



## ***THE IRAN WAR DOESN'T IMMEDIATELY JEOPARDIZE TAIWAN***

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Ramifications of the US/Israeli military campaign against Iran reverberate around the world, including in Asia. The indirect effects of this conflict are particularly relevant for the defense of Taiwan against a possible military attack by China.

There are two important questions here, and the first is how the Iran war affects the likelihood that the US would intervene to help defend Taiwan.

Most of the criticism of the US military campaign against Iran is that it was overly aggressive—that the Americans were too impatient to wait for [negotiations](#) with the Iranian government to their run their course, that Iran posed [no imminent threat](#) to the US that would [justify](#) the attack, that Washington did not consult with US allies beforehand, and that the US leadership failed to [take sufficient account](#) of Iran's ability to continue to fight back despite the severe degradation of its armed forces.

Taiwan's most immediate concern, however, is *whether Washington is aggressive enough* to send US forces into battle in the defense of Taiwan, as opposed to choosing to stay out of a cross-Strait war. Many [observers have characterized](#) Trump's foreign policy approach as isolationism. Various commentators, including Temple University Tokyo campus Professor [Robert Dujarric](#), former US National Security Advisor [John Bolton](#) and *The Guardian* foreign affairs analyst [Simon Tinsdall](#), have specifically opined that Trump wants to stay out of a war in Asia more than he wants to prevent China from taking over Taiwan. China, of course, would be a far tougher adversary than Iran, so a willingness to bomb Iran does not equal a willingness to fight China. At minimum, however, the Iran war shows this president does not rule out sending

a large number of US forces into battle far abroad—i.e., outside the Western Hemisphere.

China's approach could be called cautious-aggressive: probing first and then advancing only if opposition is light, in the fine tradition of the guidance often attributed to Josef Stalin or Vladimir Lenin: "If you hit mush, keep going; if you hit steel, pull back." To the Chinese, who prefer gray zone tactics, Trump's actions—the surgical strike to kill Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani (during Trump's first term), the abduction of Venezuela's president from a military compound in Venezuela, the blockade of Cuba's oil supply, the bombardment of Iran, and discussions about seizing Greenland—are shockingly bold. In light of these episodes, it is difficult if not impossible for the Chinese to conclude with confidence that the US would not intervene militarily in defense of Taiwan.

This leads to the second important question: how the Iran war affects the likelihood that China will decide to attack Taiwan.

There is an [argument](#) that America's "embrace of a 'might is right' doctrine," manifested in US actions against Iran and Venezuela "could be interpreted as a green light by Xi" to launch a war of conquest against Taiwan. This is wrong. Beijing does not peg its policies to a normative bar set by the US. The Chinese government long ago proclaimed it will use force against Taiwan if Beijing decides this is necessary. China's 2005 Anti-Succession Law formalized the threat.

Chinese have heard a lot of state-sponsored gloating about the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2021 as well as the claim that America is a "[paper tiger](#)" in decline. Against Iran, however, the US military performed superbly in a complex operation halfway around the world from the US homeland. In contrast, Chinese-supplied military equipment, particularly air defense systems, performed poorly in both Venezuela and Iran. This was an instructive reminder for the Chinese that the US armed forces are the world's most capable. While PRC officials and state media criticized the US action as lawless and brutal, Chinese also recognized America's operational competence. Chinese foreign affairs analyst Zheng Yongnian [concluded](#) the US is "still number

one.” Another, Niu Tanqin, [said](#) he “cannot but admire” the performance. International relations scholar Shi Yinhong [revealed](#) that the tactical success of American forces “strongly impressed the leaders here.” The demonstration of well-orchestrated lethality has deterrent value.

On the other hand, the Chinese saw a diversion and a depletion of the military resources the Americans might use to oppose Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific region.

US officials [insist](#) the Iran war has not worsened pre-existing delays in delivering weapons that Taiwan has bought and paid for. Weapons used against Iran are drawn from US inventories, not from pre-scheduled production for sales to other countries.

Nevertheless, the US has at least temporarily moved military capability from Asia to the Middle East for the Iran campaign. This includes Patriot interceptors, THAAD tubes, the USS *Abraham Lincoln* carrier strike group, two additional destroyers, and two Marine expeditionary units.

