

## Taiwan must help the US help it

Written by James Holmes

Tuesday, 17 August 2021 04:21

---

Help us help you. That is my standard reply when friends from Taiwan ask how they can guarantee the US will be there for them in times of extreme peril. Such times might soon be upon us. The foreign policy commentariat on this side of the Pacific is afire with conjecture about the timing of a potential Chinese assault on Taiwan, what the US can do about it if it happens and whether the White House would give the order to intercede.

Then-outgoing commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phil Davidson kindled the debate in March, when he told the US Senate Committee on Armed Services that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) could move against Taiwan within six years.

Something about fixing a date concentrates the mind. Until now a cross-strait war has been something that — to American minds — might transpire in some hypothetical, misty, far-off future. Davidson made that future concrete — demanding action in the here and now. But what kind?

The US must reform and upgrade its maritime forces, restoring its ability to deny the PLA control of the seas and skies around Taiwan — control the PLA must wrest from Taiwan's defenders to stage a successful attack. The reform effort is under way.

Yet Taiwan must do its part by taking control of its own fate, chiefly by mounting a stalwart national defense.

Let us look to a long-dead Prussian soldier-scribe for help sorting out strategy. Carl von Clausewitz, a veteran of warfare against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, codified his ideas about war-making in his masterwork *On War* (1832).

Clausewitz pled with commanders and their political masters to keep rational cost/benefit calculations in charge of martial endeavors, even amid the chaos, dangers and dark passions that tend to deflect war-making from any rational pathway.

## Taiwan must help the US help it

Written by James Holmes

Tuesday, 17 August 2021 04:21

---

He fashioned a formula to help them do that.

War is governed by its “political object,” he said, meaning the goal political leaders instruct the armed forces to attain.

Because the effort is “controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and in duration. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.”

What Clausewitz was saying, in his dense German way, is that how much a society wants something determines how much it is prepared to pay to obtain that something. Magnitude is the rate at which a combatant spends resources — national treasure, hardware, military lives — on its cause. Duration is how long it keeps up the expenditure.

Much as in elementary physics, multiplying the rate by the time yields the total price of the political object. The society keeps making payments so long as the people and government deem the price affordable and acceptable; it stops when the goal comes to seem too expensive or more important goals come along.

But here is the rub: Contenders get a say in not just their own Clausewitzian cost/benefit calculations, but those of foes and allies. A combatant can drive up the magnitude of the effort for its enemy, draining the enemy’s militarily relevant resources. Inflicting punishment on hostile forces will do that. It can drag out the duration of the conflict. Or it can do both. If it can drive up the price to a figure that a rational enemy deems too burdensome, the enemy should extricate itself from the fracas on the best terms it can get.

Think about Afghanistan. Despite being woefully outmatched on the battlefield, the Taliban managed to stretch out the conflict for 20 years. It inflated the costs of victory for the US. Washington is no longer willing to bear the expense of keeping its ally in Kabul afloat, and so US forces are quitting that beleaguered land. Washington is cutting its losses. Clausewitz would nod knowingly at the Taliban’s seemingly impending victory.

## Taiwan must help the US help it

Written by James Holmes

Tuesday, 17 August 2021 04:21

---

Now let us put the value-of-the-object calculus to work for President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and her lieutenants. Taiwan needs to deter China while ensuring the US will provide succor in times of duress. Now, it is doubtful in the extreme that anyone can induce Chinese communist magnates to forever renounce their dream of sovereignty over Taiwan. They long for it too much.

Yet Taipei can hope to deter China today, tomorrow and the day after that.

If Beijing postpones military action day-by-day for long enough, who knows? Good things could happen.

To deter, Taiwan's military can drive up the magnitude of effort for the PLA — and raise the price of conquest — by pursuing asymmetric measures. Strewing Taiwan's coasts with anti-ship missile batteries and nearby seas with swarms of stealthy missile-armed patrol craft would make Taiwan a tough nut to crack. Such measures could give Beijing pause if pursued with zeal.

Furthermore, China's leadership craves a speedy victory over Taiwan above all else. After all, if the PLA cannot win quickly, the US armed forces might have time to gather at the scene of combat to reverse aggression.

Taiwan can refuse to permit China that quick triumph. If the Taliban could protract a war for 20 years, Taiwan's armed forces can do it for weeks or months. They can deter by ballooning the magnitude and the duration of the effort for China.

Taipei can also bias Clausewitzian cost/benefit calculations in Washington in favor of coming to its defense, and it should. But how?

Chiefly by keeping the US effort affordable.

## Taiwan must help the US help it

Written by James Holmes

Tuesday, 17 August 2021 04:21

---

First, Taiwan can raise its value to Americans. It can remind everyone, early and often, that it is a worthy cause — a vibrant democracy and contributor to world prosperity. Just as important, it should go out of its way to prove that it will fight for its survival and independence if forced to it.

The leadership should model its efforts on former prime minister Winston Churchill's Great Britain, the island kingdom that stood alone against Nazism in 1940 and 1941. The UK's plucky attitude stoked admiration among Americans, making it politically palatable for then-US president Franklin Roosevelt's administration to renounce isolationism and go to its aid after Pearl Harbor.

Tsai should emulate Churchill's fortitude, rousing not just the government, but Taiwanese to defend themselves — come what may. If they show sufficient resolve, they will make it easier for US President Joe Biden to sway the American people to intervene in a far-off conflict against a regional superpower.

In other words, Taipei can raise its value to the US, and thus the price American society is prepared to pay during a cross-strait war.

Second, Taipei should strive to reduce the magnitude of the effort for the US military. Taiwan's navy and air force should gear their efforts not just to making things tough on the PLA in the Strait, but to helping US forces reach the scene of battle from the Western Pacific without suffering grievous losses from PLA anti-access weaponry.

Keep the value of the object high and the magnitude of military effort low, and the tally of costs and benefits could work out in Taiwan's favor. The price of a favorable peace would look affordable and acceptable to the White House on terms set by a 19th-century Prussian.

Help us help you.

*James Holmes is J.C. Wylie chair of maritime strategy at the US Naval War College and the coauthor of *Defending the Strait: Taiwan's Naval Strategy in the 21st Century*. The views voiced here are his alone.*

## Taiwan must help the US help it

Written by James Holmes

Tuesday, 17 August 2021 04:21

---

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2021/08/17](#)

---