

Understanding the Cross-Strait Challenge

An Interview with the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States

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Fabio van Loon, a researcher and writer for the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers, sat down with officials from the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) to discuss cross-strait security challenges, military investments, and the US-Taiwan relationship. Discussing the details of the People's Republic of China's threat to Formosa, Taiwan's military readiness, the nation's military investments, US-Taiwan security cooperation, and Washington's military activities in support of Taiwan, the interview provides a unique glimpse into US-Taiwan relations and the way forward for a prosperous, independent Taiwan.

Fabio van Loon: *Beijing's aggressiveness vis-a-vis Taiwan is nothing new, and some argue that China's increased aerial incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ are merely symbolic. Is this true, or is a Chinese attack imminent?*

TECRO: China's behavior and malign influence have destabilized the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. The Taiwanese people have lived under constant military threat from China for decades. That threat will continue to be a problem for the people of Taiwan as long as the Chinese refuse to renounce the use of force and other coercive methods against Taiwan.

China has been increasing its military incursions and provocative activities in order to probe our early warning capabilities and reactions. In 2020, there were 380 incursions in the southwest corner of Taiwan's ADIZ. As of November 2021, there have been more than 700 incursions, which have seriously impacted Taiwan's air defense security. Over the past year, Chinese military sorties have increased more than 50%. These missions are part of China's expansion of military activities and gray zone operations in an attempt to thin out our maritime and air power.

In recent years, the gray zone threats frequently posed by the PRC on us are highly diversified and orchestrated generally through military and non-military approaches. The military approaches have taken the form of PRC military planes frequently intruding into Taiwan's ADIZ and areas in the vicinity of the Dongsha Island (Pratas Island) to conduct military drills, while the non-military approaches have included PRC speedboats ramming our coast guard vessels and its sand pump dredgers' illegal operations in Taiwan's neighboring waters. The PRC is considered to be using these "salami slicing tactics" to gradually escalate the threat level and shape the strategic calculus to its advantage. This intimidating behavior is aimed at consuming Taiwan's combat power and challenging the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, in line with the PRC's goal of "seizing Taiwan without a fight."

Fabio van Loon: *If a full-scale Chinese attack were possible by 2025 as stated by Taiwan's Minister of Defense Chiu Kuo-cheng, what does Taipei need from Washington today in order to thwart a possible invasion?*

TECRO: We hope for an easing of cross-strait relations and we will not act rashly, but it must also be understood that the Taiwanese people will never bow to pressure. We will continue to bolster our national defense and demonstrate our determination to defend ourselves in order to ensure that Taiwan will never take the path China has laid out for us.

We are under no illusions that China will ever renounce the use of force to resolve cross-strait issues. Therefore, our armed forces will continue to strengthen operational readiness and defensive capabilities. In addition, the U.S. is our most important strategic partner. The defense and military exchange and cooperation under the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances are vital to the security around the Taiwan Strait.

We fully understand that it is our responsibility to protect our homeland. And the continued arms sales from the U.S. and security cooperation will help to enhance Taiwan's comprehensive defense capability, and maintain regional security, prosperity and mutual interests. The cooperation includes supporting indigenous defense such as the F-16 maintenance center, promoting visits between senior officials and expanding HA/DR engagements.

In the future, we will continue to strengthen our defensive capabilities, and push for exchange programs with regard to cybersecurity, intelligence sharing, reserve forces, non-conventional threats, HA/DR, advanced military technologies, force buildup concepts and combat and training experience, so as to rapidly construct a multi-domain deterrence and perform our duty to maintain security in the region.

Fabio van Loon: *U.S. Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro recently stated that artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, unmanned platforms, directed energy and hypersonic weapons would be the "frontiers" that will define the U.S.-allied advantage over the PRC. What is Taiwan investing in today to bolster its own military "frontier" against the PRC?*

TECRO: Compared with China, Taiwan is small. Therefore, Taiwan needs to use all resources efficiently and effectively. We are focusing on weapons that are both mobile and lethal, which is an area of emphasis in our recent military reforms.

We've continued to actively develop asymmetric capabilities. Particularly, we are prioritizing multi-domain strikes, coastal defense cruise missiles, light and fast maritime assets, advanced naval mines, highly mobile field air defense, anti-armor capabilities, new technologies on electronic warfare (EW), cyberwarfare and unmanned surveillance and strike systems.

