



Taiwan & Tensions with China: Five Recommendations for US Policy

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Taiwan has built a vibrant democracy on values Americans share and is an important US economic partner. China is the largest power in the region and sees Taiwan's fate as central to its own national interest. US leaders need to manage these realities in a way that enhances regional and global stability, rather than framing disagreements over Taiwan as part of a dangerous narrative of inevitable conflict with China. Rhetoric about "winning" wars that neither Americans nor the people in that region want to fight is misguided and reckless. The US can best serve Taiwan's security, and our own, by stabilizing relations with China in a manner that reduces the dangerous tensions that have built up between Washington and Beijing. The Center for International Policy has developed the following recommendations for US action toward that goal.

Recommendation #1: Ratchet "competition" rhetoric down rather than up

The people and government of Taiwan—as well as nearly all countries in the region—are saying loud and clear that they want a reduction in US–China tensions. Most countries also do not want to be forced to align with one side against the other.

The United States should amplify statements and actions that bolster the status quo. It should reiterate its longstanding position of strategic ambiguity to both China and Taiwan, and avoid inflammatory symbolic gestures that do little to increase Taiwan's security but signal to China that Taiwan is moving toward formal independence. While opinion in Taiwan is highly fragmented on what status to ultimately aim for, there is an overwhelming consensus on what to do today: four of every five people in Taiwan want to maintain the ambiguous status quo.

When Chinese official actions warrant criticism, the United States must also take care to clearly distinguish between the Chinese Communist Party-controlled government and the Chinese people. Calling out the human rights violations, repressive policies and authoritarianism of the Chinese government is crucial, but so is countering the increasing vilification of China in American politics, which not only puts the Chinese diaspora and

Asian-Americans at risk of increased discrimination and violence; it repeats the dangerous “clash of civilizations” narrative reminiscent of the disastrous “war on terror” era.

Recommendation #2: Support—don’t jeopardize—Taiwan’s self-defense

Meeting the United States’ long-held objective of preserving stability in East Asia and the Pacific requires avoiding and dissuading others from taking actions that increase risks of war, encourage militarist policies, or empower reactionary politicians. America’s key tasks in this regard are to foreclose on the prospect of a future crisis and make miscalculation less, rather than more, likely.

That means robustly supporting Taiwan’s self defense according to a principle of non-offensive or non-provocative defense, balancing the need to defend against and render prohibitively costly Chinese attempts at conquest with the twin imperatives of both preventing war in the first place and reducing the prospects of nuclear escalation should a war occur. Accordingly, US arms sales should focus on capabilities that support the political status quo and preserve strategic stability. That includes systems to help Taiwan blunt Chinese power projection while avoiding new weapons systems that could range deep into the Chinese mainland and eschewing an arms buildup on a scale that would be reasonably misperceived as mobilizing for war. It also means undertaking efforts to ensure Taiwanese cybersecurity and combat disinformation that could stoke belligerent sentiment and trigger confrontation.

Recommendation #3: Foster stability by ensuring the legitimacy of international law survive its tests in Ukraine and Gaza

While differences in the precise circumstances and histories of each conflict are apparent, Chinese aggression toward Taiwan would be subject to the same international humanitarian law (IHL) obligations as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza. The extent to which the United States affirms and acts to uphold the laws of war, human rights and democratic principles with regard to those conflicts has a tremendous impact on the international legal landscape in which China operates vis-a-vis Taiwan.

Failure to champion adherence to international law in these conflicts – either by backing away from material support for Ukraine as it fights illegal conquest or by continuing to largely ignore Israeli IHL violations both in Gaza and in connection with its deepening occupation and annexation of the West Bank – undermines the universality of their application and makes it easier for actors like China to ignore them without fear of consequences from other states. The US unwillingness to take [meaningful steps](#) to protect

Palestinian lives and rights in the Gaza war has led to accusations of hypocrisy. Continuing that mistaken approach, alongside the movement by rightwing forces in the US to limit or cease support for Ukraine, will only further degrade the international order the US constructed after WWII, eroding an important barrier to China and other actors that may consider more aggressive actions of their own.

Recommendation #4: Invest in the US domestic critical technology workforce, while cooperating with China on shared challenges like climate change.

The Biden administration has already taken steps to increase domestic production capacity for technologies critical to the security and economy of the United States, especially advanced technologies and those essential to address dire challenges like climate change. US technical innovation led the way in the 20th century and should continue to do so as we face new global challenges. Increasing government support for programs to ensure an ample and sustainable workforce for these industries – including through transitional income support, student loan forgiveness and substantially increased across-the-board investments in public education and societal welfare – should therefore also be pursued as a US security priority.

At the same time, US strategic investments in American democracy, equality, and prosperity must be undertaken in such a way that they do not simply redirect insecurity toward the rest of the world. The technologies needed to survive, mitigate, and overcome challenges like climate change and global health threats will not be built in one nation, and will require significant investment and cooperation from governments across the world.

Both China and the US face tremendous challenges from warming temperatures, particularly in the area of desertification and water security. Cynically exploiting these vulnerabilities in China, as some have argued the United States should, in the hope that they lead to crisis and instability is both immoral and dangerous. Catastrophic or even substantial dysfunction in one of the world's largest countries, economic engines and a nuclear power would imperil US and global security in a multitude of areas. Instead, the United States should approach cooperation on addressing urgent climate change imperatives – such as working with China to leverage non debt-creating climate finance investments and provide critical technical assistance to developing countries – as an opportunity to build trust and identify areas of mutual benefit on other issues.

Recommendation #5: Advance global priorities that break away from an outdated and counterproductive “Great Power Competition” mindset

The explicit embrace of a “Great Power Competition” worldview by the Biden Administration and much of the US foreign policy establishment drives its fixation on reducing China’s presence and influence around the world. The dangerously unquestioned need to “counter” or even “beat” China in region after region across the globe is not only reactionary, but subordinates US interests at home and abroad to a zero-sum fight that drains US resources and goodwill. China’s leaders, in turn, seem happy to accept the prestige that comes with being the apparently destined competitor of the United States. They shape China’s foreign and military policy with this confrontation paradigm in mind, with Taiwan’s fate teetering at the leading edge.

The United States needs to recognize and secure its interests in the reality of a multi-polar world, rather than futilely attempting to forestall it via a costly and ultimately self-defeating effort to constantly disadvantage China. US military spending is already three times that of China (which is investing much of the difference in sectors like green technology). While China has a larger naval fleet in terms of vessel numbers, the US has far [greater](#) naval capability. What ultimately matters is not the actual balance of forces, but what a nation does with its share of the balance—and that has much to do with the overall tenor of relations and policy choices outside the military domain. The challenges that we face globally – among them climate change, political instability and pandemics -- require equally global cooperation and cannot be solved militarily.

To break out of the zero-sum competition that dominates strategic thinking on both sides, a new approach to defining success in global influence is required, focusing on 1) global public goods like universal public health infrastructure and green energy for all; 2) significantly increasing development investment in those countries and regions that have been starved of capital for decades; and 3) guaranteeing human, political and labor rights globally. Building international cooperation around such a transformation of the global economy would reestablish US–China relations on a new foundation, revive the legitimacy of international norms by expanding the opportunity it offers to people of all countries, and address the truly existential threats humanity faces today.