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POLICY BRIEF

AVOIDING WAR OVER TAIWAN

by The Task Force on U.S.-China Policy

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The People's Republic of China's (PRC) assertive military exercises in response to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on Aug. 2-3, 2022 — and the PRC's continued military actions in the air and maritime space around Taiwan since then — have brought heightened attention to the risk of military conflict between mainland China on the one side and Taiwan and the United States on the other. This policy brief argues that despite rising tensions, it is both essential and possible to avoid war in the Taiwan Strait. None of the three governments wants war. But to avoid war, all three governments must avoid steps that force the other side to launch a military conflict.

As tension rises between the PRC and the United States over Taiwan, strategists on both sides seem to have forgotten the lesson taught years ago by Nobel Prize-winning American game theorist Thomas Schelling: deterring an opponent from taking a proscribed action requires a combination of credible threats and credible assurances. Thus, key for United States policy is to understand that effective deterrence of the PRC requires not only the credible threat of a forceful response to an attack on Taiwan, but also the credible assurance that if the PRC refrains from attacking Taiwan, interests considered vital to Beijing will not be damaged anyway. This second requirement would be violated if Washington were to heed recent calls for a change in its long-standing policy that refrains from supporting statehood for Taiwan or appears to restore the U.S.-Republic of China (ROC) alliance that was scrapped as a prerequisite for the establishment of U.S. diplomatic relations with the PRC.

Drivers of conflict: The peaceful settlement of differences across the Taiwan Strait is unlikely in the near term. The policy challenge is to keep rising tensions from evolving into a shooting war that would be extremely dangerous and destructive for all sides and that could result in the use of nuclear weapons.

The PRC is unlikely to abandon its quest for control over Taiwan — what it calls “reunification with the motherland” — no matter who is in power in Beijing. The Qing dynasty's loss of Taiwan to Japan in 1895, and the island's recovery at the end of World War II, are central chapters in the historical narrative of Chinese nationalism. Preventing the permanent separation of Taiwan is thus viewed as essential to the PRC's national interest and, perhaps most important, to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

But to date, Taiwan remains outside of Beijing's control, administered by the same government (although not the same political party) that fled the mainland when the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. Taiwan's government has survived for more than seven decades thanks to security assurances from the United States – first in the form of a mutual security treaty and later in the form of a political commitment without a formal defense arrangement, embodied in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. Starting in 1986, Taiwan went through a transition to democratic rule, making it a more valuable partner for the United States and more challenging for the CCP to move toward reunifying it with the mainland.

PRC rulers from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping acknowledged that the unification of Taiwan with the mainland would take a long time. At the same time, CCP leaders and party documents have repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo. In 2002, under Jiang Zemin's leadership, the 16th Party Congress report declared that the "Taiwan issue cannot be postponed indefinitely." In 2013, President Xi Jinping stated that "we should not allow this problem to be passed down from one generation to the next." Xi has since identified unification as essential for the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation," a mission to which he has linked his personal legacy and for which he has set a target date of 2049, the centennial of PRC's founding.

The PRC continues to state that it prefers to unify with Taiwan through peaceful means, but insists that it has the right to do so by force if Taiwan declares independence, takes steps to establish Taiwan's permanent separation, or delays unification indefinitely. Article 8 of 2005 [China's Anti-Secession Law](#) states that "In the event that the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Beijing has for decades been building up the military capability to make credible the military threat to Taiwan and to any U.S. forces that might intervene in Taiwan's defense. This includes developing what the U.S. Department of Defense calls "anti-access area denial" (A2AD) capabilities – large inventories of Chinese missiles, submarines, military aircraft, and cyber weapons that put at risk U.S. surface ships (including aircraft carriers), aircraft, military satellites and American bases in the Western Pacific, like those in Japan and Guam. After Speaker Pelosi's August visit, the Chinese military sought to demonstrate its ability to surround and squeeze the island, signaling a potential blockade strategy that could strangle Taiwan's economy and force the island to enter political talks on Beijing's terms.

