



THE CASE FOR ABANDONING TAIWAN IS STILL WEAK

BY DENNY ROY

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As intended, Chinese military pressure on Taiwan is causing America to debate whether it should send US forces to intervene if China opts to attack the island. There have always been analysts arguing that the US should distance itself from Taiwan for the sake of Washington's relationship with China. That argument is easier to make now that China is relatively stronger and increasingly insistent, seemingly raising the costs to the US of continuing to support the Taipei government.

One of the latest examples comes from Lyle Goldstein, Director of the Asia Program at Defense Priorities, whose [article](#) "The U.S. Must Beware of Taiwan's Reckless Leader" appeared in Time magazine on Oct. 23.

Goldstein reprises two classic arguments. The first is the danger of being dragged into war by an injudicious Taiwan government. Goldstein argues this danger has become extraordinarily acute because current Taiwan President Lai Ching-te is "reckless," in contrast to his "cautious" predecessor Tsai Ing-wen.

In reality, the differences between Taiwan's current and former president are not so stark. Lai has basically followed Tsai's policy toward China. As Goldstein acknowledges, the evidence for Lai's purported drive toward independence is limited to "speeches making the case for Taiwanese nationhood."

Lai relatively frequently uses words and phrases that distinguish Taiwan from China, implying that Taiwan is a separate country from China. But Lai is not really breaking new ground. In 1999, Lai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) accepted a [resolution](#) that said, "Taiwan is a sovereign and independent country." Since then, all DPP politicians – including Tsai – have repeated this position on multiple occasions. Lai's wordsmithing is fairly minor by comparison.

Chinese officials and state media were highly exercised over Lai's "[17 strategies](#)" speech, which labeled China a "hostile foreign force" and specified measures to combat Chinese espionage and political interference on the island. Yet there is no question the Chinese government is displaying hostility toward Taiwan, recruiting informants, and attempting to sow division and defeatism.

China is reacting especially stridently to Lai, but there are two problems with accepting the PRC as the arbiter of the issue of whether Lai is "reckless." First, the CCP is biased. Even before Lai took office, Beijing condemned him as a politician who would push to achieve de jure independence while he was president. Some of Lai's statements certainly played on Chinese fears.

For instance, he has [called himself](#) a "pragmatic Taiwan independence worker." In 2023 he [said](#) one of his goals was to see a Taiwan president "enter the White House." However, "Pragmatic" actually suggests caution, and Lai walking into the White House is no more foreseeable now than when he started his presidency. The Chinese government, nevertheless, is following through with its pre-judgment of Lai as a radical revisionist regardless of his actual policies.

Second, focusing blame on Lai overlooks other factors that contribute to China's aggressive posture. China's military capabilities relative to those of both Taiwan and the United States have grown in recent years. Successfully using military force to forcibly annex Taiwan [looks increasingly feasible](#) for the PRC. The Chinese government continually pushes the narrative, internally as well as externally, that America is on a permanent trajectory of decline. While the US

government still contains many pro-Taiwan officials, the US government's commitment to help defend Taiwan has weakened. Previous US President Joe Biden four times publicly said he would dispatch US forces to intervene in a cross-Strait war. Current President Donald Trump campaigned on a pledge of "[no new wars](#)." He has usually refused to say whether he would send the US military to defend Taiwan, but during one [interview](#) he said he would respond to a Chinese invasion by raising tariffs on Chinese exports.

China's military buildup and the perception of a wavering US commitment have incentivized China to rely more heavily on military intimidation in its cross-Strait strategy because the threat of military attack has become more credible. Lai is a convenient justification but not necessarily the driver of Beijing's belligerence.

The second classic argument that Goldstein makes is that defending Taiwan is not in America's interest. "Taiwan does not represent a vital U.S. national security interest," he writes. "It is not a treaty ally, nor are the various geostrategic or economic rationales to defend Taiwan enough to risk a potentially catastrophic great power war."

The implicit argument that another country is not worth defending if it is not a treaty ally is demonstrably false. The US has sent troops and/or major military assistance to the Soviet Union (during World War II), South Vietnam, South Korea, Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Ukraine to assist non-allies. One could question whether some of these cases represented sound policy, but they prove the point that in practice, strategic interventions by a superpower are not limited to defending allies.

Goldstein's assertion that the risk of a war with China trumps "the various geostrategic or economic rationales to defend Taiwan" requires further parsing. How large are the respective risks and opportunities? If the economic and strategic upside to the US of protecting Taiwan is very low and the risk of war with China is very high, Goldstein is right. But what if the advantages of helping Taiwan avoid forcible annexation are very large, and deterrence of China is practicable, so that the risk of war is low?

In fact, the economic and security rationales for defending Taiwan are robust. Taiwan is the world's [16th largest](#) economy and the manufacturing base of most of the world's supply of semiconductors. It is certainly to the great advantage of the US and other partner countries that Taiwan is ruled by a government that respects international law and liberal norms.

Strategically, Taiwan is the anchor of the First Island Chain. It is the frontline state in China's campaign of territorial expansion, which also includes the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, parts of India and Bhutan, and by some indications the Ryukyu Islands. Capturing Taiwan would give China its richest and best-developed province, unhindered access to the Pacific Ocean, and a commanding position astride key sea lanes that sustain the Japanese and South Korean economies.

In addition to the economic and strategic rationales for defending Taiwan that Goldstein mentions, there is also a political rationale. As a previously authoritarian country that transitioned to a multiparty liberal democracy, Taiwan exemplifies the political liberalization America has traditionally promoted worldwide. Standing aside while China violently seized and then Hong Kongized Taiwan would erode US reliability and soft power while energizing the efforts of China, Russia and North Korea to promote a global order oriented toward keeping their ruling parties in power.

The question is whether these add up to a vital US interest in preventing China from forcibly annexing Taiwan. The same issue came up during Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby's confirmation hearing. "Taiwan is very important to the United States," Colby [said](#), "but it's not an existential interest. The core American interest is in denying China regional hegemony." Colby's position seems contradictory. If the overriding goal is to resist PRC regional hegemony, defending Taiwan becomes more rather than less important. This is the logical place to make a stand, unless making a stand is hopeless.

The other half of the calculus is the risk of a catastrophic war. The US has a legitimate concern about entrapment because of Taiwan domestic politics. That concern led

to a public rebuke of President Chen Shui-bian in 2003. The trigger was Chen planning a symbolic referendum that was implicitly a vote on Taiwan independence. Such an intervention by Washington could happen again, but it hasn't so far because Lai has not taken a comparable action.

For the foreseeable future, the task of militarily subduing Taiwan will remain so formidable, and success so uncertain, from China's point of view that going to war is a desperate, last resort option. Efforts underway by both Taiwan and the US to enhance defensive capacity should keep China's confidence permanently low.

Taiwan is an important and constructive world citizen and a supporter of America's global agenda. Although threatened by an authoritarian aggressor, it chooses to remain free, which is also to the US advantage. If the likelihood of conflict can be kept manageable, there is no rush for the US to desert Taiwan.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.