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The Porcupine and the Dragon: Deterring China's Rise

China has long sought unification with Taiwan and has made it a core goal of its “national rejuvenation.” In addition to repairing historical insults, China sees great strategic value in Taiwan and is increasing the pressure for unification. According to a Pentagon report, “China expects to be able to fight and win a war on Taiwan by the end of 2027.” How should the U.S. respond if China initiates an invasion or blockade? While some would argue that the U.S. should stand down to avoid the costs and casualties from a full-out war with China, I believe that the U.S. must defend Taiwan, but stop short of crossing a “red line” that would trigger a nuclear war. By giving up Taiwan, the U.S. would suffer a huge loss in technology leadership, significantly weaken its military position in the Indo-Pacific and critically, lose its role as the leading superpower.

While early capitulation would minimize costs and casualties and avoid the risk of nuclear escalation, the US would give up all leverage and allow China to dictate the terms of Taiwan's annexation. Instead of a “One Country-Two Systems” plan, which had been previously offered to preserve Taiwan's autonomy and self-governance, China could instead dismantle Taiwan's democratic government, control the island, and build a strong military base there. Furthermore, a win in Taiwan would make China more emboldened to pursue its wider goals of

dominance. China has ambitions that extend beyond Taiwan, as communicated in the “nine dash line” boundary on official Chinese maps claiming 90% of the South China Sea’s territories.

Taiwan could be the first domino to fall in a push for regional dominance. According to Malcolm Davis, a senior analyst with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, writing about China’s recent friction with the Philippines, “The goal is to intimidate Manila into accepting China’s interests.”

As history has shown, appeasing authoritarian rulers often leads to further aggression. As Thomas Friedman from the New York Times states, “China and Putin have the exact same agenda, which is to shrink American power, keep it bottled up in North America, get the Americans out of Europe, and get the Americans out of the Pacific Asian theater.” The loss of Taiwan will lead to China’s dominance in Asia and also greatly diminish American global power.

Beyond this potential loss of global clout, Taiwan is central to U.S. technology leadership. Taiwan’s TSMC manufactures around 90% of the world’s advanced semiconductors. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said, “The single biggest threat to the world economy, the single biggest point of single failure, is that 97% of the high-end chips are made in Taiwan, [...] if that island were blockaded, that capacity were destroyed, it would be an economic apocalypse.” Additionally, a report by the Semiconductor Industry Association states that “U.S. economic output would plunge 11 percent, twice as much as the 2008 recession.” These chips are used in almost everything, and advanced chips are critical in the race for AI superiority. AI will transform almost all industries, solving intractable problems, and boosting productivity. It will also be used in military applications to enable superior targeting, intelligence, and AI-powered humanoids. If China were to control the TSMC chip supply, they would have the ability to cripple U.S. technology advancement. Technology leadership promotes economic dominance. If

China's AI becomes the standard, they will wield control, and everyone else will pay a toll to access their technology and systems. It will be hard for companies to switch to other platforms once embedded. Reshoring chip manufacturing to the US is an incomplete solution as well. It will take a decade to complete, and because Taiwan needs a "Silicon Shield" to make sure the U.S. will protect Taiwan, the government does not allow the latest technology to be transferred. Even if we are able to reshore, the U.S. will be multiple generations behind if we aren't able to access technologies only available in Taiwan itself.

In addition to incapacitating our technology leadership, a loss of Taiwan will cripple the U.S. and its allies' ability to blunt Chinese military aggression in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. China has been aggressively building its military might and nuclear arsenal. In his New York Times article, Chris Buckley wrote, "Now, as China's nuclear options have grown, its military strategists are looking to nuclear weapons as not only a defensive shield, but as a potential sword—to intimidate and subjugate adversaries." The U.S. views the First Island Chain, of which Taiwan is central, as a strategic line of defense to restrict China's naval and air forces from projecting power into the wider Pacific. As John Mearsheimer explains, we need to "bottle up the Chinese navy and air force in the First Island Chain. We don't want them to get out." Taiwan has a unique geographical advantage, as the shallow strait prevents Chinese submarines from diving deep. The U.S. and Taiwan can detect early Chinese submarine movements in the event of an invasion and target them during the crossing. Taiwan is also critical because sensor systems in the waters require electricity from Taiwan, and data is transmitted there. If the Chinese military occupies Taiwan, Chinese submarines can submerge into deep waters from the east coast of Taiwan and be undetectable. This is a great threat to the U.S. because it is much harder to protect

against stealthy undersea attacks on our allies or the U.S. itself. This would increase China's military threat and close any military advantage the U.S. currently has.

Blows to our technological leadership and military superiority will challenge our status as a superpower. This will be further eroded by the withdrawal of our allies and damage to our soft power. The U.S. has many important allies in Asia. A Pew Research survey lists South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines among the top four countries whose people (63% or more) see the U.S. as their top ally. An Al Jazeera report also showed that Japan and South Korea were ranked first and third, respectively, by the number of bases and troops. If we do not protect Taiwan, a critical ally, our reputation and credibility will be severely damaged and our other Asian allies will lose confidence in U.S. security guarantees. John Mearsheimer states that "If we do not defend Taiwan, our allies will say, if the Chinese attack us, the Americans won't be there for us." This may lead our allies to seek new alliances with China instead, so they themselves are not attacked. For example, when India was threatened by massive U.S. tariffs, they partnered with China: The article *America Alone Can't Match China, but With Our Allies, It's No Contest*, says that "The United States spent three decades courting India as a geopolitical counterweight to China, but after the tariffs were applied on India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week visited China for the first time in seven years, where he and President Xi Jinping agreed to move past a recent history of tense relations and work as partners, not rivals." We need our allies to not only deter China from Taiwan, but also to compete with them globally. According to Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi in the previously mentioned article, they state that "America's singular advantage in the global power landscape is its allies and partners." Finally, allowing Taiwan, a democracy of 23 million people to be absorbed by China, an authoritarian power,

would be viewed as a failure of the U.S.-led liberal world order, a system based on rules, human rights, and the inviolability of borders. We will therefore damage the soft power that has been a major driver for our world leadership and further fracture the strength of our alliances.

In the event of an invasion or blockade, the U.S. must defend Taiwan while avoiding actions that could trigger a nuclear conflict. Taiwan is critical to realist U.S. economic, technological, and military interests. Critically, we will lose allies when they cannot rely on the U.S. as a protector of democracy and the liberal world order. Losing Taiwan could ultimately dethrone the U.S. from its superpower role, either being replaced by China or leading to a multipolar “sphere of influence” system with China as the hegemon in Asia. Before China launches submarines and navy ships, the U.S. needs to deter a forceful annexation of Taiwan by China. We must present a realistic scenario where the costs to China, and the possibility of losing or at best achieving a draw, are unacceptable. Crossing the straits to Taiwan with troops and tanks is a formidable challenge, and even more difficult when it is densely fortified with mines and drones as part of Taiwan’s “porcupine” strategy supported by US intelligence and weapons. China is facing major domestic challenges and the health of its economy relies on exports, so airtight economic sanctions coordinated with our allies would have severe consequences. However, we cannot execute this alone. Taiwan and its people must have the will to fight a potentially prolonged war and continue to buy asymmetric weapons from the U.S. We must also maintain and support our allies, such as Japan, when they declare support for Taiwan. Successful deterrence, sanctions, and warfare require a united and committed effort.