ASIAN ALLIANCES
WORKING PAPER
SERIES
PAPER 7 | JULY 2016

ORDER from CHAOS
Foreign Policy in a Troubled World

The United States Security Partnership with Taiwan

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Of all of the United States' security partnerships around the world, the one with Taiwan is surely unique. Washington does not recognize or have diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) government in Taipei, but instead recognizes the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing. Washington has an embassy in Beijing and conducts its ties with Taiwan through a nominally private organization, the American Institute in Taiwan. This makes Taiwan a rare case where Washington has a security partnership with an entity with which it does not have diplomatic relations.

The reason for that security partnership is PRC policy toward Taiwan. It holds that the island is a part of the sovereign territory of China. It seeks the "reunification" of Taiwan with the PRC under a formula that both the island's government and people reject. It denies that the ROC exists as a sovereign government. It has never renounced the use of force as a means to end Taiwan's separateness, stating that by law, it has set conditions under which it would use "non-peaceful means." And it holds that the United States has no right to have a security relationship with Taiwan and sell defense articles to its armed forces.

Another anomaly is the absence of an American treaty commitment to come to Taiwan's defense if it were ever attacked. Such a treaty, the U.S.-ROC mutual defense treaty, existed from 1954 to 1979, but the Carter administration terminated it as a condition for establishing relations with the PRC. But the United States has sustained a political commitment to Taiwan, under the rubric of the Taiwan Relations Act, which was enacted in 1979.[1] Substantively, moreover, the security relationship with Taiwan and its military is broad and deep. The United States seeks to enhance Taiwan's military capabilities through substantial arms sales, fortified by ongoing contacts between the two defense establishments.

Increasingly, that security partnership will be tested by the continuing modernization of PRC armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). What Taiwan does to ensure its security is also a critical variable.

China's Threat and Taiwan's Strategy

China's threat to Taiwan stems from a prolonged political dispute that has sometimes assumed a military

[1] Article 3(c) of the Act states that, "The President is directed to inform the Congress promptly of any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people on 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." "Taiwan Relations Act," website of the American Institute in Taiwan (www.ait.org.tw/en/taiwan-relations-act.html). Actually, the legislative language of the TRA was not the functional equivalent of the treaty, as most Members of Congress and Taiwan have believed; see Richard C. Bush, *At Cross Purposes: US-Taiwan Relations, 1942-2000* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 152-60.

character. From 1949 to 1979, the level of tension remained high but only broke out into limited military conflict twice (1954-55 and 1958). After 1979, Beijing reduced tensions in the expectation that political means would bring about its goal of unification. Taiwan was increasingly marginalized in the international community. The United States had terminated diplomatic relations and it treaty commitment to the island. Economic ties between the Mainland and Taiwan would soon begin and flourish. Time seemed to be on the PRC's side.

Beijing's leaders, however, did not count on Taiwan's democratization in the early 1990s. They came to fear that some of Taiwan's leaders and one of its major political parties—the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—intended to pursue Taiwan independence through covert and gradual steps. Former presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian took actions that China interpreted as confirmation of its fears, whether or not they truly had a separatist intent.[2] To deter independence and punish Taiwan if deterrence failed, *and* to complicate any American attempt to come to Taiwan's defense, the PRC began to build up military capabilities beginning in the late 1990s. The military dimension of the political dispute regained salience. Although Beijing says it would prefer peaceful unification, it asserts its resolve to use force if necessary and codified that resolve in the Anti-Secession Law of 2005.[3] To make matters worse for Taiwan, the capabilities that China has created to deter what it fears, could also be used to compel what it wants (unification).

How to respond to China's declared intentions and its growing capabilities presents for Taiwan leaders a profound dilemma. Appeasement—accepting one country, two systems—is not an option, given the state of Taiwan public opinion. Generally, less than 5 percent want unification right away and over 80 percent prefer some version of the status quo.[4] Nor does Taiwan have the resources and political will to match China's capabilities with a military build-up of its own. The ability of the People's Liberation Army to project power across the Taiwan Strait and in the East China Sea will only grow.

Instead, Taiwan has tried to pursue engagement with the Mainland by leveraging the ability of Taiwan companies to contribute to China's economic growth, a strategy they have pursued since the late 1980s. The hope is that economic cooperation will mitigate hostile Chinese intentions and leave Taiwan both more secure and prosperous.

But Beijing has also exerted leverage. To contain leaders it suspects of separatism, it has set political preconditions for government-to-government interaction on economic issues. Those preconditions have been controversial among both Taiwan elites and the public. Former presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian resisted Beijing's political formulas

[2] Some or all of these actions also had a domestic political purpose.

[3] Article 8 of the law says: "In the event that the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity"; "Full Text of Anti-Secession Law," Adopted at the Third Session of the Tenth National People's Congress on March 14, 2005 (www.china.org.cn/english/2005lh/122724.htm).

