24 percent in a survey taken in February 1996. <sup>[18]</sup> Even more revealing, more than half of the respondents in the July poll regarded themselves as "Taiwanese," while only 30 percent viewed themselves as "Chinese."

Reflecting those trends are the growing popularity and influence of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, which scored impressive victories in local elections in 1997 and actually captured more votes nationwide than did the long-governing Kuomintang Party. A national government led by the DPP is no longer a fanciful prospect. The DPP has tried to assuage apprehension in the international community by stating that it would not provoke a crisis by issuing a Taiwanese declaration of independence should the party come to power. <sup>[19]</sup> DPP leaders promise instead to pursue independence in a cautious and orderly way through negotiations with Beijing. Nevertheless, the PRC would likely see the election of a DPP government as a powerful blow to any hope for China's reunification.

### **Irreconcilable Differences**

The divergent attitudinal trends on the mainland and Taiwan leave little room for compromise. Given the intensity of the emotions on both sides, it is uncertain how long the modus vivendi that has existed since the 1970s can endure. Both Beijing and Taipei seem increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo built around Taiwan's acceptance of political and diplomatic limbo. They also have sharply conflicting prescriptions for resolving the impasse. Beijing advocates the formula of "one China, two systems," which would mean a status for Taiwan similar to that granted Hong Kong. Taipei categorically rejects that solution and counters with a proposal for "one China, two states." <sup>[20]</sup> The model preferred by ROC leaders is the two Germanys during the latter stages of the Cold War--an option that is anathema to Beijing.

### **The PRC-Taiwan Military Balance**

U.S. policymakers who assume that the creative ambiguity of the last two decades can persist indefinitely may be in for a rude awakening. The nightmare that U.S. leaders studiously avoid addressing is what happens if Beijing sees the need--or perhaps an opportunity--to use force to resolve the Taiwan issue on the PRC's terms.

Military factors are at least as important as political and economic factors in determining the eventual scenario. Taiwanese capabilities are not insignificant. For example, Taipei's air force will have 150 U.S.-made F-16s, 60 French Mirage 2000-5s jets, and 130 locally developed Indigenous Defence Fighters by the year 2000. <sup>[21]</sup> But the military balance between the PRC and Taiwan is then likely to shift toward the former unless there is a further Taiwanese buildup. <sup>[22]</sup> Furthermore, although Beijing does not currently have the airlift and sealift capacity to launch a successful invasion, and probably will not have such capacity for another decade, it might already possess sufficient air and naval power to blockade and bombard Taiwan--unless the U.S. Seventh Fleet intervened. <sup>[23]</sup> American intervention, however, would risk a clash between two nuclear-armed great powers.

Taiwan's de facto security dependence on the United States is dangerous for all concerned. The long-standing U.S. policy of "strategic ambiguity" (that the United States would regard an attack on Taiwan as an extremely serious breach of the peace and might defend the island, depending on the circumstances) was excessively risky even before Clinton muddied the waters further by his comments in Shanghai. Unfortunately, the most prominent suggestions for clarifying U.S. policy would make matters worse.

### **Competing Bankrupt U.S. Policy Options**

Thus far, the debate about a new policy on the Taiwan issue has been dominated by two factions. Members of the first group believe that it is crucial for long-term U.S. interests in East Asia that Washington go to considerable lengths to accommodate Beijing's wishes. Such "accommodationists" are the most outspoken advocates not only of "engaging" China but of developing an extensive U.S.-PRC "strategic partnership." Although they shrink from openly consigning

Taiwan to the PRC's tender mercies, the policies they advocate point ultimately to that outcome. The accommodationist view is now clearly making inroads at the highest levels of the Clinton administration.

The rival faction, centered in the conservative wing of the Republican Party, wants the United States to intensify, not reduce, its support for Taiwan. Members of that group express great admiration for Taipei's economic success, democratic reforms, and long-standing anti-communist credentials, and they increasingly accuse the administration of appeasing Beijing. The pro-Taiwan faction generally favors an explicit U.S. guarantee to defend the island if the PRC resorts to force, and some members openly urge Taiwan to declare independence and seek U.S. diplomatic recognition.

The course suggested by either faction could cause major problems for the United States.

### **The Blundering Accommodationist Approach**

Perhaps the most vocal and visible member of the accommodationist faction is former assistant secretary of defense Joseph Nye. In a crucial March 1998 article in the *Washington Post*, Nye argued that it was imperative for the United States to move away from the "calculatingly ambiguous" language of the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué and the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). "If we leave these ambiguities in place," Nye warned, "we may court disaster." [\[24\]](#) He then proposed a three-part policy bargain.

