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## Maintaining the Taiwan Strait Status Quo Requires Washington Leadership

*By Darren Spinck*

### Introduction

The era of American strategic ambiguity toward the defense of Taiwan has seemingly ended. Gaffe-prone U.S. President Joe Biden upended over 40 years of Washington's carefully crafted diplomatic policy which has helped maintain a tense, yet mostly peaceful, status quo in the Taiwan Strait, when he stated in unambiguous terms that he was committing America's military to defending Taiwan if the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) forced reunification with the island. Despite the Biden Administration not

yet sufficiently strengthening America's ability to ensure a peaceful Taiwan Strait, the U.S. President has uttered a garbled version of his intentions to commit U.S. military to the defense of Taiwan not only once, but on three separate occasions. The American Enterprise Institute's Hal Brands surmised, "once is a gaffe, three times is a policy."

The White House's policy pivot toward strategic clarity should surprise few, certainly not Beijing military leaders, as America has assumed the role of security guarantor for Taiwan since Washington ended diplomatic ties with Taipei in

1979 and normalized U.S. relations with Beijing. However, it does raise the specter that the U.S. president's public, unambiguous declaration of support for Taiwan may accelerate PRC leader Xi Jinping's stated goal of reunification and achieving the "Chinese Dream," well ahead of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of PRC's founding in 2049. The German Marshall Fund's Bonnie Glaser wrote soon after Biden's latest pronouncement on strategic clarity, "consider the possibility that ending strategic ambiguity will provoke the attack we seek to deter, since the U.S. lacks sufficient military capability to prevent China from invading Taiwan and Taiwan can't defend the island itself."

## U.S.-Taiwan Relations

Washington's strategic ambiguity policy has not only successfully deterred Beijing from seeking forced reunification, but also discouraged Taiwan from declaring *de jure* independence. America's ability to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait is based on the U.S. "One China" policy, which recognizes the PRC as the sole government of China. The United States acknowledges, but does not recognize, Beijing's "One China" principle, which states Taiwan is part of China. The U.S. policy was outlined in the 1979 U.S. China Joint Communique, with Washington and Beijing previously agreeing in a 1972 joint statement that neither would seek

hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region.

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Once Washington ended its diplomatic relations with Taiwan (Republic of China [ROC]), U.S. policy has been guided by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which defines Washington's de-facto diplomatic ties with Taipei through the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in the United States, as well as America's commitment to provide weapons to Taiwan for self-defense. The 1982 U.S.-China communique included Washington reiterating its intentions to not pursue a "Two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan" policy. Washington's Taiwan policy evolved further during the Reagan Administration with "Six Assurances" conveyed to Taiwan, including Washington not agreeing to end arms sales to Taiwan nor agreeing to consult with the PRC on such sales.

*Admiral Davidson warned Congress in 2021 that a PLA attack on Taiwan would "manifest" by 2027.*

While both the PRC and ROC have likely long considered Washington's Taiwan policy as an unspoken inference that the United States

would indeed defend Taiwan from invasion, any public pivot to this position is premature. Defense of Taiwan and security of the Strait require an increased U.S. naval presence in the Indo-Pacific region, a coalition of targeted partners to counter Beijing's hegemonic ambitions, modernization of U.S. military assets to compete with PRC People's Liberation Army (PLA) technological advancements, and arming Taiwan with the weapons it needs to defend itself. U.S. Navy Admiral Phil Davidson (Ret.), former commander of America's Indo-Pacific Command, cautions "China is on a trajectory of investment. If the U.S. continues the status quo in its approach to defense investments, the gap between the two is going to be such that the timeline [for invasion] will accelerate in that window." Admiral Davidson had warned Congress in 2021 that a PLA attack on Taiwan would "manifest" by 2027.

### **A Secure Taiwan Strait is a U.S. National Interest**

Securing the Taiwan Strait is not nation building nor a lofty aim at democratization. It is an American national interest. A secure Taiwan Strait is needed to ensure sea and air trade routes remain free and open and that China's hegemonic aspirations throughout the three island chains of the Indo-Pacific are countered. One of the key objectives outlined in

the declassified 2018 U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific is to "deter China from using military force against the United States and U.S. allies or partners, and develop the capabilities and concepts to defeat Chinese actions across the spectrum of conflict." According to the Trump Administration's strategy, actions to realize this objective include an increased "combat-credible presence and posture in the Indo-Pacific" and a defense strategy capable of denying China air and sea dominance in the first island chain and defending nations located in this island chain, including Taiwan.

