

Commentary



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Taiwan: Between the Extremes of War and Abandonment

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With the commentariat in full swing trying to predict who will likely fill key positions in a Democrat administration should Joe Biden defeat Donald Trump in November, there has been a surge in opinion that whoever occupied the White House in January next year should avoid treating China as an adversary. Convinced that the current course risks engaging us in a new and unnecessary “cold war,” those commentators have also tended to argue that US security commitments to Taiwan should be abandoned, under the premise that the democracy of 23.5 million people isn’t worth risking the spiral of major armed conflict with China.

Two principal groups have made the case in recent years for the abandonment of Taiwan. One comprises primarily academics who, revealingly, have in most cases enjoyed visiting scholar positions at think tanks or universities in China (Goldstein 2020).¹ Others simply feel compelled to echo Beijing’s official position on Taiwan to ensure continued access to China. The second group includes intellectuals who either argue, from a Realist perspective (Mearsheimer 2014), that concessions ought to be made to rising powers (White 2019; Glaser 2015; Swaine, Deng, and Lescure 2016),² or, from the left, regard US involvement abroad as inevitably imperialistic. For the latter, Taiwan is a mere means to an end, an extension of US empire and, as a bonus, a perfect client for a nefarious “military-industrial

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complex” (Clifton 2015). Tellingly, many of those who have argued for “ceding” Taiwan to China have never set foot in Taiwan and therefore have little if any understanding of what its society is like and why it is, in many ways, so fundamentally different from China.

A good number of them have also argued that whoever favours continued US support for Taiwan must be a “Trump supporter,” an intellectually lazy attempt at discrediting anyone who makes the case that at least some of the US’s foreign policy decisions since 2016 (such as closer ties between Washington and Taipei) have actually been genuinely beneficial to the international community.

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The Trump-supporter argument quickly falls flat, however, since it has become rather clear that there is bi-partisan support in the US for the idea that the permissive – and often myopic, by design – China policy that has governed relations since the 1970s has engineered the emergence not of a responsible stakeholder, but rather a despotic giant. And that giant has now amassed sufficient capability to challenge the international order as we know it, an order that, albeit imperfectly observed, even by its key architect, is nevertheless more humane than the one that Beijing is now proposing. Whoever staffs a Biden administration – Michèle Flournoy, for example, is widely regarded as a potential Secretary of Defense in a Democratic administration (Martin 2020) – will not turn back the clock on China (see Flournoy 2020).³ Given this, as well as strong bi-partisan support for Taiwan in Congress, it is difficult to imagine that Washington will abandon Taiwan anytime soon.

And yet, the argument for abandonment will not fade away. And if it remains sustained, it could whittle away at longstanding policy and have a truly transformative impact at some point in the future. Consequently, even though such voices are unlikely to have much currency with the next US administration, it is nevertheless necessary to restate why continued investment in Taiwan’s defence is morally the right thing to do.

Taiwan isn’t simply a piece of real estate for the US to exploit for purposes of containing China. Nor is it only of strategic value to other countries within the region which, should it be annexed by China, could perceive an existential threat and therefore launch an arms race with China, on which, in Japan’s case, could very well go nuclear. In all of East Asia, Taiwan is by far the most successful and vibrant democracy, with a civil society that is the envy of much more “mature” democracies around the world.

Under the Tsai Ing-wen administration, Taiwan has partnered with other countries in promoting democracy and good governance in a region where such values are scarce. Taiwan does not threaten any of its neighbors militarily, and decades ago forsook a nuclear weapons program. Despite being excluded from the UN, it has nevertheless willingly subscribed to various non-proliferation initiatives, and while outside the UN system, it has proven to be one of the most adept at dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (thanks in large part to its having one the best health care systems in the world) (Cole 2020) and in providing support for other countries. Taiwan is therefore the perfect example of an authoritarian country that democratized and embraced the values that underscore the international order that emerged from two devastating world wars in the previous century. It has one of the freest press and was the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, a reflection of the openness and creativity of its people.

From a moral perspective, it would be bankrupt to sacrifice one of the most successful examples of democratization and rules-abiding polity after all these years of investing in it. It would send a dangerous signal, that playing by the rules and embracing norms provides no guarantee that, when push comes to shove, a state will not be overrun by larger states that behave in a manner which led to two bloody World Wars. The abandonment of Taiwan would also strike a major blow to millions of people across Asia (including many in China, who cannot say so openly) who look up to Taiwan as a source of inspiration for what could be in their own country. Abandoning Taiwan would cheapen democracy and turn our alleged commitment to its defence into a mere cynical slogan.

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Taiwan also isn't an unresolved issue from a “family quarrel” or “unfinished business” in a civil war, as China and its champions want us to believe. Beijing maintains that Taiwan is an “internal matter” which other countries should, under the “one China” principle, stay away from. But it is an “internal matter” only if we allow its propaganda to define our reality or rewrite history. Rather, Taiwan is a frontline state in a clash of ideologies, a line at sea where the very foundations of our world will be defined and redefined. Taiwan, therefore, isn't a mere pawn, without volition and whose sake is to be decided by others. Its people have a voice, and year after year they have made it clear that their democracy is non-negotiable. This does not entail a refusal on the part of the Taiwanese to acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of China. Far from it: ever pragmatic, many of them regard China as a neighbor with tremendous potential and where many opportunities exist,

not to mention the fact that the two countries share languages and various cultural elements. None of this, however, undermines the case that Taiwan is sovereign.