Another priority is to reform our reserve force. In 2022, the Ministry of National Defense will launch an agency designated to manage all-out defense mobilization. The All-out Defense Mobilization Agency will coordinate inter-agency cooperation and integrate human and material resources across the country.

Recent regularized arms sales from the U.S. have enabled Taiwan to bolster our asymmetric capabilities in a timely manner. Taiwan has been increasing its defense spending. Since 2016, the annual defense budget has grown over 30%. Over the next 5 years, Taiwan is investing in an additional special defense budget to build indigenous anti-ship missiles and fast, mobile and resilient surface warfare vessels to supplement the asymmetric capabilities acquired from the U.S., all aimed at deterring a PLA invasion. The purpose is to make the PRC face unacceptable consequences of initiating a military conflict, deterring its intention to wage war.

Our force structure is being realigned based on the military strategy of "resolute defense and multi-domain deterrence" to transform our Armed Forces into a modern force that is maneuverable, compact and integrated across all domains. Enemy threats, allocation of defense resources, supply and demand of the labor market, acquisition of new weapons and equipment, military modernization and low birth rates have also been factored into our reform considerations. In keeping with this strategic restructuring, the Armed Forces will continue to seek to flatten C2 structure, replace manpower with technologies, replace troops with firepower, integrate regular and reserve forces, combine reserve forces and mobilized resources and promote interagency cooperation.

Fabio van Loon: *Beginning with the NDAA for FY2018, the U.S. Congress has expressed an interest in deepening military cooperation between U.S. and Taiwanese forces. The FY2022 NDAA explicitly invites Taiwan to join the United States in military exercises along the Pacific Rim. What does Taiwan make of these policies, and would Taiwan consider deepening its cooperation with the United States in the form of an AUKUS-like treaty?*

TECRO: Taiwan and the U.S. have already established military cooperation at multiple levels. Taiwan will continue to promote engagements based on our defense requirements to improve joint combat capabilities and interoperability.

Taiwan strives to participate in U.S.-led bilateral or multilateral exercises as a reference for building up future defense capabilities. Taiwan is deepening its bilateral defense cooperation with the U.S. and demonstrating our determination and contribution to maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

We will continue to look for opportunities to participate in any security framework and dialogue mechanism in the Indo-Pacific region. Taiwan welcomes all opportunities to deepen military exchanges with the U.S. and other like-minded countries and establish a strategic partnership to safeguard regional security collectively.

The ROC Armed Forces, following the principle of “maintaining exchange across the board, solidifying international relations earnestly,” have assigned defense attachés stationed in five of those nations with diplomatic ties to perform military diplomatic missions. Moreover, we continue carrying out high-level bilateral visits, midshipman cruise training, intelligence exchange, military medicine exchange, donations of surplus materiel and hosting National Development Courses (NDC) to deepen security cooperation. As for like-minded partners without diplomatic ties, we have assigned service coordination divisions to push for high-level mutual visits, intelligence exchange, education and training, think tank exchange and humanitarian medical exchange so as to expand cooperation on defense affairs.

Fabio van Loon: *Some have suggested that the United States should establish a permanent military presence (a base) on Formosa in order to successfully hold off a potential invasion from the Chinese mainland. How does Taipei view the possibility of a U.S. military presence on Formosa?*

TECRO: We are determined to defend ourselves, but it is important that we have support from friendly, like-minded countries, including the U.S. Taiwan has a decades-long relationship with the U.S., and we also enjoy the support of the people of the U.S. as well as bipartisan support in Congress and the administration, which has been very helpful.

We have a wide range of cooperation with the U.S. aimed at increasing our defensive capabilities. As previously stated, regional security partnerships with like-minded countries are essential to maintain peace in the region, and we are actively seeking to increase our military cooperation with the U.S. and other partners.

It is important to remember that Taiwan has lived with the threat of China's military aggression for decades. Taiwan will never bend to pressure, nor will it turn adventurist. But if our democracy and way of life are threatened, Taiwan will do whatever it takes to defend itself.

Countries all over the world have a common interest in the preservation of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and China's increasingly aggressive behavior across the Strait has thus attracted worldwide attention. We have continuously demonstrated our unquestionable determination and ability to defend our national security. It is our hope that regional partners and like-minded countries can jointly promote security cooperation to ensure that peace and prosperity endure in the Indo-Pacific region. 🌟

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