The people of Taiwan are largely opposed to unification with the PRC. Since the island's democratic transition in 1986, and through the practice of hard-fought but peaceful presidential, legislative, and local elections, a distinct, liberal-democratic Taiwanese identity has emerged. This is at odds with the Chinese identity that an earlier generation of leaders on Taiwan endorsed, and which Beijing has sought to perpetuate. A June 2022 [survey](#) of Taiwan public opinion by the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University found that 63.7% of respondents in Taiwan now identify as Taiwanese rather than both Chinese and Taiwanese (30.4%). Taiwan residents fear the imposition of authoritarian political, cultural, and economic controls that would suppress their political and intellectual freedoms. Still, most of Taiwan's people are wary of taking any action that might result in a Chinese attack.

The people of Taiwan know that a declaration of independence or acts tantamount to such a declaration would likely trigger Chinese military action. In the National Chengchi University [survey](#), more than 56.9% favored maintaining the status quo, under which Taiwan neither declares independence nor moves toward unification with mainland China. Another 30.3% favored moving toward independence (though only 5% favored independence as soon as possible), and only 6.4% favored unification with mainland China.

For the United States, insistence on what the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué called "peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question" is a long-standing policy interest, subsequently reiterated in the U.S.-PRC communiqués of 1979 and 1982 and the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979. This posture reflects American values and strategic interests – the principle of peaceful settlement of disputes and support for the strategic interest of a friend and former ally. Since Taiwan's democratization began in the late 1980s, the United States has had an added incentive to help defend a democracy against absorption by an authoritarian state. Economically, Taiwan is a major U.S. trading partner and a source of strategically crucial high-end computer chips. War in the Taiwan Strait would be catastrophic to the global economy. Politically, global perceptions of U.S. resolve at home and commitment abroad would be severely damaged if the United

States were to stand aside as the PRC attacked Taiwan to compel unification. But exactly how and under what conditions the United States would respond to a PRC attack has purposely been left unclear, under a policy known as “strategic ambiguity.”

The only way all three sides could be satisfied would be if the people of Taiwan voluntarily agreed to some arrangement that Beijing could call “unification.” But this possibility is remote without positive political changes on the mainland and without a more flexible formula for some sort of federation in which Taiwan would enjoy significant autonomy and a voice in federal affairs. Instead, as the PRC has become more repressive in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and more broadly throughout the country, Taiwan’s separate identity has only become stronger. Beijing makes matters worse by refusing to speak with elected Taiwan officials who reflect majority opinion.

Increasing risk of war: The crisis kicked off by Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan was a symptom of larger changes taking place in the Washington-Beijing-Taipei triangle. As its economic and military resources have grown, the PRC has emerged from a period of strategic caution to assert its interests more strongly by, for example, reclaiming land and building military installations atop seven reefs in the South China Sea, sending coast guard ships daily into waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands whose ownership China contests with Japan, and enrolling many of its neighbors in its Belt and Road Initiative to tie their economies more closely to China’s. The United States has tried to preserve its incumbent position as the preeminent power in East Asia by strengthening its alliance relations with Japan, upgrading and increasing the activities of the “Quad” group consisting of the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, and establishing the AUKUS (Australia-UK-U.S.) grouping to provide nuclear submarines to Australia, increasing diplomatic activity in the region, and in other ways.

China appears convinced that the United States seeks to prevent China from ever achieving what it sees as its legitimate national objectives, and that U.S. policy on Taiwan is part of that strategy. The U.S. appears convinced that Chinese pressure on Taiwan threatens U.S. values and interests. Taiwan, for its part, has done what it could to consolidate its distinct democratic identity at home and to cultivate *de facto* international status as an autonomous political entity.

