INTRODUCTION

Ian Easton is Senior Director at the Project 2049 Institute, where he conducts research on defense & security issues in Asia. During the summer of 2013 he was a visiting fellow at the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA) in Tokyo. Previously, Ian worked as a China analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) for two years. Prior to that, he lived in Taipei from 2005 to 2010. During his time in Taiwan, he worked as a translator for Island Technologies Inc. and the Foundation for Asia-Pacific Peace Studies. While in Taiwan, he also conducted research with the Asia Bureau Chief of Defense News. Ian holds an M.A. in China Studies from National Chengchi University in Taiwan and a B.A. in International Studies from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He also holds a certification in advanced Mandarin Chinese, having formally studied the language at Fudan University in Shanghai, and National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei. Ian has testified before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, and lectured at the U.S. Naval War College, Japan’s National Defense Academy, and Taiwan’s National Defense University. Ian is the author of "The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia" (The Project 2049 Institute, October 2017).

WHY DO I CARE?

China is the world’s 2nd largest economy and widely acknowledged to be the world’s 2nd most powerful country. It contains within its borders 1/5 of humanity. Its GDP growth rate is unprecedented for a country its size, and putting aside questions about how accurate China’s official statistics are, the fact remains that the country has rapidly progressed from a state of wide-spread poverty by Western standards to one of middle-income status within the span of only a few decades. It now has the financial, technical, and human capital to invest significant resources into advancing its military capabilities. If the broad, Western consensus on China and its governing party are to be taken at face value, then we should all be concerned about the rising likelihood of an escalation in hostilities between America and China that could lead to a full-blown, all-encompassing war similar in scope to that which ripped the continent of Europe apart between 1914-1945. If a war is to break out, the Taiwan strait is one of its most likely flashpoints. Recent diplomatic overtures towards the island by the Trump administration, combined with continued arms sales have helped to raise concerns that war may be closer than many of us may hope or think possible.
Any conflict between China and Taiwan will almost certainly involve America. The United States has an enduring interest in a peaceful, prosperous, and stable East Asia, and the emergence of an openly hostile China would represent a grave challenge to American interests. The U.S. government does not recognize PRC sovereignty over Taiwan and regards the island’s sovereign status as unresolved. Moreover, the White House is legally obligated by the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) to provide defensive arms and services to Taiwan, and to maintain the U.S. military’s capacity to respond to any Chinese use of force against the island. Should China seek to blockade, bomb, and invade Taiwan, the United States would be compelled to help its democratic ally. While not as binding as a mutual defense treaty, the TRA (U.S. Public Law 96-8) makes it clear that Washington is likely to intervene if China uses force. For both legal and moral reasons, the U.S. would be compelled to side with this island nation, even if it meant risking war with the world’s second most powerful country. In addition to being a matter of principle and honor, the U.S. supports Taiwan for geostrategic reasons. It has become increasingly clear to American strategists that China has embarked on a long and intense competition for dominance over the Western Pacific. Taiwan is at the geographic and political heart of this competition. Maritime tensions in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, while serious, pale in comparison to this flashpoint. The possibility of conflict here, at the central gateway to the Pacific, demands close scrutiny. — Ian Easton

Washington signed a mutual defense treaty with Taipei in December 1954, and the Senate ratified the alliance in February. On March 3, 1955, the final ratification documents were formally exchanged. President Eisenhower concurrently requested permission from Congress to exercise special powers in the defense of Taiwan. This was granted in the form of the Formosa Resolution. — Ian Easton

In 1979, when President Jimmy Carter played the "China Card" against the USSR and switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, Taiwan suffered an earth-shaking strategic loss. From a purely military perspective, however, the balance was still unquestionably favorable to Taiwan and would remain that way for a long time to come. — Ian Easton

Taiwanese military planners assume they would have around 60 days ambiguous warning, followed by 30 days unambiguous warning. — Ian Easton

Newly emerged sources of information offer us details on the scale and form of China’s likely war plan. Based on these sources, the formal plan for wartime operations (Joint Island Attack Campaign) outlines the roles which would be played by Chinese military and civilian units before, during, and after the future invasion. The objectives of the plan would be to: (1) rapidly capture Taipei and destroy the government; (2) capture other major cities and clear out the surviving defenders; and (3) occupy the entire country. To do this, the plan apparently calls for overwhelming the ROC military’s coastal defenses and forcing surrender before the United States could deploy sufficient forces to the area. PLA writings indicate that China has developed additional contingency
plans for fighting against American and coalition forces in the Pacific to prevent them from helping to defend Taiwan. — Ian Easton

The Chinese objective at the outset of war would be to gain localized control over the airwaves, airspace, and seascapes surrounding Taiwan. The most likely approach could be to create a crisis situation and constrict the Taiwanese government's freedom of action before first strikes were launched. In this scenario, PLA writings envision conducting military operations to harass aircraft and ships leaving or approaching Taiwan. As an island trading nation, Taiwan is reliant upon the seas for transporting its export goods and supplying its domestic consumption needs. The bulk of the trade goods Taiwanese people make and use, the fuel they burn, and the food they eat passes over vast tracks of saltwater to reach them. — Ian Easton

How might a future invasion of Taiwan unfold? Based on internal Chinese military writings, it would most likely begin with attacks on Taiwan's small island fortresses. PLA writings portray it as essential to rapidly storm Kinmen and Matsu, paving the road to Z-Day. These islands are a key to success because they sit within range of the ports and airstrips where China would likely assemble its invasion armadas. Unless completely neutralized, Taiwan's defenders could use their frontline island perimeter to mount missile strikes, commando raids, and helicopter assaults on the mainland. Perceiving a serious threat from these otherwise modest islands, the PLA has conducted extensive studies on surrounding and seizing them in the opening days of war. — Ian Easton

Chinese military writings present the Penghu Islands (or Pescadores) as of great importance to the invasion of Taiwan, second only to the capture of Kinmen and Matsu in terms of priority. They describe this island group as a critical target for assault immediately following, or perhaps even concurrent with, operations against the outer islands. — Ian Easton

The Gu'an Plan is designed so that the armed forces of Taiwan are prepared for the three worst case scenarios they might one day confront. In the first scenario, China invades and the U.S. "cavalry" never shows up. In the second, the Americans arrive on the battlefield too late to make a difference. In the final scenario, the Americans deploy in good time, but are routed by overwhelming PLA surprise attacks. These scenarios, while seemingly unlikely, could be catastrophic for Taiwan.
Precautions are therefore made to guard against an overreliance on America’s superior military capabilities and good intentions. — Ian Easton

Perhaps the most notable capability in Taiwan’s arsenal for attacking enemy forces as they approach is the Ray-Ting 2000 (Thunderbolt 2000), a wheeled multiple-launch rocket system. Rockets have longer ranges and considerably larger payloads when compared to traditional artillery, but they can be relatively inaccurate and slow to reload. To overcome this, the Ray-Ting 2000 combines rockets into tubes that can fire volleys simultaneously. They have guided munitions, with shotgun-like projectiles filled with tens of thousands of ball bearings. They are anticipated to create macabre kill zones around the anchorage sites and along amphibious lines of approach. If long range interdiction failed to turn back the attack, Taiwanese tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and infantry would greet Chinese invaders up close on the beaches with murderous firepower. — Ian Easton