[4] Advocates of the status quo might like Taiwan to be independent (less than 10 percent want it right away), they know that will probably lead to conflict; see Yuan-kang Wang, "Taiwan Public Opinion on Cross-Strait Security Issues: Implications for US Foreign Policy," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 7 (Summer 2013), pp. 93-113.

and some military tensions ensued. Ma Ying-jeou, president from 2008 to 2016, accepted terms, even as he defined them his own way. That brought prosperity and less friction with Beijing. As time went on, however, the public became increasingly concerned that growing economic dependence on the Mainland would be a slippery slope to unification.

The United States Factor in Taiwan's Security

Reliance on the United States has been the constant element of Taiwan's security strategy. The Taiwan Relations Act provided Taipei confidence in the United States even after the termination of the U.S.-ROC mutual defense treaty. On the American side of the coin, concern for Taiwan's security has lasted through several administrations due to the political support Taiwan enjoys in the United States and the knowledge that Asian allies and partners treat Taiwan as a larger litmus test of U.S. resolve. Finally, Beijing was long discouraged from attacking Taiwan because of the risk that capable U.S. armed forces would intervene to protect Taiwan.

Washington does not, however, explicitly commit itself to Taiwan's defense. To do so would only unnecessarily complicate relations with China. Instead U.S. officials cite the Taiwan Relations Act, speak in general terms about Washington's "abiding interest" in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and reiterate opposition to either side's unilaterally changing the status quo—without saying how the United States would respond to such an attempt. Despite the ambiguity of public American rhetoric, the capabilities that the PRC has acquired to complicate any U.S. intervention suggest that it assumes the United States will in fact act to defend Taiwan. Beijing looks at both American words and deeds to assess its intentions.

The other significant element of the post-1979 U.S.-Taiwan security partnership was sales of advanced military equipment, which continued even after Washington established diplomatic relations with Beijing and ended the defense treaty with Taiwan. The level of arms sales has been relatively high over the last two decades. In the first term of the Obama administration, for example, the United States transferred over $12 billion in weaponry to Taiwan.

For many years, however, U.S. arms sales to Taiwan had as much a political purpose as military one. Both in Beijing and Taipei, these transfers were regarded as a signal of U.S. commitment to Taiwan's security. To be sure, advanced platforms like the F-16s that the George H.W. Bush administration announced in 1992 certainly improved Taiwan's capabilities. But aside from U.S. support, the main reason that Taiwan remained militarily secure was the PLA's relative backwardness, not Taiwan's strength. That quality gap began to shrink in the late 1990s.

The one area of U.S.-Taiwan security relations that was dormant until the mid-1990s was interaction between the two militaries on everything except arms sales. As China-Taiwan relations deteriorated in that period, the Clinton administration took steps to restore interaction between the two military establishments. If the United States might actually have to come to Taiwan's defense, it would need contacts within the Taiwan military to de-conflict responses. Reportedly, those contacts have "nearly doubled in recent years."[5]

[5] "Taiwan: A Vital Partner in East Asia," remarks by Susan Thornton, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, The State Department, at the Brookings Institution, May 21, 2015 (www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2015/05/242705.htm).

Taiwan's democratization also created a dilemma for Washington about whether and how to provide for Taiwan's security. Washington clearly prefers it when Beijing and Taipei engage each other, cross-Strait relations are mutually beneficial, and the risk of conflict is low. The early 1990s and the Ma Ying-jeou period are cases in point. In the late 1990s and for most of the 2000s decade, however, cross-Strait relations deteriorated, as Beijing interpreted initiatives by Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian as evidence of movement towards Taiwan independence.

In these latter contexts, Washington took the initiative to find ways to reduce tensions, and U.S. officials had to address four questions:

- Are these Taiwan deeds and actions a way to score domestic political points or to gain an advantage over Beijing?
- Whatever the reasoning, is Taiwan being reckless in making these moves?
- Is China over-reacting to Taiwan moves and perceiving a challenge to its interests where it doesn't significantly exist?
- In adopting these initiatives, are Taiwan politicians taking U.S. support for granted?

During the Lee and Chen administrations, Washington essentially adopted a security policy of dual deterrence. It was "dual" in two senses. First, it was directed at both Beijing and Taipei, since each had a responsibility to keep the peace. Second, there was a mix of warnings and reassurances. Towards Beijing, the basic U.S. line was to warn against attacking Taiwan, but to reassure that Washington did not support Taiwan independence. Towards Taipei, the message was to warn against political steps that would unnecessarily provoke a Chinese military response, but to reassure that the United States would not sacrifice Taiwan's interests for the sake of good relations with Beijing. The relative mix of warnings and reassurances to each side depended on the circumstances, and operationalizing them was not easy, in part because each side thought that it could manipulate Washington into taking its own side.