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Forced reunification through armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait would have catastrophic effects on the global economy, leading to naval blockades, impeded supply chain routes, and the risk of a region-wide war. Taiwan's semiconductor manufacturing industry will produce an estimated 66% of the world's output in 2022. A disruption to Taiwan's semiconductor supply chain would impact global industrial sectors including telecommunications, health care, military hardware, transportation, and consumer electronics. Chen Wenling, chief economist for the China Center for International Exchanges, recently suggested China must

“recover Taiwan” and “seize” chipmaker TSMC, adding Taiwan’s largest semiconductor manufacturer is an “enterprise that belongs to China.” Until the United States is prepared to re-shore key global production back to America, ensuring free and open Indo-Pacific trade routes remains a critical U.S. national security objective. Attempts to coerce a U.S. retreat from the Indo-Pacific must be met with resolve. The need for America to exhibit leadership required to counter China’s attempts at forced reunification and maintain a peaceful status quo is best illustrated by a recent Center for a New American Security (CNAS) war game simulation, which found Beijing could consider first use of nuclear weapons during a U.S.-China conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

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While White House officials have corrected Biden’s comments each time he has expressed strategic clarity on the defense of Taiwan, the Carnegie Endowment for Peace’s Stephen Wertheim believes “even if Chinese officials were to accept the White House’s clarification that U.S. policy remains unchanged, they may conclude that the United States will grow

only more determined to defend Taiwan as time goes on and that China’s existing threats no longer suffice to keep Taipei from drifting toward independence.” The risk of the CCP accelerating a timeline for reunification following Biden’s “strategic confusion” have increased considerably as America and China have begun to decouple economic ties, Beijing draws inward with its Zero Covid policy and “Dual Circulation” model which favors economic self-reliance, geopolitical influence campaigns intensify throughout the region. President Xi seeks a new term at the CCP’s 20th Congress, and the PLA learns lessons from Ukraine’s use of asymmetric warfare to initially repel Russian military advances.

### **Cross Strait Tensions Worsen**

Tensions in the Taiwan Strait have worsened after President Biden’s May 23, 2022 remarks on committing to Taiwan’s defense, with China’s PLA announcing a series of combat drills and readiness patrols as a “solemn warning to the recent collusion between the United States and Taiwan.” There were 30 PLA incursions into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) on May 30, in apparent response to President Biden’s comments a week earlier and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth’s announced Taiwan visit to discuss increasing U.S. military support for

Taiwan's All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency. In 2021, there were 969 PLA incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ, more than twice the amount from the previous year. Agence France-Presse monitoring of PLA violations of Taiwan's air space found there has been a 50 percent increase of incursions in 2022 from the same period last year. Seth Cropsey, President of the Yorktown Institute, reported the PLA also has conducted ongoing military training exercises in China's Taklamakan Desert, with targets built to the dimensions of a U.S. Navy Arleigh Burke-class destroyer and Ford-class carrier, as well as infrastructure models resembling a port with three piers.

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Taiwan, the United States, and Washington's Indo-Pacific allies and partners, face a growing threat from not only Beijing pressuring Taipei to reunify with Beijing, but an increasingly powerful PRC military. China has the world's largest navy, with an overall battle force of 355 ships and submarines. China recently launched its third aircraft carrier, which, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) wrote, is a "seminal moment in China's ongoing modernization efforts." U.S. Navy battle force

ships total 298, with approximately 30 percent forward deployed. A CSIS report found China's maritime militia throughout the South China Sea and Spratly Islands adds approximately another 300 additional boats to the PLA navy fleet for a potential Zero-Day (Z-Day) invasion. According to the Project 2049 Institute's Ian Easton, the PLA would commit up to 400,000 Chinese troops for the initial invasion, with up to two million available to maintain a 3-1 manpower advantage over the approximately 450,000 Taiwanese defenders. While the PLA has nearly 1,300 more combat aircraft than Taiwan, the U.S. maintains an advantage with an active global fleet of 2,740. The U.S. military air fleet including combat aircraft, special mission, tanker, transport, combat helicopter, and training aircraft totals 13,246 compared to the PRC's 3,285.

As geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific intensified, the PRC has attempted to curry favor with smaller regional island chain governments in an influence campaign aimed at solidifying security and economic ties with Beijing through a Common Development Vision. Foreign ministers of the islands Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited, including Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea, initially rebuffed Beijing's overtures, deferring decision on the agreement with China until the governments discuss terms of the pact at a joint

regional meeting. Beijing's outreach throughout the island chains follows a PRC-Solomon Islands security pact agreement. Initial, but unverified, reports indicate the bilateral agreement may include plans for a PRC military base on one of the Solomon's six islands.

Beijing has taken note of Washington's over-reliance on sanctions policy and the failure of these punitive economic measures to deter Russia's invasion of Ukraine. CCP officials have developed workarounds should the U.S. and its allies use such policies to deter the PLA's invasion of Taiwan. Samir Saran, president of India's Observer Foundation, warned attendees at the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum that the CCP is intently focused on mitigating the risk of western economic sanctions by internationalizing the Yuan and bypassing the SWIFT payment system. Beijing initially began its risk mitigation policies by restructuring its economy with the Dual Circulation model, which focuses on domestic production and limiting dependence on exports. The PRC next minimized the potential of western pressure against CCP officials, by restricting foreign ownership of assets and financial accounts. Beijing also limited the leverage of western energy policy by increasing cooperation with Russia, signing a 10-year gas export deal through the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline.

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As CCP officials continue to "sanction proof" the Chinese economy, threats of sanctions, export controls, and investment restrictions against Beijing to deter an invasion of Taiwan will not suffice. A policy based on "peace through strength" must therefore be the focal point of any attempt to deny the PRC its objectives. As Russia's blockade of the Black Sea has demonstrated with its impact on global grain shortages, any PLA blockade of the Taiwan Strait would cripple global supply chains, including a worldwide shortage of the "brains of modern electronics." But, even more concerning for U.S. interests, war in the Taiwan Strait would ease PLA efforts to project forces into the Indo-Pacific's second and third island chains, closer to the United States and its territories.

### **Conclusion**

"Peace through Strength" begins with ensuring Taiwan has the weapons it needs to defend itself, training Taiwan's self-defense forces, and maintaining a significant regional military and economic presence. This does not necessitate abandoning "strategic ambiguity" or committing U.S. and allied forces to wide-spread collective

defense guarantees throughout the Indo-Pacific. A robust regional military posture and providing Taiwan the weapons needed to deter a PLA attack will, however, require hard choices as the war in Ukraine continues without an end in sight. The U.S. has already depleted large quantities of its weapons stockpile, with one-third of the U.S. Javelin anti-tank missile supply sent to Ukraine as of April.

Elbridge Colby, former Trump Administration Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development, warned before Russia invaded Ukraine that “the U.S. can no longer afford to spread its military across the world.” Washington will find it increasingly difficult to arm both Ukraine and Taiwan *ad infinitum* with certain weapons systems. Delays are expected for U.S. commitments to Taiwan of Stinger surface-to-air missiles and MA109A6 Paladin self-propelled howitzer sales. There are also ongoing disagreements between Washington and Taipei over the quality of weapons sent to Taiwan, with the Biden Administration demanding the ROC purchase weapons needed to repel an invasion, while Taiwanese authorities request weapons to deter Beijing from ever launching an invasion.

U.S. allies must shoulder more of the responsibility for arming both Taiwan and Ukraine. It is understandable if the United Kingdom, Germany, or France are reluctant to

provide Taiwan with weapons while the U.K. and EU forge their own trade policies with China, sometimes diverging from America’s path. Beijing also likely views large-scale weapons sales to Taiwan from any other country than the United States as a “redline.” Therefore, the United States should consider shifting its policy on arming Ukraine to prioritizing the defense of Taiwan, with the United Kingdom and other European allies agreeing to “backfill” the U.S. weapons transfer void in Ukraine.