There is an odd defect in the human mind that allows people living under an enormous dam to suffer little anxiety as the reservoir behind it gradually fills to the brim and the concrete walls crack from the mounting force. In such circumstances, most people will go about their daily business. The specter of sudden catastrophe will remain unthinkable to them, if only because it has not yet happened—as if the ravages of time were positive evidence instead of something to worry about. In the aftermath, the same defect will cause survivors of disaster to blame it all on the trigger event, the unforeseen engineering flaw or earthquake or storm that finally burst the dam and brought the water crushing down. People naturally ignore that unhappy reality: all dams break sooner or later if they are not strengthened. — Ian Easton

Attempts to appease Beijing are at least as likely to encourage aggression as those aimed at providing Taiwan with international recognition. Sooner or later, the dam is probably going to surrender to the pressure and break. — Ian Easton

While few are comfortable admitting it, the United States and China are firmly entrenched in what will likely be a long and intense strategic competition for dominance over the Pacific Rim. American strategists Andrew Marshall, Robert Kaplan, and Aaron Friedberg each began foretelling of this great power struggle well over a decade ago. — Ian Easton

The first step of dealing with a highly sensitive global problem is admitting it exists. In the nuclear age, avoiding conflict between great powers is absolutely essential, and the weight of evidence suggests that nothing is more likely to invite war than covering up uncomfortable truths. Obsequiousness and silence in the face of coercion could only validate Beijing’s behavior. — Ian Easton

The U.S. government has failed to develop and dedicate the resources needed for the broad collection, translation, analysis, and dissemination of Chinese writings and speeches. As a consequence, Washington has only a limited understanding of the official Chinese worldview, and
even less knowledge of what is going on inside China's halls of power. In the absence of understanding, too many Americans assume that the PRC operates basically like the United States, when in fact it is profoundly different in all the ways that matter: politically, economically, and militarily. This is why Chinese behavior so often puzzles Western observers, and this is why, despite the long-time reluctance to officially admit it, strategic competition is here to stay. — Ian Easton

America does not covet Taiwan as a base for its soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen, but it does require that the island remains in the hands of a friendly government. If Taiwan were lost, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines would become vulnerable to naval blockades and air assaults. For this reason, and many others, any Chinese attempt to gain control of Taiwan would almost certainly be regarded as an attack on the vital interests of the United States, and therefore repelled by any means necessary, including use of force. — Ian Easton

The landslide results of the 2016 presidential and legislative elections in Taipei are telling. The citizens of Taiwan chose Dr. Tsai Ing-wen, who is widely viewed as tough on China and friendly to America, and therefore more likely to secure a better future relationship with Washington. At the same time, they also chose a Democratic Progressive Party whose policy platform calls for a more robust indigenous defense industry as a pragmatic hedge against continued American dysfunction. Taiwan’s government wants to arm itself and will do so whether its long-standing ally feels it can help or not. This attitude means that the island, largely ignored for the past two decades, will soon be at the forefront of American geostrategic thinking. If the contest of the century is to be waged between the United States and China for primacy in the Pacific, Taiwan will be at the center of the action. — Ian Easton

Elevating the role of Taiwan in U.S. strategy would likely prove to be the single most effective means of signaling resolve and purpose, diminishing the likelihood of a potentially cataclysmic regional conflict. — Ian Easton

Rather than invade, China could opt to engage in a war of nerves that played out over the course of years or even decades. This should be considered more probable than invasion, especially if the correlation of forces continues to confront Chinese leaders with the prospect of a prohibitively costly and uncertain war. — Ian Easton

Already the situation in the Taiwan Strait is severe, but the emerging threat has not passed beyond the capabilities of the defending side, nor will it in the near future. There are even indications that trends in precision strike technology could provide Taiwan with a significant advantage. Missile and sensor technology developments could make it next to impossible for China to invade. In any event, it is not certain that Beijing will have the sustained economic strength required to continue its military
buildup. If it does, the PLA would still have to break the
defenders on their home island or lose a war because no
elected government in Taipei is likely to surrender
without a ferocious fight. Taiwanese nationalism, like
nationalism everywhere, is a powerful and growing force.
— Ian Easton

Events await across the years ahead, and it cannot be
known at the present time how things will play out and
what the implications of future actions will be. What can
be known, and is documented in this book, is that China
is preparing for amphibious operations against Taiwan.
The invasion of Taiwan, unlike other Chinese war
planning scenarios, would be the largest and most
complex in the PLA’s history. Every domain of modern
combat would be engaged to the full. The plan to invade
Taiwan is likely to hinge upon landing a severe blow
against the United States, delaying it from unleashing full
fury until it is too late to change the final outcome. The
stakes and the risks are unparalleled. — Ian Easton

Timely American intervention, almost certainly alongside
the other Pacific democracies of Japan and Australia, is
a nightmare for Chinese war planners, and very possibly
could occur in ways they have not thought of. — Ian
Easton

Beijing’s leaders will likely find that they have three basic options. The first is that they could ignore
the problem and make only symbolic gestures, while hoping something changes in their favor in
the future. The second is that they could engage in small scale acts of aggression to weaken
Taiwanese resolve overtime in a long drawn-out standoff. The third is that they could attempt an
invasion and occupation of Taiwan. Given prevailing conditions, the third option would be the least
likely and most dangerous to all concerned. Plans and preparations for it will continue, nonetheless.
— Ian Easton

If the United States and Japan can stand
together with Taiwan to put combined pressure
on China’s rulers, peace is very likely to be the
reward, and with it unprecedented freedom and
prosperity across Asia. If on the other hand they
fail, the Chinese military may eventually be able
to overwhelm and destroy Taiwan. The means
to prevent war and avert defeat are within sight,
but the distressing reality is that not enough has
been done. Many American leaders, having
never lived abroad, cannot conceive of anyone
whose views are not more or less within the
boundaries of their own. Lacking a knowledge
of Chinese history and of the dangers inherent
in its authoritarian system, they place forward
deployed U.S. forces in a vulnerable position. It is long past time the U.S. military was retooled and
refitted for great power conflict. — Ian Easton
Americans, when considering cross-Strait conflict, would be wise to remember the great strategist Carl von Clausewitz, who famously observed that rationality is fragile in war. The enemies of reason are emotion, friction, and fear, which can quickly turn battles into scenes of purposeless violence and carnage. While it may seem very improbable when viewed in the cool lights of peacetime, crises can rapidly escalate to limited wars, which might turn at any time into something uncontrollable. The Chinese authorities, by planning and preparing to strike Taiwan with exceptionally naked acts of aggression, risk jeopardizing their own security and prosperity. While China’s generals would have the initiative against Taiwan on Z-Day, they could only be on the receiving end of the Americans and their allies, who would be free to present them with unpleasant surprises. This of course assumes that the PRC would not preemptively strike U.S. forces first, an assumption that could be tragically falsified by events. If China did, it would be an act of madness given the predictable magnitude of American wrath. The inescapable conclusion of this book is that the sum of Chinese strategy, doctrine, and war planning for the Taiwan invasion scenario is something likely to prove self-destructive and dangerous. While the theoretical essence of the campaign may appear defensive to the eyes of Chinese strategists, its actual character is wholly offensive and escalatory. It should be repudiated by the entire world, and especially those who seek to advance the cause of human progress. — Ian Easton