US forces also burned through stocks of precious precision weapons. [Tomahawk](#) cruise missiles, for example, would be very useful in an Indo-Pacific conflict because they have long range and a robust warhead, and there is now an anti-ship variant. The US military has fired off 850 to 1,000 Tomahawks in the Iran campaign already. These will require two to three years to replace at a cost of about \$3.5 million each. [Observers therefore speculate](#) that China has a newly-opened window of opportunity for attacking Taiwan. US magazine depth was already a [problem](#) before the Iran campaign. Now China could count on American forces running out of crucial weapons even sooner.

The window-of-opportunity argument is strongest if we assume Xi has already made the decision to forcibly annex Taiwan when the odds appear favorable.

That assumption, however, fails to appreciate the massive risks and downsides to the Chinese leadership of choosing war. In an invasion scenario, China would need to plan for fighting a combined Taiwanese, US and Japanese defensive coalition.

Even as the US runs down its munitions stockpiles, Taiwan is assembling what it [claims](#) will be “the world’s highest density of anti-ship missiles” by the end of 2026. Japan is now mass-producing its new Type 25 anti-ship cruise missile, which will be able to range the Taiwan Strait, and began deploying it in March.

Victory by China is uncertain, and in any case might prove pyrrhic. The US Navy would likely interdict China’s seaborne energy supplies. A Taiwan Strait war would temporarily halt cargo shipping traffic along much of China’s east coast. The resulting economic turmoil in China could lead to social and political unrest. And China would face a long-term challenge pacifying and governing an angry Taiwan populace.

Indeed, there is no immediate need for Beijing to resort to using force against Taiwan. China sees US comprehensive power as receding while China is advancing in industrial and technological prowess. The passage of time, therefore, improves China’s position relative to the US, and increases the chances that Washington will

choose of its own accord to stop competing with China for strategic leadership in eastern Asia.

Xi is still amid a purge of about half of his senior military commanders. A disproportionate number of these leaders were with People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force, which would have a key role in an assault on Taiwan.

Taiwan’s Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party, or KMT) accepts Beijing’s bottom line that Taiwan is part of “China.” Beijing has reason to hope the KMT will regain control of Taiwan’s government. KMT Chairwoman Cheng Li-wun’s visit to China this month will buoy these hopes. With its coalition partner the Taiwan People’s Party, the KMT enjoys a majority in Taiwan’s legislature. President Lai Ching-te is not highly popular. His approval ratings were negative for much of 2025 and have been around 50 percent this year. The KMT emerged victorious from the ruling DPP’s attempt in 2025 to invalidate the elections of 31 KMT legislators through a recall campaign; all 31 retained their seats. The KMT has attempted to improve its electoral chances by nominating younger candidates with broader cross-party appeal. Whether these efforts will result in a KMT candidate winning the presidency in 2028 and implementing a more China-friendly cross-Strait policy is far from certain, but developments up to now incentivize Beijing to wait and see.

Trump and Xi plan two formal summits this year. Beijing hopes to stabilize US-China economic relations, which are currently under a temporary truce in the trade war that saw the US brandish extraordinarily high tariffs on imports from China while the Chinese threatened to restrict supplies of rare-earth minerals to the US. The Chinese want to avoid disrupting this stabilization. Beijing will also have the chance during these negotiations to push the US side to make a concession or two on US support for Taipei. The US government has already [decided](#) to delay the announcement of another large arms sale to Taiwan prior to Trump’s first 2026 meeting with Xi, now expected in May.

For the PRC, this is an opportunity for a limited win without fighting.

The Iran war draws attention to Taiwan’s vulnerability to a cutoff of energy supplies. Taiwan is over 95% dependent on seaborne imports for its supply of oil and [liquid natural gas](#). The latter provides about half of Taiwan’s electrical power, and the island’s strategic reserve amounts to only eight to 11 days of gas. Taiwan’s oil situation is not as dire, but still vulnerable, with a stockpile of 100 days’ worth. Addressing these vulnerabilities should be a high priority for Taiwan. So should packing the western shoreline with survivable anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile batteries.

The conflict in Iran, however, does not put Taiwan in additional, immediate jeopardy. Despite the depletion of US precision weapons, Beijing has its own more compelling reasons to hold off from launching a risky invasion attempt.

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