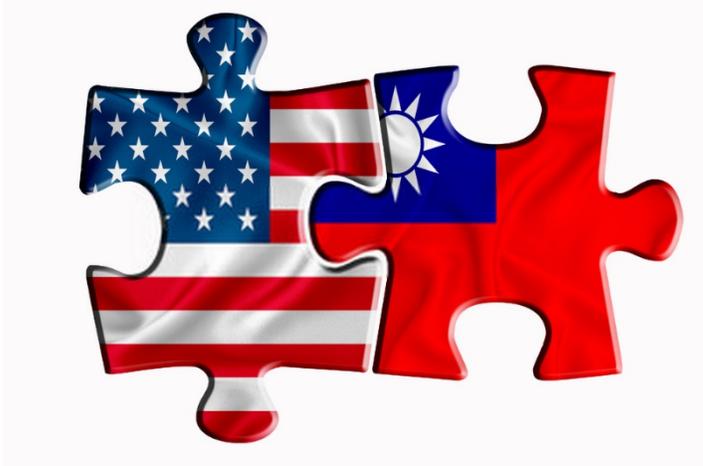


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“Rock-solid” America’s Past and Present Commitment to Taiwan Michael Mazza



On 23 January 2021, 15 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft flew into the southwest corner of Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ). Thirteen aircraft repeated the exercise the following day. The US Department of State called on Beijing “to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan” and, in what must have been reassuring words to leaders in Taipei, described American “commitment” to Taiwan as “rock-solid.” Those are strong words from the new Biden administration, especially given the lack of a legal obligation to defend Taiwan and the lack of formal bilateral diplomatic ties.

That rock-solid commitment has endured for decades, even as the particulars of Taiwan policy have evolved. In the Formosa Resolution of 1955, Congress pre-authorized Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower to use force in defense of Taiwan, noting that armed attack “would gravely endanger the peace and security of the West Pacific area” and that “the secure possession by friendly governments of the Western Pacific Island chain, of which Formosa is a part, is essential to the vital interests of the United States and all friendly nations in or bordering upon the Pacific Ocean.”¹

The American switch in diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1979 did not fundamentally change that outlook. The Taiwan Relations Act, passed with veto-proof majorities and signed into law by Pres. Jimmy Carter, described US policy thusly:

2. to declare that peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern; [. . .]
4. to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States . . .²

Why is the US commitment to Taiwan “rock-solid” and why must it remain so? The commitment has its origin in the aftermath of World War II, as American strategists were establish-

ing a forward defense perimeter to ensure the events of 7 December 1941, would never be repeated. Gen Douglas MacArthur, fretting that Taiwan might fall into communist hands, in a memorandum transmitted to Washington just 11 days before the outbreak of the Korean War, compared the island to an “unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender ideally located to accomplish Soviet offensive strategy and at the same time checkmate counteroffensive operations by United States Forces based on Okinawa and the Philippines.”³ Seven decades later, that logic still holds relevance.

Were China to one day occupy Taiwan, the defense of Japan and the Philippines, both US allies, would become far more complicated. China would bolster its ability to control the South China Sea waterways should it choose to do so. Most troubling of all, the PLA would for the first time have unimpeded access to the Pacific Ocean, allowing it more easily to threaten Guam, Hawaii, and the continental United States. PLA ballistic missile submarines might ply the waters of the Western Pacific, allowing China to pose a more potent nuclear weapons threat to the United States.

As long as Washington assesses that American security is best served by defending forward—an approach that has served the United States well over the past 70 years—Taiwan’s *de facto*

independence will remain a key US interest and driver of American policy in Asia.

The PRC’s annexation of Taiwan would, moreover, usher in a new regional order in Asia—one that would be conducive to the interests of no one but Beijing and its hangers-on. The presiding, if currently contested, order is marked by widespread (though not unanimous) embrace of an understanding of law of the sea grounded in both customary law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, liberal approaches to international trade, and a preference for the peaceful settlement of disputes. Some in Asia may bristle that the current order has long been dominated by the United States, but it is hard to argue with results: the emergence of several high-income countries in the decades since World War II, healthy growth in several developing economies, and more than four decades without great-power war.