QUOTES:

“Interference is not a projection of power—it’s a projection of insecurity.” — Audrey Tang, Taiwan’s Digital Minister

“At this critical juncture, as we enter into a time of uncertainty, I believe that it is now more important than ever for Taiwan and Europe to come together and further our collaboration while contributing to the world. Not only do we have solid economic ties, we are also connected by our shared values. By beginning discussions for a bilateral investment agreement, we can open the door to an even more concrete partnership.” — Tsai Ing-wen, President of the Republic of China (Taiwan)

Ninety percent of success is just showing up. — Unknown

A U.S. security guarantee for Taipei would not solve the problem and might provoke a Chinese attack. — Bonnie Glaser

Diplomacy is like success in marriage: not every truth need be articulated. — State Department Official

Just as Putin factored the U.S. response to Russian actions in Georgia into his decision to invade Ukraine,
China’s leaders will factor the U.S. response to the Hong Kong security law into their decisions about future aggression in Asia. — Michael Green and Evan Medeiros

The Joint Force needs to take this observation to heart. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army has been patiently stalking the U.S. military for two decades. It has studied the preferred American way of war and devised a strategy to exploit its weaknesses and offset its strengths—particularly its military-technological strengths. It appears increasingly close to achieving technological parity with U.S. operational systems and has a plan to achieve technological superiority. In this emerging security environment, where both China and the United States seek a dominant military-technical advantage, the side that finds the better "fit" between technology and operational concepts likely will come out on top. — Robert O. Work & Greg Grant

The US and the island of Taiwan must give up all illusions about the redeployment of US troops in Taiwan, because it means nothing but war. The Anti-Secession Law outlined three conditions that would compel China to use force. The second condition is "the development of major incidents that involve the independence of Taiwan from the mainland," and the third condition is "the exhaustion of all options to reach a deal on the peaceful reunification." The redeployment of US troops in Taiwan meets the two conditions. We believe that the PLA will inevitably take military actions to start a just war to liberate Taiwan. — Global Times Op-ed
SHOULD AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR TAIWAN BE AMBIGUOUS?

By Bonnie S. Glaser; Michael J. Mazarr; Michael J. Glennon; Richard Haass and David Sacks

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A Guarantee Isn’t Worth The Risk

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In their recent article, “American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous,” Richard Haass and David Sacks correctly note that China’s coercive tactics and military buildup are eroding deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. But their proposed solution—a U.S. security guarantee for Taipei—would not solve that problem and might even provoke a Chinese attack. To reduce the chances of war, the United States needs to signal credibly that Beijing would pay a high price for invading Taiwan. Washington cannot, however, make its willingness to defend Taiwan unconditional. Rather, the United States should reserve the latitude to judge whether Taipei’s policies are consistent with U.S. interests—and with the region’s peace and security.

If the United States extends an unqualified security commitment to Taiwan today, without the ability to make its threats credible, China could respond by mounting an attack. Chinese President Xi Jinping has taken a tough approach to sovereignty disputes throughout his tenure: in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and the disputed border with India, he has doubled down in defiance of foreign criticism. The United States might try to head off this reaction by assuring China that it still adheres to its “one China” policy and does not support Taiwan’s independence. But such blandishments would fall on deaf ears, especially if they come from U.S. President Donald Trump, who has little credibility in Beijing. Rather, Xi would likely calculate that failing to take decisive action would open him to domestic criticism and jeopardize his bid to be China’s leader for life. The authors advise U.S. leaders against signing a treaty with Taipei on the grounds that doing so would “force Xi’s hand,” but they don’t explain why an ironclad security guarantee wouldn’t have the same consequence.

That consequence hardly seems worth risking when there is little evidence that China is poised to invade Taiwan. Xi has said that “reunification” of the island with mainland China is “inevitable,” but he has given no indication that he is willing to jeopardize other Chinese interests in order to urgently achieve this goal. Haass and Sacks cite “speculation” that Beijing will force reunification with Taiwan as soon as 2021—but the United States should base a major shift in policy on hard facts, not rumors.

Nor should the United States be shortsighted about the potential intentions of future Taiwanese leaders. Haass and Sacks are confident that the island’s authorities have judged that pursuing independence is contrary to their interests. Current President Tsai Ing-wen has indeed taken a cautious stance toward Beijing and coordinated her approach closely with Washington. But her successors may not do the same. A clear statement of U.S. resolve to defend Taiwan regardless of the circumstances could embolden pro-independence constituencies in Taiwan to promote their cause. The United States should not give Taipei a green light to bend to these forces or to advance policies contrary to U.S. objectives.

U.S. treaty allies have a strong stake in preserving peace in the Taiwan Strait. Japan in particular has a vital interest in averting a Chinese takeover of Taiwan, because the island is located in the
middle of the first island chain stretching from Japan to the Philippines and the South China Sea. A Chinese occupation would threaten Japanese sea-lanes. Japan and other U.S. allies in Asia, however, would likely see a U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan against all threats not as evidence that the United States is a reliable partner but as a potential provocation of China. Moreover, such a commitment accompanied by a request that regional allies assist the United States during a Taiwan contingency, as Haass and Sacks propose, would likely lead those allies to fear being dragged into a conflict.

The Taiwan Relations Act requires the U.S. president and Congress to determine “appropriate action” in response to “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.” Therefore, Beijing cannot rule out the possibility of U.S. intervention in the event of an invasion. Still, the United States does need to shore up its ability to deter Chinese aggression in the Taiwan Strait. On this point, Haass and Sacks are spot-on. China has developed “anti-access/area-denial” capabilities that complicate the United States’ ability to defend Taiwan. If the United States is to credibly head off a Chinese invasion, it must find effective ways to counter these capabilities. Taiwan must also do its part to ensure that its military can survive an attack and slow down an enemy force to buy time for the U.S. military to arrive.

The United States should revise its publicly declared policy in a manner that strengthens deterrence, but not by issuing a statement of “strategic clarity,” as Haass and Sacks recommend. U.S. policymakers could issue a warning that any Chinese use of force against Taiwan would be viewed as a threat to peace and stability and a grave threat to the United States. Such a statement would signal U.S. resolve without the downsides of a clear security guarantee. If Beijing looks set to move against Taiwan, the U.S. president could forestall a crisis by privately issuing clear warnings to China’s leader about the consequences of such an action.

Ambiguity has preserved cross-strait stability for decades and can continue to prevent war. To keep the peace, the United States must restore deterrence, not further weaken it.
A Guarantee Won’t Solve the Problem

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Richard Haass and David Sacks have done a great service by promoting debate on an increasingly vexing issue—the United States’ commitment to Taiwan. They are right to worry that, as China’s thirst to resolve the Taiwan issue intensifies, the United States’ halfhearted commitment to the island will become increasingly perilous: too weak to deter Chinese aggression but strong enough to drag the United States into a war.