All three sides have claimed that their positions have not changed, while advancing their interests step by step. Under the leadership of President Tsai Ing-wen, Taipei has not declared independence, held referendums on issues that appear tantamount to asserting independence, nor proposed revising the ROC constitution in ways that would permanently separate Taiwan from mainland China. But it has fought hard against Chinese attempts to diminish its status as an autonomous political unit, by seeking a greater presence in foreign capitals with new trade offices and meaningful participation in international bodies such as the UN that require sovereignty for membership. With U.S. advice, weapons, and training, Taiwan is building up its military capability to resist a Chinese military attack for at least as long as it would take for American help to arrive.

The United States says it has not changed its long-standing policy that urges the Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to resolve their differences peacefully, and that the United States does not support Taiwan independence, and opposes unilateral changes in the status quo by either side of the Taiwan Strait. But beginning in the Trump Administration, the United States began upgrading the level and symbolic trappings of U.S. government contacts with Taiwan representatives, publicizing high level contacts and military relations with Taiwan that were new or previously kept secret, and referring to Taiwan as a “country” in a Pentagon document. The Biden Administration formally invited Taiwan’s top representative in Washington to attend President Biden’s inauguration, continued with some of the Trump Administration’s upgrades in contacts with Taiwan representatives, and has intentionally or unintentionally altered long-standing language regarding U.S. policy toward cross-Strait relations. President Biden’s remark at a press conference in Tokyo in May that defending Taiwan is “the commitment we made” and his subsequent remark on *60 Minutes* that U.S. forces would defend the island “if in fact there was an unprecedented attack” appeared to many to be a strengthening of the American commitment to Taiwan even though other government officials said these comments did not mark a change in policy.

Under President Biden, the United States has continued to send high-ranking government officials to Taiwan, while several Congressional delegations have visited the island, and the Pentagon has further enhanced its military sales and training assistance to prevent PRC conquest of Taiwan. Seen in this context, the Pelosi visit was understood by Beijing as a fresh escalation of American support for Taiwan because of Speaker Pelosi’s high rank as second in the line of

succession to the presidency and because she is a Democrat, like President Biden. Beijing's belief was thus that Biden could have blocked the trip if he so chose, which is almost certainly false. Still, even though the individual actions of Members of Congress do not change the policy of the executive branch, Pelosi's visit marked an increase in the protocol level of expressed U.S. federal government support for Taiwan.

Under Xi Jinping, Beijing's coercive approach has increased tensions across the Taiwan Strait and, linked with Xi's rhetoric about the need to make progress on unification, appear to be attempts to change the status quo. Beijing has refused to have any direct contact with President Tsai's government. PRC leaders continue to declare that they want to achieve unification peacefully, but long before Speaker Pelosi's visit, the PRC had invested tens of billions of dollars every year in building the capacity to attack Taiwan and deter or defeat an American intervention. In addition, the PRC has blocked Taiwan's participation in international bodies, and has induced several countries that used to recognize Taiwan to switch diplomatic recognition to the PRC.

Beijing took advantage of the Pelosi visit to ramp up threatening military activities in what were clearly pre-planned exercises and to establish what appears to be a new status quo in which its ships and planes operate freely and frequently in the air and waters near Taiwan. The PRC also sought to punish the United States for the visit, cancelling military-to-military dialogues and suspending several bilateral cooperation programs, including on climate change. The PRC blamed all these outcomes on the United States because of the Pelosi visit, attempting to reduce the diplomatic costs to the PRC of its increasingly aggressive behavior toward Taiwan.

Deterrence 101: Avoiding war in the Taiwan Strait requires all sides to be deterred – at a minimum, for Taiwan to be deterred from declaring formal independence, the United States to be deterred from recognizing Taiwan as an independent state or restoring something akin to the U.S.-ROC alliance, and the PRC to be deterred from using military force against Taiwan to compel unification. Not only must all sides be threatened with harm for crossing these red lines, but they must also be assured that refraining from crossing these red lines will not lead to catastrophic losses or damage to their interests. Triangular deterrence has succeeded for more than 40 years in keeping peace across the Taiwan Strait. But rising tensions and changed conditions have made that state of mutual deterrence fragile. American policy should seek to bolster, not disrupt, deterrence.