A Changing Threat Environment

Even if we assume that the United States would decide to come to Taiwan's defense in event of a Chinese attack, the "tyranny of distance" across the Pacific Ocean requires that Taiwan be able to survive for a while (usually estimated to be several weeks) to give U.S. armed forces time to effectively enter the conflict. That raises the question of whether Taiwan's defense strategy would buy it enough time.[6]

Taiwan's traditional defense strategy has been forward defense in and over the Taiwan Strait, to permit a staged defense of the island, give more time for U.S. intervention, and so dissuade Beijing from undertaking a blockade or amphibious campaign in the first place.

China's counter to this strategy has been to build a force of short- and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles. As of late 2014, the PRC had over

[6] Increasingly, I have concluded the greater threat to Taiwan is a PRC use of intimidation, playing on the sense in Taiwan of growing weakness—economic, military, political, diplomatic—and a lack of confidence in the ability to resist. Reducing this vulnerability requires Taiwan to strengthen itself in these areas, and to restore confidence and make intimidation less likely in the first place. That is a task that Taiwan must undertake for itself with Washington providing assistance only where it is possible.

1,200 short-range ballistic missiles with improving accuracy in its arsenal, plus an unknown number of cruise missiles. This force has created the possibility that PLA missiles could immobilize Taiwan's air force by repeated missile strikes on its airfields. Also, improvements in Mainland air defenses, with Russian help, would also render vulnerable any Taiwan's air force fighters that could take off and then fly over the Strait.[7] The Chinese military cannot yet conduct a successful amphibious campaign against Taiwan or execute a tight naval blockade of the island's ports, but its capabilities are improving systematically, and in the process, are negating the ROC's long-standing defense strategy.[8]

Some American defense scholars have concluded that the only defense strategy that makes sense for Taiwan is one that better exploits its key strategic feature—that it is an island—and the PLA's greatest weaknesses—the vulnerability of an invasion force to attack while it is transiting the Taiwan Strait and coming ashore on Taiwan.[9] This strategy, in turn, requires that Taiwan adopt innovative and "asymmetric concepts and technologies to maximize Taiwan's enduring strengths and advantages."[10]

As noted, China has sought to improve its ability to counter an American intervention (what American experts call "anti-access, area denial"). The goal would be to put key U.S. assets at risk, such as power projection platforms like aircraft carriers, advanced command and control, and communications systems.[11] One can assume that the Department of Defense is doing everything it can to develop counters to the new PRC capabilities, if only because the counter-intervention strategy affects the security of other U.S. partners and allies in the region. Moreover, just because the PLA has a weapon that might constrain the actions of U.S. armed forces does not guarantee that it would use it successfully in a war-fighting situation. The number of cases in which the PLA Navy and Air Force have engaged in combat is limited at best.

Looking Forward

The wheel of Taiwan politics has turned again. Tsai Ing-wen, the leader of DPP, took office in May 2016 after winning a clear-cut electoral victory. For the first time, her party has an absolute majority in the legislature. During her campaign, Tsai said her goal was to preserve the status quo with the PRC without conceding to its political conditions. Beijing has insisted she explicitly endorse them, based on its view that her covert goal is Taiwan independence. How far Beijing will go in reacting (or over-reacting) to the

[7] Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015," released April 2015 (www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2015_China_Military_Power_Report.pdf), pp. 39, 89. Taiwan sought independently to acquire its own cruise missiles to attack China's missile bases, ports, etc. But there is a question of whether such missiles would be effective without robust intelligence assets to identify targets and carry out battle damage assessments.

[8] "Annual Report to Congress," pp. 57-61; William S. Murray, "Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review,* vol. 61 (Summer 2008), pp. 13-38.

[9] Michael J. Lostumbo, "A New Taiwan Strategy to Adapt to PLA Precision Strike Capabilities," in *New Opportunities and Challenges for Taiwan's Security*, Roger Cliff, Phillip C Saunders, and Scott Harold (eds.) (Santa Monica, Cal.: RAND Corporation, 2011). pp. 127-136.

[10] "Prepared Statement of Dr. Peter Lavoy, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs," Testimony before Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, October 4, 2011 (http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/lav100411.pdf). Some observers of Taiwan's military focus on the size of the defense budget. Clearly, underspending will do little to re-shape the calculations of PRC civilian and military leaders about Taiwan's ability to resist an attack. At the same time, measuring Taiwan's commitment to its own defense by setting a metric of a certain percentage of GDP (3 percent is the usual figure) in no way guarantees that the budget is being used for purposes that strengthen deterrence, which should be the emphasis.

[11] "Annual Report to Congress," pp. 33-37.

new government in Taipei and the voters that put it there will play out in the months ahead. It is not inevitable that a deterioration of cross-Strait political relations will lead to a crisis. Clearly, ensuring that the cross-Strait political dispute stays de-militarized works to the advantage of all parties concerned, including the United States. Still, Washington policy-makers should probably pull out the dual-deterrence playbook and consider the appropriate mix of warnings and reassurances to Beijing and Taipei, in the knowledge that China's military power will only grow in the years ahead.

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