But Haass and Sacks’s solution—an unequivocal U.S. commitment to the defense of Taiwan—has more emotional than strategic appeal. To begin with, Taiwan does not yet face an imminent threat. Little evidence—beyond belligerent statements and provocative exercises—suggests that China is on the verge of invading Taiwan. As Taylor Fravel recently argued, “China does not appear (yet) to have altered its view about the importance of maintaining a relatively benign security environment.” The United States should not pay the huge costs of a security guarantee if the menace remains mostly hypothetical. Were China ever to move toward invasion, the United States could issue more pointed threats.

Even if an invasion were imminent, however, a security pledge might not be effective. In the late 1930s, many Japanese officials admitted that they would lose a long war against the United States. Despite that grim assessment, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, because it concluded that it had no other option. History is full of such occasions, when nations—fueled by a toxic brew of paranoia, desperation, and wishful thinking—felt so compelled to act that they were effectively undeterrable. If Beijing ever decides to take the risk of invading Taiwan, it will likely have arrived at just such an urgent imperative to act. A tougher policy is unlikely to work when it is needed most.

Worse, if China believes that the United States is about to make a security pledge to Taiwan, that prospect could itself become the impetus for China to take rash action. Once the United States makes such a pledge, the situation becomes even more dicey, as U.S. officials will likely worry about the guarantee’s credibility and agitate to deploy military forces to Taiwan as a signal of resolve. Beijing is unlikely to tolerate such action. Rather than forestalling war, the proposed policy could easily set a chain of events in motion that would make conflict inevitable.

An unqualified security commitment might also be counterproductive for the United States’ relationships with other countries in the region. Haass and Sacks rightly note that many Indo-Pacific nations worry about U.S. reliability. But those countries also want to avoid taking sides between the United States and China. An ironclad security pledge would undercut multilateral collaboration by reminding other states that to engage in a closer security partnership with the United States means possibly getting dragged into a war over Taiwan.

As for Taipei, Haass and Sacks claim that “detering Taiwan from declaring independence is no longer a primary concern,” in part because few Taiwanese support it. But the sense of independent identity in Taiwan appears to be growing. Moreover, an absolute security guarantee could encourage Taiwanese authorities to treat Beijing with contempt, figuring that the United States has the island’s back. Having made such a promise, the United States will not be able to backtrack without demolishing its credibility—leaving few means of influencing Taipei’s behavior in a crisis.
If all these risks are not enough to make a Taiwan security guarantee unattractive, Washington should consider the cost. The United States is already strengthening its regional posture, but an unqualified promise would demand a much larger investment if it is to be substantially more credible than U.S. deterrence is already. Prevailing military trends do not favor the kind of long-range power projection that such a posture in Taiwan would require. Given the many domestic problems confronting the United States, devoting scarce dollars to defending Taiwan is arguably not the best way to make the country safer, more prosperous, or more competitive with China.

The United States should find ways to deter Chinese aggression that don’t involve making an unambiguous and costly military commitment to Taiwan. Short of such a guarantee, Washington can still make much more explicit that invading Taiwan will entail economic, political, and military consequences for China. Options include intense and targeted economic sanctions, conditional plans to deploy new U.S. forces in neighboring countries, limits on academic and professional exchanges with Chinese partners, and expelling Chinese diplomats from international organizations. Although a detailed plan to undermine China’s strategic position would not deter an attack on its own, it would at least force Beijing to acknowledge and consider the potential costs of its actions.

At the same time, the United States could help Taiwan deliver on its 2017 defense strategy, which shifts the island’s focus away from major combat systems, such as tanks and aircraft, and toward potentially more effective asymmetric defenses, such as smart mines, anti-ship missiles, drones, and information warfare. A bold commitment from Taipei to make itself a more costly target—supported by an increase in Taiwanese defense spending, continued U.S. arms transfers, and perhaps even some joint weapons development programs—would enhance deterrence as much as any new U.S. promises.

No U.S. approach to Taiwan will offer a perfect guarantee of peace. But the United States has many options short of the provocative, costly, and diplomatically risky step of an unconditional security pledge.
A Guarantee is Legally Dubious

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In the 1972 agreement known as the Shanghai Communiqué, the United States promised that it would not challenge China’s position that there is “but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China.” In a separate agreement signed in 1979, the United States agreed that the Chinese authorities based in Beijing were the country’s sole legal government. Taken together, these twin declarations—popularly known as the “one China policy”—cleared the way for the modern relationship between the United States and China. On the legal status of Taiwan, the United States took the same position then as now: no position.

Richard Haass and David Sacks’ proposed security guarantee in their recent article would forsake that purposefully ambiguous policy in favor of a dangerously provocative unilateral commitment. Not only would such a move abandon a policy that has functioned effectively for 40 years, but it would also violate the U.S. Constitution and the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA).

The UN Charter would permit using force to assist Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack only if such action could be characterized as collective self-defense: if a state is subject to an armed attack, other states may lawfully use force in its defense. But the collective self-defense rationale presupposes an external attack, not the use of force by a state within its own territory. U.S. military assistance to Taiwan premised on collective self-defense could align with the charter only if the United States regarded Taiwan as a sovereign, independent state. The one-China policy explicitly precludes this view.

A U.S. president might assert the authority to jettison that policy in favor of a security assurance to Taiwan, but such a move would violate the U.S. Constitution, which gives Congress the power to declare war and the Senate the power to approve treaties. For the president alone to make a formal security guarantee would manifestly encroach on those powers. Long-standing U.S. custom and
practice dictate that a commitment of such magnitude—dedicating U.S. soldiers to the unconditional defense of a foreign country—cannot be made solely by the chief executive. The president cannot promise what is not the president’s to give.

Nonetheless, Haass and Sacks would have the president make a sweeping promise of an absolute and automatic response to “any” Chinese use of force against Taiwan, however limited in scope and whatever the circumstances. Such a pledge would be extraordinary. As the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee said in its report on what would become the TRA, the law that currently defines U.S.-Taiwanese relations, “an ‘absolute’ security guarantee for Taiwan would go further than any current mutual security treaty to which the United States is a party.” The report went on to note that it is “questionable whether, as a matter of constitutional law, an absolute security guarantee can be made—either by treaty or by statute.”

Haass and Sacks suggest, however, that the provisions of the TRA show that such a move would not violate the one-China policy. To the contrary, section three of the TRA expressly forbids the kind of action that Haass and Sacks recommend. It states that “the President and the Congress,” not the president alone, “shall determine, in accordance with constitutional processes, appropriate action by the United States” in response to any threat to the security of Taiwan. The TRA, moreover, does not contravene the one-China policy but honors it. As the committee emphasized in its report, legislators drafted the TRA specifically to allow U.S. relations with Taiwan to continue “on an unofficial basis” and to “reassure Taiwan without being inconsistent with recognition of the PRC.”

