

*LIMITS OF LETHALITY –**LETHALITY IS NEEDED, BUT THE US
MUST ALSO COUNTER MALIGN
INFLUENCE*

BY ROB YORK

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The Trump administration, particularly Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, [correctly identifies](#) the People's Republic of China as the primary threat to regional security, especially its stated ambitions for Taiwan. Were the PRC to seize Taiwan militarily without US intervention Beijing could dictate the terms of trade past the Island, project power further into the Pacific, and cause Washington's allies in East Asia and emerging partners in the Indian subcontinent to question the US willingness to stand up for them.

Hegseth has [called for](#) a defense budget increase, and the Pentagon is [currently drafting](#) its new national security strategy, due in August. He has also made clear that the United States would be [ready to respond](#) if Taiwan were attacked.

Yet he also notes, correctly, the need to [deter](#) such a conflict. The effects of a war over Taiwan would so catastrophic that neither side could win—not the United

States, whose aircraft carriers would be [vulnerable](#) to Chinese anti-ship ballistic missiles; not China, whose troops would be vulnerable during the initial strait crossing and whose economy may contract [as much as 25%](#); not Taiwan, which may see its miraculous economic growth erased even if it survived as an autonomous entity. And not the world, which is ever more dependent on the technology-fueled growth enabled by the semiconductors Taiwan plays the leading role in fabricating.

Hegseth is signaling that the United States will prioritize countering an invasion and mobilize the resources necessary to do that, including [reviving](#) the industrial base and investing in shipyards.

He also noted that deterring conflict with the PRC is [not America's role alone](#), and his remarks at the Shangri-la Dialogue last month demonstrated a keen interest in working with US partners in the region in that endeavor. He called upon them to make a similar investment in their defense and combat readiness.

Hegseth has emphasized the need to prioritize the ["lethality"](#) of America's armed forces, as well as similar descriptors like "warfighting" and "readiness." It would appear that this administration views hard power as the key to keep the PRC from achieving its aims for the region.

However, does the Pentagon and its sister agencies have a plan to keep China from winning without war? It has been easy in recent years for the PRC's critics to mock its political shortcomings, as its prickliness over issues it considers core strategic areas overrode its diplomatic professionalism, leading to it alienating previously ambivalent partners.

- In 2011 China took the step of [withholding rare earths exports](#) to Japan during a territorial dispute; within a decade Japanese leaders would [openly discuss](#) defending Taiwan as a national security priority despite Tokyo's pacifist constitution.
- From 2016-2022 China enjoyed warm relations with the Philippines under the Duterte administration, who considered [ending their hosting](#) of US bases, only for public outrage

over Chinese aggression in the South China Sea to prompt a [course change](#) by Duterte and the election of a pro-US administration in 2022.

- South Korea, which has long seen China as essential to not only economic growth but a resolution to inter-Korean division, now have among the [world's most negative views of China](#) following years of PRC enabling of North Korea, plus the spread of COVID-19 and sanctions on the country following THAAD deployment.
- Taiwan, which until 2016 had leadership that desired to deepen cooperation with the PRC and eventually achieve unification, has now elected three successive administrations supportive of independence, and the PRC's response has been a series of punitive measures that have only deepened the [public's antipathy](#) for Beijing.

It must be stressed, again, that those “wins” for Washington were the product of PRC actions taken in defense of what Beijing considers core interests—whether over [territorial rights](#), [defense](#) of the Chinese mainland, or the [credibility](#) of Communist Party rule—and had little to do with US messaging or improvements to its reputation in the region.

And political successes in these countries may not be as durable as they appear. Taiwan's pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party recently launched a [sweeping set of measures](#) designed to counter PRC influence, but its pro-unification opposition still finds much success in [local elections](#), and now holds the majority in the Legislative Yuan, where it has used that majority to fight the [defense budget increases](#) the Trump administration [wants to see](#), and even civil defense-bolstering [programs](#).

The current leadership of the Philippines has been strident in its support for the US alliance and has done the most among ASEAN nations to shine a light on the PRC's coercive tactics in the South China Sea. Yet their former president, who enjoyed a much friendlier relationship with China, remains a [popular figure](#) despite his recent arrest by the International Criminal Court. The former president's party did [very well](#) in recent senate

elections, increasing chances that his daughter, the current vice president, will survive upcoming [impeachment](#) proceedings and run for president herself in 2028.

South Korea, after three years of close cooperation with the United States and Japan, just elected a candidate much more open to [cooperation](#) with China. Even Japan, where the success of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party is rarely in doubt, currently labors through a period of weak governance that makes the formulation of effective defense policy difficult, especially in terms of overcoming its post-war pacifism and insularity and preparing for an operation as risky as the [defense of Taiwan](#).

If the United States is to remain engaged in the Indo-Pacific and prevent PRC domination, it faces obstacles that cannot be solved by lethality alone. The PRC currently wages a campaign which “lethality” cannot counter—as Xi Jinping continues to [purge high-ranking officers](#), the PRC would seem to lack the capability to direct an invasion, even if they have the manpower and equipment to wage one.

Therefore, its assaults on these locations will remain more subtle. These will include seeking to coopt their politicians, academics, [media](#), and [social media personalities](#) with paid trips to China, directing and controlling diaspora communities through the presence of overseas “[police stations](#)” that some countries are [not legally equipped](#) to counteract, buying up crucial assets and establishing partnerships to ensure deference from business communities, and spreading narratives through official and unofficial channels that the United States is unreliable, untrustworthy, and unable to counter the inevitability of China's rise.

If the United States is not engaged in countering such influence, in the next five years Taiwan could again have a pro-unification leadership—or at least, gridlock may prevent it from adequately prepping its defenses—while Manila could turn against hosting US military bases, Seoul could [vow neutrality](#) in a Taiwan contingency, and Tokyo may not have made any meaningful preparations to counter PRC ambitions in the region.

Under such circumstances, even if the defense secretary does get the most lethal US military in history, the US

Armed Forces may be rendered helpless by politics in partner countries.

The recent departure of Elon Musk, the Department of Government Efficiency's founder from the US government is an opportunity to begin rebuilding the soft power organs—USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor at the US State Department—targeted by spending cuts. The Defense Department should be part of broader, whole-of-government efforts including State, Commerce, Energy, the Treasury, and others to not just counter the PRC, but also to erode its influence. The lethality of US forces should not merely be enhanced; partners should know the United States will use it to good ends, including their defense against unprovoked aggression.

The Trump administration need not concern itself with empowering political leaders that do not share its vision—political parties of the right are leading the charge against Chinese influence in Manila, Seoul, Tokyo, and elsewhere, and despite its name Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party is a big tent more committed to Taipei's autonomy than political progressivism. Nor should such moves be seen as interference in the domestic affairs of partners; Washington can and has worked with unlikely partners in countries where politicians have campaigned on skepticism of the United States—until they, and the constituencies that elected them, saw what the alternative to the United States was.

But before the United States can convince these countries that they should arm themselves, Washington must first convince regional countries that there is a threat to prepare for, and that the United States is the reliable partner it claims to be.

\$1 trillion in lethal weapons systems, by itself, will not buy that.

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