Taiwan also isn't an inconveniently or unfortunately located plot of land caught in a dispute between a hegemon and its challenger, nor is the ongoing US policy shift on China solely the result of fears of being displaced as *primus inter pares* in the region. The longstanding US presence in the Asia-Pacific has inarguably served as a stabilizing factor that has buttressed the region's extraordinary rise as an economic powerhouse in recent decades (including China's). That stabilizing presence is now being challenged. And here, those who argue that we should yield to China its due sphere of influence – which by default implies abandoning Taiwan to its fate and potential takeover by the People's Liberation Army – often forget (or refuse to see) that the would-be new no. 1 in the region isn't an ordinary country.

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The difference isn't merely that, unlike Western democracies, China does not have a multi-party system. It is, instead, civilizational in its outlook and therefore inherently expansionist, driven by a racist understanding of nationhood that is of significance for both ethnic minorities within China and the region. This is a challenger that disagrees with our very concept of human rights and democracy, one that is governed, in every aspect, by a despotic regime that silences critics, erases history, muzzles the press, engages in rampant ethnic-cleansing and cultural genocide, that imprisons millions in Xinjiang and represses millions more on the Tibetan plateau, and that conducts surveillance and intimidation against millions more abroad while expecting that no matter where they are, Chinese must serve the Motherland.

Yes, China has lifted millions of people from poverty, an achievement as commendable as it is unprecedented. But none of this necessitates, or should be used to legitimize, a highly repressive state. None of this gives China the right to challenge international norms of conduct, or *carte blanche* when it projects its ambitions onto neighbors who do not subscribe to its policy preferences.

It would be sheer folly to reward Beijing by “giving it” Taiwan, or to expect that some negotiated settlement could resolve the matter in ways that ensure the continued freedoms of the Taiwanese people. Abandoning Taiwan to its fate would simply embolden the current hawks in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) while adding fuel to a form of ultranationalism that has already reached alarming levels. Rather, it is essential that we draw a line. And that

line lies in the Taiwan Strait.

None of this signifies that we should wage a hot war with China. Such a strategy would only lead to disaster – potentially a nuclear one – for all involved, including the likely annihilation of Taiwan. Nor, in fact, should a commitment to Taiwan’s defence entail that in doing so the US and allies risk being dragged into an unnecessary war with China. When the first shots are heard across the Taiwan Strait, we all lose. With abandonment and appeasement morally defunct and a hot war an extreme that much be avoided, what does this leave us?

Deterrence and counter-coercion. And on this point, far too many commentators have tended to over-militarize deterrence while neglecting the many other, non-kinetic elements of what should constitute a whole-of-government approach to the problem. Although deterrence will always have a military component (and that is why Taiwan continues to procure defence assets from the US and to develop its own technology), it is insufficient, in and of itself, to change how an opponent calculates the potential costs and benefits of taking military action against an opponent (in this case, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan). In cases, like the Taiwan Strait, where the balance of power has clearly shifted in favour of the aggressor (China), there is always a risk that decision-makers will conclude that they can accomplish their objectives quickly and at minimal material cost.

Such a scenario becomes all the more likely if the aggressor believes that the target’s security guarantor (the US) is distracted by another contingency or is unwilling to fully commit to the defence of its ally or to endanger the lives of countless of its servicemen and servicewomen for such a purpose. That fact explains why Chinese propaganda has long sought to convince the US that the Taiwanese are unwilling to do what is necessary to defend themselves, from which comes the question, “Why should Americans risk their lives for the defence of Taiwan.”

A more robust deterrent, therefore, will emerge if, as a complement to military provisions and preparedness, other vectors are brought into the equation. This includes, but is not limited to, the threat of economic retaliation, sanctions, embargoes, cyber attacks, and frozen assets. Besides not risking lives in actual combat, such measures have the additional advantage of adding to the burden of decision to launch an attack against the smaller party (Taiwan). It would become much more difficult to calculate that one can quickly win a war and get away with invasion if such actions risk provoking non-kinetic responses by the US (and other countries) that could have a devastating impact on the Chinese economy and the everyday life of ordinary Chinese citizens.

All of this warrants much greater thought than it has received over the years, and the Taiwanese leadership should lead the way by strengthening its own non-kinetic set of countervailing measures so as to increase its deterrent po

tential. This is also an area where countries that, like Canada, do not have the military wherewithal to play a major role in the Asia-Pacific, can nevertheless have an impact on deterring armed conflict.

Standing by one of the world's most successful examples of a young and prosperous democracy, and giving its 23.5 million people the right to determine their own future, should not be a binary decision of "inevitable war" versus abandonment. It is what lies between those two unimaginable extremes that needs to be reinforced. That is the only way that our collective responsibility toward a people who have embraced the values that we cherish, and whose continued freedom benefits us all, can be met.

About the author



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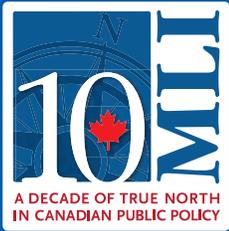
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Endnotes

- 1 Goldstein is listed as an academic visitor a Peking University's Institute of Ocean Research. See https://ocean.pku.edu.cn/english/PEOPLE1/Academic_Visitors1/Visitor_List.htm.
- 2 Swaine, who has argued that Washington should retract the Six Assurances to Taiwan in order to come to a modus vivendi with China, recently joined the Quincy Institute as director of the East Asia Program (see Clifton 2020).
- 3 For criticism of Flournoy's strategy by intellectuals who regard US policy as quasi-imperialistic, see Bacevic 2020. Bacevic is president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.



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