China is undoubtedly more threatening to the United States and Taiwan today than it was in 1979. As its power has grown, China has exhibited an abysmal disregard for international humanitarian norms. In a dark future, the United States might need to take military action to defend its security interests in Taiwan. But formally and explicitly saying so would inflame an already volatile U.S.-Chinese relationship—with potentially unimaginable consequences. As an esteemed former State Department legal adviser used to say, success in diplomacy is like success in marriage: not every truth need be articulated.
Haass and Sacks Reply

In our piece “American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous,” which appeared in Foreign Affairs on September 2, we argued the United States ought to adopt a policy of strategic clarity, making explicit that it would respond to any Chinese use of force against Taiwan. Given an increasingly assertive China with significant and growing military capabilities, and mounting doubts as to U.S. reliability, we concluded that strategic clarity is more likely than ambiguity to maintain deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. Importantly, strategic clarity does not change the ends of U.S. policy, only the means. We advocate that the United States continue to uphold its one-China policy, reiterate that it does not support Taiwan independence, and eschew symbolic moves to upgrade Taiwan’s status. The purpose of strategic clarity is to avoid a conflict in the Taiwan Strait. We are glad to see that our article has triggered a long overdue and much-needed debate.

There is the contention that strategic clarity would be inconsistent with the U.S. one-China policy. This argument is simply incorrect. The United States never accepted the Chinese position that “there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China.” The United States merely acknowledged the Chinese position, taking note of it but not endorsing it. The bottom line is that the United States has refrained from taking a position on sovereignty over Taiwan and does not subscribe to the position that Taiwan is a part of the People’s Republic of China.

There is nothing in any of the three U.S.-Chinese joint communiqués that would preclude a policy of strategic clarity. What we propose does not touch on questions of Taiwan’s legal status or diplomatic recognition, China’s core concerns that were addressed in the communiqués. Indeed, we made clear that a policy of strategic clarity would be introduced together with an endorsement of the U.S. one-China policy, a declaration that the United States does not support Taiwan independence, and a refusal to establish formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Strategic clarity only adds weight to the long-standing U.S. position that any resolution of cross-strait differences must occur peacefully and with the consent of the people involved.

Some argue that the president does not have the power to pledge that the United States would respond to any Chinese use of force. Nowhere do we argue that should the United States have to come to Taiwan’s defense, the president should do so without seeking Congress’s approval. Indeed, if deterrence fails and the president acts to commit U.S. soldiers, he should go through Congress to seek authorization. Given that time would be of the essence in a crisis, he could do so beforehand so the authority to act was clear. Congress has consistently sought executive leadership on Taiwan and would likely welcome a policy of strategic clarity.

Others object to our article on strategic grounds, asserting that our proposal would force the very confrontation that we are trying to avoid. In doing so, they create Chinese redlines that have not surfaced and may not exist. The 2005 Anti-Secession Law is China’s legal framework for military action against Taiwan, and it does not state that China would use military force if the United States made a pledge to Taiwan. There is even a relevant historical precedent. In April 2001, Washington received signals that China was questioning whether the United States would come to Taiwan’s defense. President George W. Bush disabused China of these notions, stating the United States would do “whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself.” President Bush’s statement did not spark a war but instead bolstered deterrence.

Respondents have suggested that a policy of strategic clarity might make Taiwan less cautious and more likely to trigger a confrontation with Beijing. Diplomacy can manage this hypothetical risk. President Tsai Ing-wen, who has nearly four years left in her term, has shown no inclination to test China’s redlines. Her successors might be less prudent, but a policy of strategic clarity would be
paired with a public reiteration that the United States does not support Taiwan independence. The United States would continue to echo this statement privately with Taiwan’s leaders. Should Taiwan make provocative moves, the United States would make clear that it does not enjoy a blank check. All U.S. strategic partners understand that with their benefits come obligations, and Taiwan would be no exception.

Some critics argue that a policy shift is unneeded because a Chinese attack on Taiwan is not imminent. This may be true, but we do not believe the possibility can be dismissed. Strategic surprise is a staple of history. Now is the time to act to reduce the chance of such a surprise or to prepare for it should it occur. Waiting until a Chinese attack on Taiwan is imminent or underway would do nothing to strengthen deterrence and would result in a situation in which the United States would be left with only terrible choices.

What is more, U.S. allies already believe that the United States is committed to coming to Taiwan’s defense. We are not proposing that the United States take on a new obligation but are instead arguing that U.S. policymakers should recognize this obligation exists and resource it accordingly. Maintaining a policy of strategic ambiguity leaves the United States vulnerable: its allies expect it to come to Taiwan’s defense, but U.S. planners do not see a firm commitment and therefore do not prioritize contingency planning, and China is unsure of the United States’ commitment and therefore less likely to be deterred.

Whether one subscribes to our position or not, the United States must commit resources to bolstering deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. It should shift more American air and naval assets to Asia and work with Taiwan to increase its warfighting capabilities. The United States should also consider how it might respond to coercive Chinese “gray zone” activities short of military action. Last but far from least, any and all such steps should be paired with a renewed U.S.-Chinese dialogue, in which each side could privately communicate what it deems to be unacceptable in the Taiwan Strait or in any contingency in Asia. The stakes are too great for any party to miscalculate.
IS TAIWAN THE NEXT HONG KONG?

China Tests the Limits of Impunity
By Michael Green and Evan Medeiros
July 8, 2020

Pro-democracy protests have rocked Hong Kong for more than a year. Now, China has imposed a draconian national security law that will undermine the territory’s autonomy and, by extension, its identity. The new law is a profound tragedy for the people of Hong Kong, but unfortunately, there is little the international community can do to halt its implementation. The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has suggested that it will dial up pressure on Hong Kong’s government. But doing so risks hurting Hong Kong’s economy more than Beijing’s and accelerating the territory’s absorption into southern China.

Some analysts have therefore counseled U.S. restraint, arguing that a softer touch could encourage Beijing to moderate its implementation of the law and avoid making the situation worse. But there are larger issues at stake. U.S. policymakers must consider more than Hong Kong when formulating their response. A tepid U.S. reaction could leave Beijing with the impression that it can proceed with relative impunity on other contentious issues in Asia. The shadow of Taiwan looms large in this context. Unless the United States demonstrates the resolve and ability to resist Chinese coercion and aggression, China’s leaders may eventually conclude that the risks and the costs of future military action against Taiwan are low—or at least tolerable.

There isn’t a straight line from Hong Kong to Taiwan, of course. A Chinese assault on the island is neither imminent nor inevitable. But Beijing’s recent actions in Hong Kong—and elsewhere in Asia—raise worrying questions about its evolving objectives and increasing willingness to use coercive tactics to achieve them. In short, the United States must be careful not to play a narrow game on Hong Kong when Beijing is positioning itself for a broader competition for the future of Asia.
WIDENING THE ASIA APERTURE

Under President Xi Jinping, China has become much more tolerant of friction in international affairs than it once was and much bolder about using coercion to advance Chinese interests—often at the expense of the United States and other powers, such as Japan and India. In recent months, China has increased its military and paramilitary pressure on neighboring countries with which it has territorial disputes, including India, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Whether these aggressive maneuvers were intended to remind the world of China’s resolve or to capitalize on the distraction caused by the coronavirus pandemic, they offer a stark reminder of Xi’s appetite for risk, tolerance for conflict, and desire to assert territorial claims.