The first part would involve a U.S. statement "that if Taiwan were to declare independence, we would not recognize or defend it. Moreover, we would work hard to discourage other countries from recognizing Taiwan independence." At the same time, Washington would have to stress "that we would not accept the use of force [by Beijing], since nothing would change as a result of any abortive declaration of independence by Taiwan."

The second part would involve a concession by the PRC. If Taiwan decisively rejected the idea of declaring independence, Beijing would agree "not to oppose the idea of more international living space for Taiwan." That would include more opportunities for Taiwan to expand its participation in international groups beyond its current involvement in the Olympics and the Asia Pacific Economic Forum. The Taiwanese would have other venues in which they "could express themselves"--as long as they acknowledged that Taiwan was part of one China. As a supposed sweetener, Nye speculated that Beijing could also indicate that its one country, two systems approach to Hong Kong "could be broadened to 'one county, three systems,' so as to make clear that Taiwan would continue to enjoy its own political, economic, and social systems."

Finally, the third part would require Taipei "to explicitly express its decision to forswear any steps toward independence" and instead intensify the cross-straits dialogue--presumably with the ultimate purpose of reunification.

Rarely does a policy expert manage to make a proposal that is dreadful in almost every respect. Nye's version of strategic clarity attains that dubious status. His blueprint does nothing to reduce the principal danger inherent in the policy of strategic ambiguity. Indeed, it increases that danger. Strategic ambiguity holds out the possibility that the United States would intervene if Beijing resorted to force; the Nye plan makes it explicit that the United States would do so. Moreover, under the policy pursued by Washington before the recent Clinton innovations, the United States did not prejudice Taiwan's future status. Nye's proposal does, with a vengeance; it places Washington squarely in Beijing's camp on that issue. The question that Nye does not address is, If the United States goes to such lengths to accommodate Beijing on the Taiwan issue, why would PRC leaders then believe the United States would go to war to defend Taiwan under even a narrow set of circumstances? The accommodationist approach virtually invites the kind of miscalculation that often leads to a major war.

Nye's plan (and similar accommodationist suggestions) is also troubling on moral grounds. Nye concedes that "critics might reject this proposal as amoral, since it ignores Taiwan's alleged right to 'self-determination.'" He responds that "self-determination is neither a clear legal principle nor an overriding moral claim" and that it "has often led to disaster."

Both points have some validity. But it is one thing to say that if Taiwan wants to declare independence, it must do so at its own risk and not expect U.S. assistance; it is quite another for Washington to place itself firmly against Taiwanese independence--and especially to pressure other countries to refuse to recognize an independent Taiwan. It is

also inappropriate for the United States to pressure the Taiwanese government to forswear independence. Such meddling is objectionable on general principles, but it is especially objectionable when the target is another democracy. In a democratic political system, current officeholders cannot bind future officeholders. Policies are subject to change whenever the citizens elect a new majority. Nye and other accommodationists seem to regard a democratic Taiwan as an inconvenient obstacle to a grand bargain involving the present leaders in Washington, Beijing, and Taipei, but the basic principles of democracy cannot be disregarded.

In short, the accommodationist approach, epitomized by Nye's proposal, is fatally flawed on both strategic and moral grounds.

### **The Reckless Hawkish Alternative**

The principal competing policy proposal is nearly as bad. House Speaker Newt Gingrich and many of the ROC's other "friends" in the United States propose a strategy that would include an explicit pledge to protect Taiwan and have the United States at least flirt with actively encouraging a Taiwanese declaration of independence. During a 1997 trip to China, Gingrich told PRC officials, "We want you to understand that we will defend Taiwan. Period." [\[25\]](#) The Speaker is not the only prominent American to make such statements. Former central intelligence agency director R. James Woolsey stated that a PRC attack on Taiwan would be comparable to Iraq's invasion of a neighboring Arab state or a North Korean invasion of South Korea, and the United States should respond accordingly. [\[26\]](#) Peter W. Rodman, former director of the State Department's policy planning staff and now director of national security programs at the Nixon Center, was only a shade less categorical. Criticizing the administration's alleged commitment to a policy of strategic ambiguity, Rodman stated bluntly, "China needs to understand that the United States is likely to be drawn into any new Taiwan conflict no matter how it originates." [\[27\]](#)

Except for Rodman, the pro-Taiwan hawks tend to be exceedingly casual about the implications of trying to deter Beijing from using threats or coercion. Their approach is dangerously close to a deterrence strategy based on bluff and bluster. The hawks had better realize that if the United States promises to defend Taiwan, there is a good possibility that U.S. forces will someday be called upon to fulfill that promise. If Gingrich and his cohorts are not serious about paying the price in blood and treasure to actually carry out such a commitment, they should not advocate making the commitment in the first place.