Concerns over the Biden Administration’s ability to continue arming Taiwan has led to proposed Congressional legislation aimed at prioritizing the island’s defense. Senator Josh Hawley’s (R-MO) “Arm Taiwan Act of 2021” proposes establishing a “Taiwan Security Assistance Initiative,” so Taipei can procure asymmetric defense capabilities including air defense systems, anti-armor weapons, naval mines, and missile boats. Hawley suggests defense systems include man-portable anti-armor weapons, anti-ship missiles, and air defense systems, which have been provided to Ukraine since Russia’s invasion. As there are growing concerns that the U.S. Javelin supply has been depleted and weapons needed by Taiwan are in short supply, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) has proposed the “Taiwan Peace Through Strength Act,” which would fast track U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to Taipei and prioritize Taiwan’s arms sales ahead of other

countries “regardless of the order in which the contracts were signed.”

Any calls in Congress, however, for a “pre-authorized” Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), the U.S. government’s legal authority to use military force, is ill-advised and unnecessary. First, pre-authorizing an AUMF would be an open and full abandonment of “strategic ambiguity,” and could encourage Beijing hardliners to seek forced reunification when military parity is reached between the U.S. Navy and PLA. Second, a pre-authorized AUMF is legally unnecessary, as the president has authorization to use military force to defend U.S. interests without prior Congressional approval. Under the War Powers Act of 1973, the U.S. President would notify Congress within 48 hours of committing U.S. military forces to combat with a 60-day limit on U.S. armed forces continuing military action without an AUMF or a Congressional declaration of war.

U.S. Senator Ben Sasse (R-NE) has called for a “NATO for the Pacific” and an explicit security guarantee for Taiwan. Beijing has warned an Indo-Pacific NATO would be considered interference in the PRC’s internal affairs and likely a “redline” which may accelerate the CCP’s plans for reunification, by force if deemed necessary. Elbridge Colby believes a targeted coalition to deny China its hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, with the United

States as a “cornerstone balancer,” would serve U.S. national security and economic interests more efficiently than a widespread collective defense pact. Colby stated, “pursuing an Asian NATO is not a good idea...in reality it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to attain...the political capital needed to pursue it would be far better spent on raising defense spending and effort by the relevant states.”

The Biden Administration may never adequately focus efforts on addressing U.S. national interests in the Indo-Pacific, and instead prioritize the White House’s “Atlantacist” vision. Washington, thus far, has provided Ukraine with the weapons needed for defending itself against Russia’s invasion. As the U.S. mid-term elections approach, and with it, an almost certain landslide victory for Republicans in Congress, the likelihood of the White House helping broker a Kyiv-Moscow political solution diminish with a lame-duck Biden presidency. A prolonged war may lead the Biden Administration to commit weapons toward a strategy other than repelling the Russian military from Ukraine as *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat observed. Douthat wrote, “broader theories of hawkish commentators... seem to confuse what is desirable with what is likely, and what is morally ideal with what is strategically achievable.” Those seeking the complete collapse of the Russian government

were undoubtedly emboldened by President Biden's gaffe, Putin "cannot remain in power." Should the White House determine America's interests are better served by regime change in the Kremlin, rather than countering Beijing's hegemonic ambitions, the United States will not have demonstrated to its allies and Indo-Pacific partners that America possesses the strategic leadership necessary to serve as the "cornerstone balancer" in the region. The United Kingdom and Australia can fill the void and, under the auspices of the Australia-United Kingdom- United States (AUKUS) trilateral security pact, work cooperatively to form this anti-hegemonic coalition.

A robust defense strategy for Taiwan and the leverage of punitive economic measures against Beijing still require soft power initiatives and diplomacy to ensure regional peace endures. This includes diplomacy aimed at brokering negotiations between Beijing and Taipei. It also means treating Taipei with dignity by supporting Taiwan's aspirations for inclusion into global governance institutions such as the World Health Assembly (WHA). As the third-

largest country donor to the World Health Organization, Washington has significant leverage over the leadership of the WHA decision making body to end Beijing's pressure campaign to prevent Taiwan's observer status. Washington also can demonstrate to the region that its policies are more than a militaristic "all guns, but no butter" approach by forging closer economic ties with Taipei through trade and reversing course on Taipei's omission from the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF) talks and engaging the private sector to invest in Indo-Pacific infrastructure development.

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