Recent history reveals that the international system is vulnerable to this kind of creeping irredentism. When Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Ukraine and annex Crimea in 2014, he was drawing on lessons from his 2008 invasion of Georgia. The latter created a permissive environment for the former: the Georgia invasion cost Russia little and drew only weak international condemnation. Taiwan and Ukraine occupy very different geopolitical contexts, but just as Putin factored the U.S. response to Russian actions in Georgia into his decision to invade Ukraine, China’s leaders will factor the U.S. response to the Hong Kong security law into their decisions about future aggression in Asia. Given how little Beijing’s crackdown in Hong Kong has cost it to date, we are concerned that Beijing will draw the wrong conclusions about the costs of future coercion against Taiwan.

Hong Kong and Taiwan have more in common than many analysts appreciate, both in the view of Beijing and in the sentiments of their citizens. The protests that have raged in Hong Kong for the last year resonated deeply with the people and the leadership in Taiwan. Taiwanese citizens sent protective gear to the protesters in Hong Kong, and Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen won reelection in January in part because she voiced support for Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement. In a rare bipartisan move, her ruling Democratic Progressive Party, the opposition Kuomintang, and other parties jointly expressed “regret and severe condemnation” of Beijing’s
national security law. Taiwanese officials have also pledged to provide refuge to Hong Kong residents fleeing Chinese repression, and some Hong Kongers appear to have taken them up on the offer. According to news reports, the number of Hong Kong residents who moved to Taiwan in the first four months of 2020 was up 150 percent from the same period last year.

The democracy movement that has so united the citizens of Hong Kong and Taiwan has allies in other parts of Asia as well. A social media movement known as the Milk Tea Alliance—a reference to the sweet milk tea popular in East Asia—has brought together activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand who are critical of Chinese nationalist netizens and who oppose Beijing’s new national security law. Recently, the Milk Tea Alliance spread to the Philippines, where some citizens have joined the online movement to voice concerns about Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.

But what many in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Asian countries see as online mobilization in support of universal democratic norms, Beijing sees as a dangerous movement of “splittists” who seek to undermine China’s sovereignty, keep China permanently divided, spread Western values, and contain China in Asia. Indeed, Chinese authorities regularly blame “external hostile forces” for the protests in Hong Kong—and for the movement’s resonance in Taiwan and elsewhere.

TAIWAN AND CHINESE ANXIETY

China’s leaders have always maintained that they are prepared to use force over Taiwan—either to prevent the island’s de jure independence or to compel its unification with the mainland. But Xi has taken a progressively harder line on Taiwan, in word as well as deed. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, he declared that reunification was linked to his “China Dream” of national rejuvenation. Since then, he has twice stated that the separation of mainland China and Taiwan “should not be passed down generation after generation.” And in his most recent speech focused solely on Taiwan, in January 2019, he said that “our country must be reunified, and will surely be reunified.”

Even more ominous, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang omitted the term “peaceful” in front of “unification”—previously standard in official communications about Taiwan—in his annual opening speech to the National People’s Congress in May. A few days later, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi did the same in his speech to the congress. As a former head of the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office, Wang was well aware of the significance of this rhetorical change. By the end of the NPC’s two-week session, “peaceful reunification” was back in the final version of Li’s work report approved by the congress—along with unconvincing explanations for its initial absence having to do with poor bureaucratic coordination.

In addition to hardening its rhetoric against Taiwan, China has sought to isolate the island diplomatically. In the last five years, Beijing has poached seven of Taipei’s formal allies, leaving only 15 countries that recognize Taiwan as an independent country. At the height of the coronavirus pandemic in May, China even excluded Taiwan from the annual meeting of the World Health Assembly in Geneva, despite the island’s global leadership in containing and mitigating COVID-19.
At the same time, China has ramped up military pressure on Taiwan. Its air force and navy have conducted more than ten transits and military exercises near the island since mid-January, including an increasing number of deliberate incursions into Taiwan’s airspace, according to research by Bonnie S. Glaser and Matthew P. get Funaiolo of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. In March 2019, China’s air force sent two advanced fighter jets over the centerline of the Taiwan Strait for the first time in 20 years. Since then, it has sent an increasing number of aircraft across the centerline. China’s strategic bombers have also circumnavigated the island multiple times in recent months, while other Chinese aircraft have crossed the Miyako Strait between Taiwan and Japan. All of these maneuvers were intended to intimidate Taiwan by demonstrating Beijing’s readiness to use force at a moment’s notice.

There is little Tsai can do to convince China to dial back the diplomatic and military pressure short of accepting its unilateral definition of “one China” and its “one country, two systems” model, both of which are now wholly discredited by what has happened in Hong Kong. In the worldview of China’s leaders, Tsai’s commitment to Taiwanese independence, her perceived efforts at “de-Sinification” on the island, and the growing connections between Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the democratic world more broadly all legitimize China’s saber rattling—and perhaps, eventually, its use of force. Xi appears to have made up his mind about Tsai—wrongly but perhaps conclusively. He and other Chinese leaders are still weighing the costs and benefits of a harder line on Taiwan as they take the measure of U.S. and international willpower—which is why the U.S. response to the Hong Kong law matters so much.

CHANGING BEIJING’S CALCULUS

To deter Beijing from further aggression, the United States must make clear that there will be consequences for the national security law, particularly if Beijing uses it to justify the arrest or rendition of journalists, peaceful activists, or political candidates in Hong Kong. The U.S. Congress has passed bipartisan legislation authorizing the Trump administration to deny visas and impose other targeted sanctions against those directly involved in the crackdown on Hong Kong, and the
Trump administration has indicated a readiness to implement these measures. Targeted sanctions won’t be cost-free for U.S.-Chinese relations or for the people of Hong Kong, but the United States can limit the collateral damage by implementing them incrementally, proportionately, and in concert with other powers.

The Trump administration will need to start by improving its coordination with European and Asian allies. It has issued symbolically important joint statements on Hong Kong, first with Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom and then with the G-7. But much more diplomacy is needed to broaden that coalition and coordinate pressure on Beijing. That so few Asian governments have criticized China’s new law is deeply worrisome, as is the European Union’s initial pledge that it will merely “follow developments closely.” But before Washington can rally its European and Asian allies behind a unified message on Hong Kong, it will have to stop kicking them. Trump’s unilateral withdrawal of troops from NATO, his extreme demands for payment from Tokyo and Seoul, his threats to pull troops out of South Korea, and his disinterest in the G-7 and other groupings have pushed these allies away at a time when they would ordinarily be open to U.S. leadership. These actions have also telegraphed vulnerability, disunity, and lack of resolve among Western allies to Beijing.

But China is creating more favorable conditions for U.S.-led diplomacy on Hong Kong. Beijing’s so-called wolf warrior diplomacy, aimed at intimidating countries critical of its handling of the pandemic, combined with its recent aggression on territorial issues has alienated much of the world. The United States should seize this opportunity to make Hong Kong a diplomatic priority. In the lead-up to the Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong in September, Washington should lead the G-7, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, and the so-called Quad of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India in joint statements and actions warning Beijing against arresting political candidates it dislikes.