Several proponents of a U.S. security shield for Taiwan argue that the TRA (passed by Congress when the Carter administration switched U.S. diplomatic relations from the ROC to the PRC) already contains an implied U.S. defense commitment. [\[28\]](#) That is an exceedingly strained interpretation. The TRA merely asserts that "efforts to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, would be a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States." [\[29\]](#) It further directs the chief executive to "inform the Congress promptly of any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people of Taiwan and any danger to the interests of the United States arising therefrom. The President and the Congress shall determine, in accordance with constitutional processes, appropriate action by the United States in response to any such danger." [\[30\]](#)

Such vague provisions are a far cry from a defense obligation, even an implied one. Moreover, the TRA replaced the mutual defense treaty that the United States had concluded with Taipei in 1954, at a time when Washington considered the ROC the sole legitimate government of China. The language of the mutual defense treaty is strikingly different from that of the TRA. In the former document, the United States and the ROC declared "publicly and formally their sense of unity and their common determination to defend themselves against external armed attack, so that no potential aggressor could be under the illusion that either of them stands alone in the West Pacific area." [\[31\]](#) To achieve the objectives of the treaty, the parties "separately and jointly by self-help and mutual aid will maintain their individual and collective capacity to resist attack and communist subversive activities directed from without against their territorial integrity and political stability." [\[32\]](#) Moreover, the treaty was not merely a paper promise of defense cooperation. Another provision outlined the tangible military expression of that cooperation: "The Government of the Republic of China grants, and the Government of the United States of America accepts, the right to dispose such

United States land, air and sea forces in and about Taiwan and the Pescadores as may be required for their defense." [\[33\]](#)

If Congress had intended to incorporate the provisions of the mutual defense treaty into the TRA, it could have done so. Instead, it chose to use far more diluted, ambiguous, and conditional language. Although deserving high marks for creativity in their attempt at historical revisionism, the pro-Taiwan hawks are not preserving an existing obligation under the TRA; they are proposing a new and dangerous obligation.

### **The Third Way: Enabling Taiwan to Defend Itself**

Instead of trying to defend Taiwan, whether as part of a consistently pro-Taiwan policy or as a fall-back measure if the attempt to accommodate Beijing fails, Washington should reduce America's risk exposure by making it clear that the United States would not intervene in a PRC-Taiwanese struggle. The only politically feasible way of doing that, however, would be for Washington to liberalize its arms export policy and allow Taiwan to buy the weapons it needs to become and remain militarily self-sufficient. [\[34\]](#)

### **Liberalize Arms Sales--And Accept the Diplomatic Fallout**

There is no question that such an initiative would cause serious friction in U.S.-PRC relations. Chinese officials frequently point to U.S. statements in the August 17, 1982, communiqué, which followed the summit meeting between Ronald Reagan and PRC premier Zhao Ziyang, that indicate that the United States would gradually curtail arms exports to Taiwan. Those officials further charge that the United States is already guilty of bad faith for approving additional arms exports in the 1990s--especially George Bush's authorization of F-16 fighter sales in the autumn of 1992, just before the U.S. presidential election. [\[35\]](#) The pertinent passage in the 1982 communiqué does support the PRC's contention that Washington has reneged on a promise:

[T]he United States Government states that it does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or quantitative terms the level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, and that it intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution. [\[36\]](#)

Although the passage directly follows comments noting Beijing's statement of intent to pursue a "peaceful resolution" to the Taiwan issue and therefore must be viewed in that context, there is still an apparent contradiction between the language of the 1982 communiqué and the provision in the TRA pledging the United States to "provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character." [\[37\]](#) U.S. officials have consistently told Beijing, however, that the TRA is U.S. law, whereas the 1982 communiqué is merely a statement of policy on the part of the incumbent president--in that instance, Ronald Reagan. When such a conflict exists, U.S. law, not a presidential statement, prevails.

Moreover, both U.S. and PRC leaders need to recognize that the alternative to Taiwan's military self-reliance will be growing public and congressional pressure to have the United States shield the island from attack. Beijing would undoubtedly prefer the termination of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan combined with a nonintervention pledge. That option, though, is a nonstarter, given the realities of domestic American politics.

### **The Limits of Deterrence**

Although a decision to increase arms sales to Taiwan has a serious downside, given Beijing's probable reaction, a U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan is far more dangerous. It would have dubious credibility and virtually invite a challenge.