Deterrence to prevent a proscribed set of actions by a target state requires credibility in each of the two elements of deterrence: threat and assurance. Both elements are essential. Credible threats require signaling both the costs of a proscribed action and sufficient political will to impose those costs. Credible assurances require conveying to the target, in a way that it can trust, that it will not be taken advantage of if it does not take the proscribed action.

Since the beginning of the Trump Administration, deterrence has begun to break down on all sides. Taiwan's ability to exact a military cost from mainland China in case of an attack has never been strong. Taiwan is only now acquiring mobile weapons that might enable it to hold off a PRC attack for a few weeks. Meanwhile, Taiwan's assurance that it will not declare independence if it is not attacked has weakened over time, in large part owing to the public opinion trends on the island outlined above. For her part, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen has avoided taking actions that would provoke an attack from the PRC, but she has not assured Beijing that Taiwan will not eventually pursue *de jure* independence. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party no longer advocates formal independence for the island, but instead asserts that the ROC (Taiwan) is already a sovereign and independent country, and that any change in the status quo must be decided by all residents of Taiwan through a plebiscite. For its part, the opposition Kuomintang maintains that the ROC is independent and sovereign. It has shifted from a position of advocating eventual unification with mainland China, albeit only under certain conditions, to a position of seeking to lower tensions across the strait in order to preserve Taiwan's *de facto* autonomy as long as possible.

The PRC has implemented the credible threat part of deterrence effectively, but it has failed to implement the credible assurance element, with disastrous effects. Mainland China has long been able to threaten Taiwan with severe military and economic consequences if it were to declare independence. By building up its A2AD military capabilities, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) also poses a credible threat to U.S. forces, should there be a conflict across the Taiwan Strait. But Beijing has failed to assure the population of Taiwan that refraining from steps toward permanent separation or independence will be met with restraint rather than increased efforts to compel unification on Beijing's terms. To the contrary, the PRC has greatly increased military pressure on Taiwan and warned that it will attack if it is unable to

achieve peaceful unification. Beijing has not articulated a firm deadline by which unification must be achieved, although Xi Jinping has stated that progress on unification with Taiwan is a prerequisite to fulfilling his dream of the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation,” for which he set 2049 as the target.

On the U.S. side, both aspects of deterrence have weakened. In the past, the United States was more able than it is today to credibly threaten an effective military response if the mainland were to attack Taiwan. The cost of military action to the PRC appeared very high even if Beijing elites believed that they would ultimately prevail, including the threat of painful economic sanctions by the U.S. Meanwhile, through its consistent adherence across multiple presidential administrations to its “one China” policy by which the United States “does not challenge” the position that Taiwan is a part of China, in the words of the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, Washington was able to credibly assure Beijing that if it did not use force against Taiwan, the United States would not support Taiwanese independence for the island and that it would not restore something akin to the 1954 U.S.-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty, which was terminated as part of the U.S.-PRC normalization agreement in 1979.

Dangerous talk: Over the past few years, and accelerating after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some former top Trump officials, Congressional representatives, and political commentators have called for a clear, unconditional U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan, a shift from “strategic ambiguity” to “strategic clarity.” Some have even called for formal recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state. Still others have called for a permanent deployment of significant U.S. forces on Taiwan to lend credibility to the U.S. threat of a military response to a mainland attack. In Senate testimony, one senior defense department official implied that the United States could never allow the PRC to control Taiwan because this would render impossible the defense of U.S. allies in Asia.¹ This posture could be interpreted by the PRC as the United States opposing mainland China - Taiwan unification, even if agreed upon peacefully by those two parties.