The United States and its European and Asian allies should also consider offering Hong Kong citizens residency and a path to citizenship, just as the United Kingdom has done. And if the situation in Hong Kong deteriorates—owing to arrests of candidates in the September elections, for instance—the United States should consider sanctioning the Chinese officials responsible. Such measures won’t restore Hong Kong’s autonomy in the near term, but they could discourage overt acts of repression and help shape Beijing’s thinking about Taiwan.

Staving off Chinese aggression, whether in Taiwan or elsewhere in Asia, however, will also require the United States to get serious about military deterrence in the western Pacific. Over the last two decades, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has made advances that seriously eroded U.S. military power in the western Pacific, especially around Taiwan. Recent operations by two U.S. carrier battle groups in the South China Sea were important demonstrations of willpower, but capacity matters, too. As former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work has written, the U.S. military now faces the prospect of losing a fight with China in defense of Taiwan. The Pentagon has focused on building large platforms, such as aircraft carriers and big-deck amphibious ships, but such facilities don’t effectively deter China’s anti-access/area-denial capabilities. The United States needs to rethink its forward-basing posture, increase its cooperation and interoperability with
allies such as Japan, and improve its ability to fight in highly contested environments, including through greater use of unmanned systems. The House and Senate Armed Services Committees have proposed a Pacific Deterrence Initiative that would go a long way toward restoring the United States’ competitive edge in these areas. The U.S. Congress should fund the initiative and hold the Pentagon accountable for its timely implementation.

Aiding and cooperating with Taiwan will be crucial to larger U.S. efforts to deter Chinese aggression. Washington should help Taiwan make its political system more resilient in the face of Chinese pressure and its military better able to degrade Chinese capabilities in a fight. The latter objective will not be served by selling the island the billions of dollars’ worth of M1A2 tanks authorized by the Trump administration in 2019. These do little to deter a combined naval, air, and missile campaign from China—and the PLA will always be bigger and better equipped than Taiwan’s army in a ground battle. Rather, the United States should work with Taiwan to develop asymmetric military capabilities that would actually stand a chance of deterring a Chinese invasion or attacks on critical infrastructure. The Pentagon should further assist Taiwan’s military in reforming its reserve and mobilization systems, which are critical to the institution’s long-term strength. All the while, the United States should be quietly intensifying its preparations with Japan and other capable allies for contingencies involving Taiwan.

But even shrewd diplomatic and military preparations won’t guarantee Taiwan’s security unless the United States communicates its intentions, policies, and concerns about cross-strait relations clearly and consistently to Beijing. Doing that will require senior national security officials in China and the United States to resume the kind of candid strategic dialogue that took place during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations but that essentially ended after Trump took office. As former senior directors for Asia at the National Security Council, we can attest to both the value and the limits of such a dialogue with China. Expansive discussions of global order, such as those between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, are no longer possible, as few Chinese officials now have the freedom to range far and wide in discussing China’s intentions, let alone international politics. Nonetheless, in such talks the United States can set down clear markers that underscore what it will and will not do.

In our experience, dialogue of this nature was exceptionally useful in dispelling Beijing’s worst-case assessments of U.S. intentions and in clarifying that official warnings from Washington should not be dismissed as the isolated rhetoric of “hard-liners.” Even when such discussions are frustratingly one-sided, they should be seen not as a sign of weakness but as a critical investment in avoiding misperceptions that can lead to crises. Many U.S. allies now worry about joining U.S.-led coalitions to counter China, because they fear being pulled into a competitive spiral between Washington and Beijing that has no bottom. Resuming a strategic dialogue with China would signal that the United States is interested in arresting that spiral.

The fundamentals of the U.S.-Chinese relationship are changing as Beijing becomes more willing to take risks internationally and with a larger and more coercive toolkit than ever before. The new national security law is one instance of China’s increasingly assertive behavior. We worry that more instances could be on the horizon. However, U.S. national interests have remained constant for decades, if not centuries, and they must guide U.S. policymakers now. Since the beginning of the republic, the United States has sought to prevent a rival hegemon from dominating the Pacific. The situation in Hong Kong is a reminder that advancing this objective is rapidly becoming more difficult. U.S. pressure must be tempered with skillful diplomacy to ensure that Beijing sees an international coalition moving against it but doesn’t feel so threatened that it lashes out or is able to separate the United States from its allies.
What would happen if the US recognized Taiwan?

Risk of war is rising rapidly, and China may seek to push tensions even higher

Admiral James Stavridis

September 25, 2020

In this superheated U.S. election year, relations between Beijing and Washington are at their lowest point in decades. An increasingly dangerous flashpoint is Taiwan.

"Discard any illusions and prepare to fight," said a spokesman for China's Eastern Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army after China spent last weekend flying warplanes across the median line that separates the two highly armed competitors.

This was accompanied by a video showing Chinese long-range bombers conducting a practice run on a runway that mirrors the one located at the U.S. Anderson Air Force Base on Guam.

Clearly the risk of war is rising rapidly, and China may be trying to elicit an incident to push tensions even higher. So, is the U.S. actually considering formal recognition of Taiwan? And if the Trump administration attempted to do so, what is the likely outcome?

There are certainly strong signs of a warming relationship between Washington and Taipei, with the weekend escalation across the Taiwan Strait coming in the wake of the second high-level diplomatic visit to Taiwan by a U.S. official in as many months.

Last week U.S. Undersecretary of State Keith Krach attended the funeral of Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first democratically elected president, and joined several high-level government meetings. This followed last month's visit to Taiwan by U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar.

China has responded to both visits with 19 separate warplane incursions, forcing Taiwan to scramble its own fighters and place its air defenses on high alert.

After Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen warned that "the Chinese Communists must restrain themselves, and not provoke," the Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece, the Global Times, tweeted in response that Taiwan was "playing with fire."
The commentary from Washington has been increasingly belligerent. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell accused China of being "a lawless bully," adding that the U.S.-Taiwan relationship is "not a subset of our relations with China."

Meanwhile Washington is considering a new package of seven advanced defensive systems for Taiwan, including the MQ-9B Reaper drone, anti-ship missiles, and more advanced ground-based air defense systems. This is atop previous Trump administration sales of F-16 fighters, M1A2T Abrams tanks, Stinger portable anti-air missiles, and advanced MK-48 torpedoes.

And with the coming U.S. election likely to prompt an increase in disagreements between China and the U.S. -- especially as the competition for influence and power in the emerging markets of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America continues -- there will be a temptation for whoever wins in November to move closer to Taiwan, and even consider formally recognizing Taipei.

This would have an explosive effect on the U.S.-China relationship and could trigger a full-scale Chinese invasion of the island. Events could then easily spin out of control, leading to a U.S. military response against any Chinese offensive action on Taiwan.