Lessons drawn from America's Cold-War experience with the Soviet Union may lead U.S. policymakers (and bombastic members of Congress) to make overly optimistic assumptions about the outcome of a confrontation with the PRC over Taiwan. [\[38\]](#) The credibility of a promise to defend an ally or client from a nuclear-armed adversary does not depend merely on the balance of forces--although that factor is certainly important. An equally crucial

consideration is the relative importance of the issue at stake to the guarantor power and to the challenging power--what might be termed the "balance of fervor."

The Kremlin considered it reasonably credible that the United States would risk nuclear war to keep such strategically and economically important prizes as Western Europe and Northeast Asia out of the orbit of a totalitarian superpower rival. A threat to incur the same grave risk merely to keep the PRC from absorbing Taiwan--a political entity the United States does not even officially recognize--is less credible. In December 1995 Lt. Gen. Xiong Guangkai, deputy chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army, bluntly told a prominent American visitor (former ambassador Chas. W. Freeman Jr.) that Beijing would not be intimidated by U.S. threats of intervention, because in the end American leaders "care a lot more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan." [\[39\]](#)

Beijing is backing up its tough talk with tangible military actions. The goal of the PRC's ongoing air and naval modernization program appears to be to gain an edge over U.S. forces in the East Asian regional theater. [\[40\]](#) Since the United States could not credibly threaten to breach the nuclear threshold (as Washington did during the confrontations in the Taiwan Strait in the mid and late 1950s), Beijing's implicit scenario is that Washington would have to back down, either before fighting erupted or after losing the initial engagements.

That is not a bad strategy, given the distance of the western Pacific theater from America's primary centers of military power. Rodman (despite advocating for East Asia a status quo U.S. security policy under which America incurs grave risks on behalf of "friends" and clients) provides a sobering picture of the problem facing the United States. "Having the capability to blow the entire U.S. Navy out of the Pacific is not the standard that the Chinese military must meet; rather, it is to raise the costs and risks to the United States of coming to the aid of [U.S.] allies and friends." [\[41\]](#) Over the long term, not only is the balance of fervor in a U.S.-PRC confrontation over Taiwan likely to be against the United States; the regional balance of forces may be as well.

ROC officials also seem uncertain about the willingness of the United States to risk war with Beijing to defend Taiwan. They understand that there is no treaty commitment from the United States, and they place limited confidence in the vague provisions of the TRA. Perhaps even more important, there are no American troops stationed on Taiwan to guarantee U.S. entanglement in a conflict that might erupt--in marked contrast to the situation in such places as Japan and South Korea. Although President Lee asserted that, should Beijing's forces attack, the United States was "bound" under the provisions of the TRA to provide weapons, he conceded that "supplying troops would be a decision for the United States." [\[42\]](#) As the June 1998 Clinton-Jiang summit approached, officials in Taipei also showed signs of extreme apprehension that the two leaders would cut a deal that would undermine the island's security. [\[43\]](#)

Taiwanese leaders are beginning to realize that only strong indigenous military forces can provide a reliable deterrent. Last year the ROC air force commissioned its first air wing of domestically built fighters. The Free China Journal admitted candidly that the project "was aimed at circumventing difficulties in procuring advanced arms from abroad, especially the United States." [\[44\]](#) Parris Chang urges his country to develop a similar program to build submarines, "with the transfer of technology from abroad." [\[45\]](#) That trend may ultimately moot the issue of American arms sales to Taiwan and the resulting tensions in U.S.-PRC relations. But it is also true that Taiwan is many years away from being capable of producing domestically all of the weapons systems that it may need for defense.

### **Toward a Self-Sufficient Defense for Taiwan**

A promise to risk the lives of millions of Americans to defend Taiwan is a promise that rational Americans should never want their government to fulfill. The American people understandably admire the economic and political progress that Taiwan has made, and they have no wish to see the island forcibly absorbed into a still highly authoritarian PRC. Taiwan is also of some economic importance to the United States, since it is America's eighth largest trading partner. [\[46\]](#) Nevertheless, Taiwan's political autonomy (or independence) falls far short of being the kind of vital interest for which the United States must be prepared to wage a major war. Even some hawks concede that, intrinsically, Taiwan is not a vital interest, but they contend that failure to defend the island against a PRC attack would destroy Washington's credibility throughout East Asia. Ross Munro, director of Asian studies at the Center for Security Studies, among others, argues that "if China succeeds in taking military control of Taiwan it would gain



control of Asia's vital sea lanes and the entire balance of power in Asia would shift overwhelmingly in China's favor." [\[47\]](#)

Munro's thesis exaggerates the extent of the sea-lane control Beijing would gain, but even if true, that is an argument for Japan, South Korea, Australia, and other East Asian powers to protect Taiwan. After all, the sea-lanes are in their region, not ours. If a hostile power threatened the sea-lanes in the Gulf of Mexico, no one would expect Tokyo, Seoul, and Canberra to defend them while the United States remained on the sidelines. [\[48\]](#) There is simply no adequate strategic reason for the United States to risk war to defend Taiwan.

