

Written by Ian Easton
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The time has come for Washington and Taipei to get serious about defending Taiwan. While the eyes of the world are on the rapid spread of a mysterious strain of coronavirus, there is another threat incubating in China that may end up being far more lethal if strong countervailing actions are not taken soon.

The Chinese Communist Party has made clear that it is on a collision course with the free people of Taiwan and their democratic government. With every passing year, the risk goes up that Beijing might decide to pull the trigger. Neither America nor Taiwan seems to have a realistic strategy for responding to an all-out Chinese attack. Both countries have defense plans for raising the costs China would have to bear to conquer Taiwan, and there is little doubt they could wage a bloody war of resistance, but these defense plans are reportedly uncoordinated, underfunded, and uncertain. No one seems to know how they would actually win the war. Sinking the first few hundred ships to cross the Taiwan Strait is necessary, but hardly sufficient, for victory.

The most realistic and cost-effective way to make sure China never breaks the peace is to do something that has long seemed unthinkable: put American forces in Taiwan as a strategic tripwire. A modest mix of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines would likely be sufficient, perhaps a thousand total. To avoid giving China any pretext to instigate a crisis (something it is apt to do anyway), the Pentagon can think creatively, deploying forces on a rotational and non-permanent basis for educational, training, and liaison missions. Small units could arrive with little fanfare and build up presence over several years.

Of course, doing something like this would not be politically attractive. Yet history's tragedies show why it is foolish for status quo democracies to tolerate the military balance tipping so far in favor of a revanchist neighbor. We've seen that movie and know how it ends. We also have the added benefit of China's leaders telling us how they plan to end it. Chairman Xi Jinping (习近平) is on record as saying that the subjugation of Taiwan is critical for China's rise. Flush with ill-gotten capital and pilfered western technology, the Chinese military is getting ready for the invasion. Beijing recently announced it would surge body armor to over a million troops in preparation for a future ground war against Taiwan and the United States.

In view of the somber facts before us, America and Taiwan must get ready for the worst. This requires doing things that China's communist rulers abhor and fear. Placing US forces on the island is one such option. There are others that also deserve careful exploration. At least three alternative pathways exist that the United States should consider.

One, America could comprehensively upgrade its diplomatic treatment of Taiwan. The US government could review its outdated Taiwan policy and develop a game plan for treating the Republic of China, Taiwan, like the free and sovereign country that it actually is and has been for 70 years. In this scenario, the president of the United States would meet with the president of Taiwan, and the two would sign a historic joint communique. By welcoming Taiwan into the international community, America would be signaling its resolve to guarantee the island's survival. Of course, an ironclad defense commitment might become necessary to make sure the message didn't invite any misunderstanding.

Two, Washington could eschew statecraft and diplomacy in favor of a pure military solution. The United States could drastically increase its forward-deployed defense posture all around Taiwan. In this scenario, the US military would spend vast sums on making its Pacific forces more ready and resilient to fight their Chinese adversaries. The Pentagon would develop a well-oiled, coordinated war plan with the Taiwanese and Japanese militaries for sinking the Chinese fleet in the first days of conflict and then waging a long war of attrition. Intensive military exercises and training between the de facto allies would become routine, and so too would joint patrols of the Taiwan Strait.

Three, the United States could try to turn Taiwan into a modern day Sparta, quietly helping the island develop a large standing army, mandatory two-year military conscription, and a massive well-trained reserve force. In this scenario, a Lend-Lease-style agreement would be worked out to provide Taiwan with an enormous influx of modern equipment and training. Long-range, land-attack cruise missiles and ballistic missiles would be deployed by the thousands on mobile launchers. Men and women would have their guns in their homes under lock and key, ready to marshal at a moment's notice. Obviously, this would require the wholesale reengineering of Taiwanese society. Absent a 9/11 type crisis, voters in Taiwan are unlikely to support anything like this.

The advantage of putting a small number of American military forces in Taiwan is that it blends positive aspects of the above three pathways, while avoiding their potential pitfalls. It would signal political courage, without demanding a sudden and sweeping overhaul of US-Taiwan

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relations. It would improve American military readiness, without requiring a hike in defense spending. It would increase Taiwanese capabilities, while respecting the will of Taiwan's voters. Best of all, it would allow American policymakers to act boldly, correcting the strategic imbalance while there is still time.

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