Watch out for more actions from the U.S. that could antagonize Beijing, including fresh high-level official visits to Taiwan; the shifting of more advanced fighter aircraft to Guam; further U.S. sanctions that interfere with Chinese microchip access; or added sanctions directed against individual members of the Chinese Communist Party and their families. Taken together, such actions could convince President Xi that the time has come for more cross-strait military action. Especially if there is a period of confusion in the U.S. following the November election.

In addition to the type of cross-strait warplane incursions seen last weekend, other military actions could take the form of a significant Chinese military exercise in the waters around Taiwan; cyberattacks against key social networks on the island; the emergence in Taiwan of "sleeper cells," with so-called "little green men" in unmarked uniforms or civilian clothes moving to sow chaos; heightened submarine activity in the coastal waters off Taiwan; and military strikes against the channel islands including Quemoy, Matsu, and Penghu.

China's Coast Guard and fishing fleet could also be a factor in the waters around the island, conducting surveillance and offensive electronic warfare, all accompanied by a significant diplomatic and public disinformation campaign.

**How would the world respond?** There would likely be a combination of supporting intelligence operations; diplomatic protests at the United Nations; a worldwide influence campaign to condemn Chinese aggression; economic sanctions on Chinese goods; outright U.S. military assistance to Taiwan; and the flying of U.S. defensive counter-air sorties from Guam or even from Taiwanese bases. Naval interdiction and ground troop deployment would be unlikely given the significant potential to lead to great power war, something both sides would try to avoid.

In short, U.S. diplomatic recognition of Taiwan would have unpredictable and extremely dangerous consequences for both nations, the region, and of course for Taiwan, which would end up as ground zero in the fight. Let's hope domestic politics on both sides does not drive everyone toward that very fraught outcome.
Taiwan’s History — Q: What is the history of Taiwan going all the way back to the Chinese Civil War and how does it inform China’s policy towards the island today? ** The Qing dynasty ceded Taiwan and Penghu to Japan in 1895 after the end of the First Sino-Japanese War.

Chinese Unification — Q: Why is Taiwan so important to China? Q: Why would they risk so much in order to conquer it? Q: How can we understand the CCP’s multi-generational commitment to reunification?

Taiwan Politics — Q: What is the history of Taiwanese politics? Q: How significant was the victory of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its election of Tsai Ing-wen as president in 2016 and then again in 2020?

Tsai Ing-wen — Q: How does Tsai Ing-wen reflect where the majority of Taiwan’s citizens stand on the issue of Taiwan’s independence from mainland China? Q: How is Tsai Ing-wen perceived in Beijing?

CCP Misinformation & Political Warfare — Q: How does the CCP attempt to influence public opinion in Taiwan? Q: How much money & effort is put into propagandizing Taiwan? Q: How does Taiwan’s Digital Ministry combat this type of misinformation? Q: What is public opinion in China?
**US-TAIWAN RELATIONS**

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter signed the Taiwan Relations Act, which requires the U.S. to assist the island nation with equipment and services necessary for its defense. The Obama years were characterized by intermittent and infrequent security assistance to Taiwan. The Trump administration, on the other hand, has announced plans for new arms sales to Taiwan and signed legislation encouraging bilateral official meetings, underscoring U.S. support for a strategically important democratic ally in the Western Pacific.

**Formosa & American Support of Taiwan** — Q: What is the history of official, friendly US relations with Taiwan, going back to at least the signing of both the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty, as well as the Formosa Resolution of 1955?

**Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)** — In 1979, the Carter administration abrogated its mutual defense treaty with the Republic of China (ROC) by signing Taiwan Relations Act, which has defined the officially substantial but non-diplomatic relations between the people of the United States and the people of Taiwan ever since. Q: What are the US's obligations and responsibilities under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)?

**American Obligations** — Q: Do the American people have a treaty obligation to engage militarily on behalf of Taiwan? Q: How far do our obligations go under the TRA? Q: Do you believe that the American people have a moral obligation to assist Taiwan?
Global Balancer in Asia — The US has played the role of global balancer in Asia since the end of WWII. Q: How important is our Taiwan policy for sending a signal to other Asian countries that “we have their back” in the event of hostile interference by China? Q: Is the US capable of playing this role? Q: Will the American public have the appetite for it?

American Presence — Q: How important is showing up and being present and giving moral support to Taiwan?

Sufficient Support? — Q: Is the US doing enough? Q: What more can it do? Q: What can Taiwan do to better protect itself? You have said that we need to provide “robust support” to Taiwan. Q: What would robust support for Taiwan look like?

Understanding of China — Q: How does our understanding of China’s culture, language, politics, and operations compare with our understanding of the USSR during the 1950’s? Q: How effective are relations between our various counterparts?

Trump-Taiwan — Q: What has been the Trump administration’s policy towards Taiwan? Q: What do you believe a re-election of Donald Trump would mean for US-Taiwan relations?

Biden-Taiwan — Q: What does a Biden administration mean for US-Taiwan relations? Q: What does it mean for America’s China policy?

INVASION SCENARIO PLANNING:

Early Indicators — You have said that “the probability appears to be growing that at some point in the 2020s China's military could be ready to launch a cross-Strait invasion.” Q: How might we know if that was about to happen? Q: How might such an invasion unfold? Q: Will the PLA seek to provoke Taiwan into conflict?

PLA Depictions of a Taiwan Invasion — Q: How do internal Chinese military writings depict the campaign to conquer Taiwan, and what capabilities do they feel are necessary for executing it? Q: How do PLA writings portray their adversary? Q: Where do they see Taiwanese strengths and where do they see weaknesses?

Geographical Challenges for the PLA — Q: What sort of unique geographical challenges does Taiwan present for a ground invasion?

Importance of Decisive Victory — Q: How important is it that any war with Taiwan be rapid and decisive for the CCP?
Weaponry — Q: What sort of weaponry are the relevant players bringing to the table, how sophisticated are their systems, and how much appetite, resolve, and fortitude do their respective sides have for conflict? Q: How much of Chinese planning has been focused on defeating the United States and driving it out of the Pacific theatre?

PLA Depictions of a Post-War Taiwan — Q: How do PLA writings depict a post-war Taiwan? Q: In theory, what would follow the invasion if Taiwan's army collapsed and the island was actually conquered?

American Response to Invasion — Q: What would America do in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan? Q: How would the response differ between this administration and a Biden one?

Taiwan Defenses — Q: How does Taiwan's military plan to defend the island against Chinese invasion? Q: What capabilities do Taiwanese officers feel are necessary to execute their defense plans? Q: In the worst case, how long could they be expected to hold out before direct American assistance was required?

Towards Peace or War? — Q: Are we on a path that makes this high-end conflict more or less appealing to China? Q: Can we prevent Beijing from breaking the peace?

Strategic Clarity vs. Strategic Ambiguity — Q: Can you explain to our audience what the terms “strategic clarity” and “strategic ambiguity” refer to? Richard Haas and David Sacks recently wrote an opinion piece for Foreign Affairs magazine that made the case for a US security guarantee for Taiwan. This received strong rebuke by many in the international relations community. Q: How long has this debate between clarity and ambiguity been going on? Q: What are the implications of what Haas and Sacks are proposing? Q: Where do you come down?

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*Note that this list is notional and does not include every indicator of potential invasion.