A better option is to let Taiwan buy the weapons it needs for its own defense. It should be noted that Taiwan is not asking the United States to give the weapons as a form of foreign aid; Taipei is willing to pay top dollar for the various systems. Washington has been responsive to some requests; earlier this decade it approved sales of F-16 fighters, helicopters, and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, for example. More recently, the Clinton administration agreed to sell several Knox-class Navy frigates along with rapid-fire Phalanx anti-aircraft guns and Harpoon anti-ship missiles--a deal valued at \$300 million. [\[49\]](#) However, U.S. officials have thus far declined to approve sales of other crucial items, including the sophisticated AIM-120 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile and advanced versions of the air-to-surface Maverick missile. [\[50\]](#) Given the Clinton administration's increasingly evident policy tilt toward Beijing, it is now even less likely that Washington will authorize such exports.

Prospects have also dimmed for two other ROC objectives. The Taiwanese also want to buy attack submarines and develop, with U.S. assistance, an anti-ballistic-missile system, but Washington has thus far rebuffed both requests. Submarines are especially important to Taiwanese military planners because, unless the ROC has at least a modest fleet of subs, Beijing's navy could someday dominate the Taiwan Strait.

A more responsive U.S. policy on such arms purchase requests from Taiwan would maximize the chances that Beijing would use only peaceful measures in its campaign to achieve reunification. Conversely, a militarily inferior Taiwan might tempt PRC leaders to consider using force and thereby precipitate an East Asian crisis. University of Pennsylvania political scientist Avery Goldstein emphasizes the importance of a military balance of power across the Taiwan Strait: "The point is not that Taiwan would easily be able to defeat an increasingly modern PLA assault. The point instead is that Taiwan's sustained military modernization will make it very costly for the PLA to prevail, even if others (most important the United States) choose not to intervene." [\[51\]](#) That is the essence of a "porcupine" strategy--raising the probable costs to a would-be conqueror so high that no rational policymaker would contemplate launching a military strike.

That is Taiwan's best hope for eluding conquest or intimidation and America's best hope for escaping the nightmare of being called on to defend Taiwan against a PRC attack. A strategy based on Washington's willingness to help Taiwan become militarily self-sufficient offers the only realistic prospect of avoiding the Scylla looming as a result of the Clinton administration's policy of ambivalent appeasement or the Charybdis created by American warhawks who want to give an explicit pledge to shield Taiwan with U.S. military forces.

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## Notes

1. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President and First Lady in Discussion on Shaping China for the 21st Century," Shanghai Library, Shanghai, People's Republic of China, June 30, 1998, p. 12.

2. "Top U.S. Liaison Tells Taiwan, Yes, Commitments Stand Despite 'Noes,'" *Washington Times*, July 6, 1998, p. A1; and Philip Shenon, "No Policy Turn, U.S. Assures Taiwan Again," *New York Times*, July 7, 1998, p. A9.

3. Clinton is technically correct that his Shanghai comments were not a radical departure from the position adopted earlier by the administration. After the October 1997 summit meeting between Clinton and Jiang in the United States, State Department spokesman James Rubin read a statement containing language similar to that later used by Clinton in Shanghai. Rubin's remarks, however, did not have the same force--and certainly did not receive the same attention--as a presidential statement. Nevertheless, it may be more accurate to say that the dramatic shift in U.S. official views on

Taiwan began in October 1997 rather than June 1998. Barton Gellman, "Reappraisal Led to New China Policy," *Washington Post*, June 22, 1998, p. A1.

4. Joint U.S.-China Communiqué, Shanghai, February 27, 1972, <http://ait.org.tw/Shanghai.html>.

5. Helen Dewar, "Lott Faults Clinton on Taiwan," *Washington Post*, July 8, 1998, p. A24; Mary Ann Akers, "Clinton Taken to Task on Taiwan," *Washington Times*, July 8, 1998, p. A1; "Bill's Kowtow," editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 1998, p. A22; and "Siding with the Dictators," editorial, *Washington Post*, July 2, 1998, p. A20.