A formal U.S. policy shift from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity would undercut deterrence, rather than enhance it. Strategic clarity is hardly necessary because Mainland leaders and the PLA already fully expect and plan for U.S. intervention if China acts militarily to take control of Taiwan. An unconditional U.S. commitment to Taiwan, especially if accompanied by significant U.S. forces deployed on Taiwan in peacetime, would look like a restoration of the U.S.-ROC mutual defense treaty in the eyes of PRC leaders, akin to re-establishing U.S. formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan and committing to defending Taiwan’s permanent separation from the mainland. From Beijing’s perspective, such policy changes would also encourage Taiwan to take greater risks in pursuing de jure independence. Especially after Defense Secretary Austin stated that U.S. support for Ukraine is partially designed to “weaken Russia,” Beijing elites worry that the United States views its Taiwan policy in a similar light: mostly as a tool to weaken the PRC.

Any declared U.S. policy that appears designed to wrest Taiwan permanently from the Chinese nation would be anathema to CCP elites— worse than a war from their perspective — and the PRC would have little incentive to forego the use of force against Taiwan or against U.S. forces coming to Taiwan’s defense. In short, shifting American policy toward support for Taiwan’s permanent separation from the mainland would be more likely to provoke, rather than deter, a PRC attack on Taiwan.

Policy recommendations: The credibility of both U.S. threat and assurance in the Taiwan Strait have been weakened. To maintain peace and stability, the United States must restore the credible threat of costs the PRC would bear if it attacked Taiwan and the credible assurance that the PRC will not suffer catastrophic losses to its interests if it refrains from such an attack.

To present a credible threat, the United States must reconfigure its military posture in East Asia and shift away from a reliance on vulnerable aircraft carriers and a few large, concentrated air and naval bases. Instead, the United States should adopt a more mobile, dispersed, and ultimately resilient posture in the region that will be much harder for China to attack and destroy. Often described as “active denial,” such a strategy enhances deterrence by denying the PRC the prospect of a seemingly quick and cheap military victory over Taiwan. Moves in this direction are underway, including new doctrines from the U.S. Army, Navy, Marines, and Air force as well as the procurement of large numbers of long-

¹ [Statement](#) by Dr. Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Office of the Secretary of Defense Before the 117th Congress, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate on Dec. 8, 2021.

range anti-surface and anti-ship missiles, many of which could offset and outmatch Chinese systems. Such efforts must be complemented by increasing U.S. military access to additional locations from which to operate in the region, hardening existing U.S. facilities to reduce their vulnerability to pre-emptive strikes, pre-positioning munitions and other supplies in theater, and reducing the vulnerability in U.S. logistics support from the continental United States to forces in East Asia.

Taiwan must demonstrate its ability to maintain resilience during a blockade and impose high costs on an invading PRC force. Taiwan should create deeper reserves of strategic resources like fuel and food in case the PRC elects to blockade the island. The United States should continue to press Taiwan to create more robust, mobile coastal defenses and air defenses, turning itself into a "porcupine" capable of inflicting real pain on an invading PRC military. Unlike in Ukraine, which enjoys land borders with U.S. allies, if a war over Taiwan were to break out, it would become extremely difficult for the United States to resupply the island. For that reason, Taiwan must stockpile and train with the weapons it needs in advance. It must also expand its civil defense capabilities both to pose the threat of defense in depth to an invading military and to distribute essential resources to the public during a blockade. The United States cannot help defend Taiwan if the island will not defend itself.

The United States should continue to clarify with regional allies their own stake in peace and stability in cross-Strait relations and the need for them to contribute to a moderate and responsible U.S. strategy to deter mainland belligerence. The United States military will need greater access on the territory of regional allies and partners beyond its current fixed and vulnerable bases in the region. To the degree possible, the United States should enhance cooperation with allies to plan and prepare for joint or coordinated military responses to a conflict over Taiwan. Washington should also continue to mount a global diplomatic effort to emphasize to Beijing the kinds of economic and diplomatic costs it would incur during and after a military conflict.