But a successful PRC occupation of Taiwan would overturn the norms governing the current regional order. The Asia-Pacific would fast become a realm in which might makes right; in which traditional conceptions of freedom of navigation are likely jettisoned; in which security competitions grow in intensity, to the detriment of economic prosperity; and in which China increasingly sets the terms of trade for those inside and outside the

region. Such an outcome would not be conducive to the national security of the United States as it is traditionally understood.

Economic wellbeing is another key driver of the American commitment to Taiwan. US economic interests in Taiwan are significant. Taiwan is consistently a top-10 trading partner. According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative, Taiwan was America’s 13th-largest goods export market in 2019 and the 6th-largest agricultural export market.⁴

What is more, Taiwan occupies a key position in global tech supply chains. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, LTD, the world’s largest dedicated semiconductor foundry, is a chip supplier for major American companies from Advanced Micro Devices to Qualcomm and from Apple to Nvidia. Bloomberg News described “Taiwan’s grip on the semiconductor business” as “a choke point in the global supply chain.” Its dominance of the industry, moreover, has “helped Taiwan form a comprehensive ecosystem around it: ASE Technology Holding is the world’s top chip assembler, while MediaTek has become the largest smartphone chipset vendor.”⁵ Put simply, if the United States were to lose access to Taiwan’s innovators and manufacturers, the American tech industry could be paralyzed.

Last, but certainly not least, Taiwan is important to the United States

because it is a thriving liberal democracy—one whose freedom is threatened by a much larger authoritarian neighbor. American leaders have long assessed that a world in which democracies are prevalent is a world that is conducive to US interests and national security. And although a crusading impulse has waxed and waned as a driver of American foreign policy, it has arguably never been absent. Ensuring Taiwan’s survival as a de facto independent democratic state, then, is critical if Washington wants to shape a world in which the United States can thrive.

The existence of Taiwan’s democracy serves as proof-positive that there is nothing incompatible between a Chinese-speaking polity and self-government. Quite the contrary. If democracy is one day to come to China—a hope, even if not, at this point, an explicit aim of American policy—it may be in no small part due to dissidents and reformers looking admiringly at, learning from, and drawing inspiration from Taiwan’s own experiences with one-party rule, liberalization, and democratic consolidation.

Taiwan is a country of only 24 million people. It lies less than 100 miles from the PRC coastline and is separated from the United States by the entire width of the Pacific Ocean. Its quarrel with China has its roots in a civil war that ended in 1949 and Cold War conditions that have persisted despite the

Cold War's end. With US–China tensions on the rise across multiple facets of the bilateral relationship, some may question whether Taiwan is worth the trouble for Washington. It is. Indeed, Taiwan is where various points of friction converge. It is arguably where American and Chinese national security concerns, visions of regional order, economic and technological interests, and core values most directly collide.

Of course, the country is also home to freedom-loving people who want nothing more than to live in peace with their neighbors. The United States has every reason to ensure Taiwan's citizens can continue doing so. ■

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Notes

¹ See: "Joint Resolution by the Congress," 29 January 1955, <https://history.state.gov/>.

² For the full text of the Act, see: Taiwan Relations Act, 1 January 1979, <https://www.ait.org.tw/>.

³ See: "Memorandum of Conversation, by the Ambassador at Large (Jessup)," 25 June 1950, <https://history.state.gov/>.

⁴ Figures are taken from the Office of the United States Trade Representative, "U.S.-Taiwan Trade Facts," <https://ustr.gov/>.

⁵ Alan Crawford, Jarrell Dillard, Helene Fouquet, and Isabel Reynolds, "The world is dangerously dependent on Taiwan for semiconductors," *Japan Times*, 26 January 2021, <https://www.japan-times.co.jp/>.