6. The *Post's* prediction that Clinton's remarks would undermine Taiwan's bargaining power appears to have been correct. Barely a week later, Beijing expressed confidence that the "Taiwan authorities will get a clear understanding of the situation" and urged Taipei to "face reality." Lest anyone miss the nature of that new reality, the official *China Daily* quoted a high-level PRC official as saying that Clinton's comments had "provided favorable conditions" for a resolution of the Taiwan issue. Quoted in John Pomfret, "China Tells Taiwan to 'Face Reality,'" *Washington Post*, July 10, 1998, p. A28.

7. Parris Chang, "Clinton Sold Out Taiwan's Future," *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 1998, p. A16.

8. See the blunt comments of Premier Vincent Siew of the Republic of China that the PRC and the United States are not entitled to negotiate issues involving Taiwan's political status. Virginia Sheng, "ROC Emphasizes Its Sovereignty in Wake of Summit," *Free China Review*, July 3, 1998, p. 1.

9. For example, a report by a study group sponsored by the Economic Strategy Institute included the recommendation that Washington fully implement the 1982 U.S.-PRC communiqué "under which the United States pledged to phase out gradually its arms sales to Taiwan." *Asia after the "Miracle": Redefining U.S. Economic and Security Priorities*, Report of a study group of the Economic Strategy Institute, Selig S. Harrison and Clyde V. Prestowitz Jr., cochairmen (Washington: Economic Strategy Institute, 1998), p. 70. The study group's overall policy recommendation on Taiwan was endorsed by 27 prominent experts on East Asia.

10. See, for example, Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "Taiwan Highlight of 'Successful' Summit," *South China Morning Post*, July 8, 1998.

11. Barton Gellman, "U.S. and China Nearly Came to Blows in 1996," *Washington Post*, June 21, 1998, p. A1.

12. Indications of the easing of tensions, at least in the short term, include the agreement to reestablish direct shipping links between the mainland and Taiwan and the resumption of a cross-straits political dialogue. Nevertheless, any rapprochement has been tentative, ambivalent, and frequently marked by setbacks. For discussions of recent trends in the complex interactions between Taiwan and the PRC, see Laura Tyson and John Ridding, "China in Taiwan Strait Accord," *Financial Times*, January 23, 1997, p. 1; Gus Constantine, "Taiwan Reaches Out to China, Asks for End to Bad Blood," *Washington Times*, August 26, 1997, p. A9; "Beijing Official Sets Taipei Visit, Signaling Thaw," *Washington Times*, January 5, 1998, p. A7; "China Makes Overture to Taiwan for Talks on Ties," *Washington Times*, January 21, 1998, p. A12; Leslie Chang, "Taiwanese Money Is Drawn to Mainland," *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 1998, p. A17; Welling Liu, "Peking Urged to Help Ease Financial Crunch," *Free China Journal*, April 10, 1998, p. 1; Bernard Joei, "Talk of Invasion by Peking a Revival of Familiar Tactics," *Free China Journal*, April 10, 1998, p. 6; Steven Mufson, "China, Taiwan Reopen Talks, Agree on High-Level Visit," *Washington Post*, April 24, 1998, p. A28; James Kynge, "China's Verbal Attack Takes Gloss off Taiwan Talks," *Financial Times*, April 24, 1998, p. 6; "Taiwan Businesspeople Detained on Mainland," *Free China Journal*, May 29, 1998, p. 1; and Sheng Lijun, "China Eyes Taiwan: Why Is a Breakthrough So Difficult?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 21, no. 1 (March 1998): 65-78.

13. Author's discussions with PRC officials, Beijing, June 11-13, 1997. See also the statements of Defense Minister Chi Haotian in "China Says It Will Use Force to Keep Taiwan," *Inside China Today*, December 11, 1996, <http://www.insidechina.com/china/news/96121106.html>; Foreign Ministry spokesman Shen Guofang in "U.S. Warned against Interference in Taiwan," *South China Morning Post*, April 1, 1997; and Reuters, "China Reaffirms Its Right to Use Force against Taiwan," *Inside China Today*, June 12, 1998,

[14.](#) That was also the phrase used universally to describe Britain's return of Hong Kong in 1997. Although such terminology was certainly part of the PRC regime's propaganda campaign on the issue, the pervasiveness and intensity of the enthusiasm on the part of the Chinese people seemed too great to be feigned. I was in Beijing and Shanghai in the weeks leading up to the turnover, and the celebratory atmosphere was comparable to that of the World Cup soccer frenzy in various countries.

[15.](#) Jim Wold, "China Practiced Taiwan Attack, U.S. Navy Says," *Washington Post*, November 12, 1996, p. A10.