But credible threats are not enough to prevent a war. The United States must also restore credible assurance, making clear to both Taipei and Beijing that its objective is not an independent Taiwan but rather peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Washington needs to restate key aspects of its "one China" policy consistently and clearly: it will accept any outcome that is peacefully agreed on by mainland China and Taiwan, it does not support Taiwan independence, and it opposes any unilateral change to the status quo by either side of the Taiwan Strait. This has long been the official U.S. position, but a series of statements and omissions by political leaders in Washington have cast into doubt the U.S. commitment to this policy and at times U.S. actions have contravened these statements. U.S. President Joe Biden's administration should therefore speak and act with greater discipline and consistency on Taiwan than it has in the past. Senior U.S. officials should not refer to Taiwan as a country or an ally, and should not say that Taiwan can decide unilaterally that it wants to be legally independent, as if the United States had no stake in such a policy. The U.S. should make clear that it is not pursuing sovereign status for Taiwan when it presses for the island's inclusion in international organizations that do not require members to be independent states, for Taiwan's meaningful participation short of membership in intergovernmental organizations such as the World Health Organization and International Civil Aviation Organization that do require statehood for membership, and for the negotiation of bilateral trade and investment agreements that strengthen the U.S.-Taiwan economic relationship. The Biden administration should continue to press Beijing to engage in direct discussions with Taipei's democratically elected leadership and to seek a long-term resolution of cross-strait differences that meets the approval of the people of Taiwan.

The United States should also avoid symbolic political gestures that needlessly aggravate Beijing, focusing instead on substantive measures that make Taiwan and forward deployed U.S. forces in Asia stronger and more resilient. That means U.S. officials and politicians, including members of the U.S. Congress and those campaigning for office, should refrain from making politically advantageous but strategically damaging statements about Taiwan.² Recent calls for clarity in the U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan are unnecessary to enhance the credibility of threat because the PRC leadership already anticipates that the United States would intervene in a cross-Strait conflict, although Beijing does not know how intensively or effectively Washington would do so. An unconditional U.S. defense commitment would, however, likely undercut the essential component of assurance in deterrence by appearing to restore the U.S.-ROC

2 Chris Murphy, [Now China has changed its policy towards Taiwan, America should too](#), The Economist, Sept. 1, 2022.

alliance relationship and providing a blank check to future politicians on the island advocating for de jure independence. Similarly, calling for formal recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state as has former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or for the stationing of significant U.S. forces on the island in peacetime, as has former National Security Advisor John Bolton, or for Taiwan to be designated as a "non-NATO ally" as did the original language of the Taiwan Policy Act, may all sound like ways to bolster deterrence of a cross-Strait conflict. But if these policies were adopted, they would undercut assurances to Beijing that are an essential element of deterrence and thereby greatly increase, rather than decrease, the likelihood of conflict across the Taiwan Strait.

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About the Task Force and Past Reports

The Task Force on U.S.-China Policy is a group of China specialists from around the U.S., convened by Asia Society's [Center on U.S.-China Relations](#) and the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy's [21st Century China Center](#). It was established in fall 2015, during an increasingly uncertain time surrounding the U.S.-China relationship. Task Force projects are made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with additional support from The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands, and The Janet and Arthur Ross Foundation.

The Task Force offered a set of recommendations to the incoming Trump Administration in its 2017 report, "[U.S. Policy Toward China: Recommendations for a New Administration.](#)" A mid-term report in 2019 followed, titled "[Course Correction: Toward an Effective and Sustainable China Policy.](#)" In 2021, it released a new report titled "[China's New Direction: Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy.](#)"

In addition to the above, the Task Force formed "working groups" with other organizations to produce three topical reports. In 2018, it published "[China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance.](#)" that detailed the CCP's efforts to influence American institutions in improper ways. In 2020, it issued a report, "[Dealing with the Dragon: China as a Transatlantic Challenge.](#)" that examined changing European attitudes towards relations with China. A second report, "[Meeting the China Challenge: A New American Strategy for Technology Competition.](#)" followed in November 2020 and examined science and technology in the U.S.-China competition.