[16.](#) Author's conversations with ROC officials, Taipei, July 29-August 2, 1996. Also see Ian Buruma, "Taiwan's New Nationalists," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (July-August 1996): 77-91; Keith B. Richburg, "Leader Asserts Taiwan Is 'Independent, Sovereign,'" *Washington Post*, November 8, 1997, p. A1; Gus Constantine, "Taiwan Envoy Clarifies Quote by Lee about 'Independence,'" *Washington Times*, November 11, 1997, p. A17; Keith B. Richburg, "Exploiting Asia's Crisis: Taiwan Buys Up Bargains and Widens Its Influence." *Washington Post*, January 22, 1998, p. A23; "Relations Recast: In Diplomatic Competition with Beijing, Economic Clout Keeps Taipei a Strong Player," editorial, *Free China Review*, March 1998, p. 3; Maysing H. Yang, ed., *Taiwan's Expanding Role in the International Arena* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1997); and Gary Klintworth, *New Taiwan, New China: Taiwan's Changing Role in the Asia-Pacific Region* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995).

[17.](#) Reuters, "Poll: Hong Kong Handover Swells Taiwan Independence Mood," *Inside China Today*, July 4, 1997.

[18.](#) "Independence Gains Support in Taiwan," *Inside China Today*, January 30, 1997, <http://www.insidechina.com/china/news/17.html>. Another survey indicated that 47 percent of respondents would favor an independent Taiwan, if it could coexist peacefully with the PRC. Only 29 percent were opposed to independence under those circumstances. Yet that same survey revealed that 54 percent of respondents would be willing to reunify with a democratic and prosperous China. Tun-jen Cheng, "Taiwan in 1996: From Euphoria to Melodrama," *Asian Survey*, January 1997, pp. 44-45.

[19.](#) An offshoot of the DPP, the Taiwan Independence Party, formed by discontented DPP hard-liners in October 1996, is even more militant. Although that party has yet to show significant electoral strength, its potential to siphon off votes is likely to keep the DPP from backsliding on the long-term goal of independence. Gus Constantine, "Emergence of New Party on Taiwan Emphasizes Island's Wayward Future," *Washington Times*, October 15, 1996, p. A11.

[20.](#) Not only is the Hong Kong model unacceptable to ROC leaders; opinion polls indicate that the people of Taiwan also overwhelmingly reject such a status. Only 6 percent were willing to endorse it, according to one survey conducted in February 1997. See Tun-jen Cheng and Yi-shing Liao, "Taiwan in 1997: An Embattled Government in Search of New Opportunities," *Asian Survey*, January 1998, p. 60.

[21.](#) "Military Expansion Cuts Odds of Taiwan Invasion," *South China Morning Post*, April 17, 1997.

[22.](#) For example, the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence estimates that China may possess more than twice as many modern combat aircraft by 2011. U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence, *Worldwide Challenges to Naval Strikeforce Warfare, 1997* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), p. 18. For a detailed assessment of the existing military balance in the Taiwan Strait, see Felix K. Chang, "Conventional War across the Taiwan Strait," *Orbis* 40, no. 4 (Fall 1996):577-607.

[23.](#) The new generation of PLA missiles has already made the ROC's heavily fortified islands of Quemoy (Kinmen) and Matsu (located just a few miles off the mainland) almost irrelevant militarily, since the missiles can overfly such positions and strike Taiwan directly. Barbara Opall, "PLA Missiles Diminish Value of Taiwan's Islands," *Defense News*, August 26-September 1, 1996, p. 8.

[24.](#) Joseph S. Nye Jr., "A Taiwan Deal," *Washington Post*, March 8, 1998.

[25.](#) Quoted in Steve Mufson, "Gingrich Tells China U.S. to Defend Taiwan," *Washington Post*, March 31, 1997, p. A17. See also Seth Faison, "Gingrich Warns China That U.S. Would Step In to Defend Taiwan," *New York Times*, March 31, 1997, p. A1. The previous year, Gingrich had gone even further, suggesting that the United States urge Taiwan to declare independence. Although he retreated from that statement (reportedly after sobering conversations

with former secretary of state Henry Kissinger), his comments received widespread attention in both Taiwan and the PRC.

[26.](#) "Woolsey: U.S. Should Protect 'Threatened' Taiwan," *Chung-Yang Jih-Pao* (Taipei), March 5, 1996, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report--East Asia*, March 7, 1996, document odnxgol014ahsd.

[27.](#) Peter W. Rodman, *Between Friendship and Rivalry: China and America in the 21st Century* (Washington: Nixon Center, June 1998), p. 73. Rodman's emphasis.

[28.](#) Examples of that argument include Richard D. Fisher Jr., "China Arms Require Better U.S. Military Ties with Taiwan," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder no. 1163, March 11, 1998, p. 1; Peter Brookes, "Remain Resolute on Taiwan," *Defense News*, April 20-26, 1998, p. 31; "Throwing Taiwan Over," editorial, *Investor's Business Daily*, July 6, 1998, p. A32; and "The Question of Taiwan," editorial, *Washington Times*, October 20, 1997, p. A18.

[29.](#) For a detailed discussion of the Taiwan Relations Act, see *Legislative History of the Taiwan Relations Act: An Analytic Compilation with Documents on Subsequent Developments*, ed. Lester L. Wolff and David L. Simon (Jamaica, N.Y.: American Association for Chinese Studies, 1982). The text of the act is on pp. 288-95, and the quoted passage is on p. 288.

[30.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 289.

[31.](#) "Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of China (Taiwan), Washington, December 3, 1954," in *The United States Treaty System*, ed. J. A. S. Grenville and Bernard Wasserstein (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 123.

[32.](#) *Ibid.*

[33.](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 123-24.

[34.](#) Doug Bandow, "Taiwan: Not Worth War but Well Worth Arming," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 2, 1996.

[35.](#) "China Warns U.S. to Stop Selling Arms to Taiwan," *Inside China Today*, December 12, 1996.

[36.](#) U.S.-PRC Joint Communiqué, August 17, 1982. <http://ait.org.tw/817.html>.

[37.](#) *Legislative History of the Taiwan Relations Act*, p. 288.

[38.](#) Ted Galen Carpenter, "Move beyond Cold War Theories," *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1996.

[39.](#) Quoted in Bill Gertz, "General Who Threatened L.A. Tours U.S. on Chinese Mission," *Washington Times*, December 18, 1996, p. A6.

[40.](#) For a discussion of Beijing's military modernization program and the PRC's apparent foreign policy agenda, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "Managing a Great Power Relationship: The United States, China, and East Asian Security," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 21, no. 1 (March 1998): 1-20.

[41.](#) Peter W. Rodman, *Broken Triangle: China, Russia, and America after 25 Years* (Washington: Nixon Center, 1997), p. 8. Rodman also discusses the problem of an asymmetric challenge in *Between Friendship and Rivalry*, pp. 22-35.

[42.](#) Quoted in Jonathan Mirsky, "President Declares Taiwan 'Free of Beijing,'" *The Times* (London), November 10, 1997.

[43.](#) Leslie Chang, "Taiwan Dreads a Sellout As U.S.-China Talks Draw Near," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, weekly edition, May 25, 1998, p. A4; and Nicholas D. Kristof, "Taipei Is on Alert for Signs of Betrayal," *New York Times*, June 29, 1998, p. A9.

- [44.](#) "Air Force Commissions First Indigenous Warplane Wing," *Free China Journal*, April 18, 1997, p. 1.
- [45.](#) Interview with Sen. Parris Chang, *Defense News*, September 29-October 5, 1997, p. 30. See also Sofia Wu, "Taiwan Mulls Building Indigenous Submarines," Taiwan Central News Agency, September 30, 1997, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report--China*, 97-273, document 0e7ac004b7vb.
- [46.](#) *U.S. and Asia Statistical Handbook, 1997-1998*, comp. and ed. John T. Dori and Richard D. Fisher Jr. (Washington: Heritage Foundation, 1997), p. 45.
- [47.](#) Ross Munro, "Aftershocks from the Visit," *Washington Times*, July 9, 1998, p. A17. See also Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), pp. 149-65.
- [48.](#) For discussions of the tendency of Japan and other East Asian countries to "free ride" on Washington's foolish willingness to incur risks on their behalf, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "Washington's Smothering Strategy: American Interests in East Asia," *World Policy Journal* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1997-98): 20-31; Christopher Layne, "Less Is More: Minimal Realism in East Asia," *National Interest* 43 (Spring 1996): 64-77; and Chalmers Johnson and E. B. Keehn, "The Pentagon's Ossified Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 4 (July-August, 1995): 104-15.
- [49.](#) James Peng, "Taiwanese Welcome Arms Deal," *Washington Post*, January 29, 1998, p. A28.
- [50.](#) Barbara Opall-Rome, "U.S. to Deny Taipei Subs, Missiles," *Defense News*, April 20-26, 1998, p. 3.
- [51.](#) Avery Goldstein, "Great Expectations: Interpreting China's Arrival," *International Security* 22, no. 3 (Winter 1997-98): 52.
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