

TARGET TAIWAN: LIMITS OF ALLIED SUPPORT

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KEY POINTS

1. The United States is counting on its allies for assistance in defending Taiwan, but alliances are hardly a cure-all for Taiwan's defense.
2. Australia has fought alongside America in every war for the last century, but there is little reason to think Canberra's participation in a Taiwan scenario would make a serious difference, even taking into account the much-heralded AUKUS deal of 2021.
3. South Korea is a powerful U.S. ally, and India is a growing and important partner, but neither is likely to meaningfully participate in a prospective Taiwan war.
4. While certain East Asian countries, such as the Philippines, can offer access to advantageous locations, they will add no genuine military capability. Nor will European forces be involved at any more than a symbolic level.
5. Japan is far and away the most important of America's allies with respect to Taiwan, and Tokyo has been pushing hard for Washington to more fully embrace Taiwan's defense. However, it's unlikely Tokyo is ready to pull its weight in a war with China over Taiwan. Instead, Japan would likely opt for a middle way, refraining from dispatching military forces while allowing U.S. forces to use its bases.

The United States has a plethora of alliance partners, including in the Asia-Pacific, and many strategists hold that they are key to addressing the Taiwan conundrum. According to the conventional wisdom, while it might be difficult for the U.S. on its own to defend Taiwan indefinitely, allied assistance would make the critical difference. But careful analysis of the allies' political circumstances and capabilities casts serious doubt on this idea.

The first explainer in this series evaluated Taiwan's prospects for holding off a Chinese invasion on its own. The second looked at the United States' ability to help defend Taiwan. This one considers what U.S. allies might do.

Certainly U.S. allies have considerable capability to aid Taiwan. South Korea has more than half a million troops under arms, and almost a three million-strong reserve force. Japan's self-defense force is significantly smaller but is known for its high proficiency and professionalism. Australia's forces are smaller still, but this rather elite military has joined with American forces in almost every recent U.S. war. Beyond these stalwart allies is the allure of India, which has a strong martial tradition and the makings of a possible military superpower. Many sympathetic states, moreover, have further military potential, such as the Philippines and Indonesia. Then there is Europe, which, though distant from Taiwan, has nevertheless demonstrated an increasing ambition to become more involved in the security domain of the Asia-Pacific.¹

All this amounts to a house of cards when it comes to defending Taiwan. On paper, the amalgam of countries would seem to mitigate the vicious tyranny of distance disadvantaging the United States, along with an increasingly lopsided imbalance of forces favoring China. However, none of these allies has demonstrated both the will and the capability to make a meaningful difference in support of a U.S. military intervention to protect Taiwan from mainland China. Former U.S. intelligence official and Asia expert John Culver has said, "I think you'd get a chilling set of answers if you approached authoritative people in our treaty allies. ...Will you assist in preventing Chinese conquest [of Taiwan]? With maybe one or two exceptions, I think the answer we would get is no."²



Except for Japan and to a lesser extent South Korea, Asia does not see Taiwan as an existential or core national security interest and may even harbor significant sympathy for China's claims to Taiwan. There's also the matter of China's nuclear weapons. While Beijing has a no first use (NFU) policy, and other Asian states have nuclear weapons as well, even the possibility of a nuclear war is likely to make America's allies think twice about getting involved in a Taiwan scenario.

 CHINA Population: 1.4 billion			Active military personnel 2,035,000		Reserves 510,000	
GDP (2024) \$18.6 trillion	Defense budget (2023) \$219.5 billion	 10% of global defense spending	Approx. distance from Taiwan 100 mi.	Nuclear-armed state Yes	Formal U.S. ally No	Recognizes Taiwan No
 Surface combatants 151	 Combat aircraft 3,117	 Submarines 59	Key facts: President Xi Jinping hopes to complete the PLA's modernization by 2027 and reunification with Taiwan remains a core objective of Beijing.			

Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Google Maps.

As demonstrated in the analysis that follows, “partners” currently in fashion—for example, India and Vietnam—are very unlikely to get involved. Logistics challenges would be daunting for any U.S. campaign to secure Taiwan, and many East Asian countries might well “passively” contribute to keeping U.S. forces provisioned. But when it comes to hard power, the situation is bleak: treaty ally Australia has the will but lacks the capacity, while South Korea has the capacity but lacks the will. Only Japan comes closest to meeting both requirements, but Tokyo is also quite unlikely to definitively resolve Washington's Taiwan dilemma.

This explainer does not consider all aspects of alliance behavior, nor does it try to examine every possible variation of a Taiwan scenario. The focus is on the potential military contributions of allies and partners, rather than political support or economic issues, such as possible sanctions policies. Similarly, it is recognized that allied responses could vary significantly according to the degree of coercion that Beijing opts for, which could range from a symbolic show of force to a limited attack to a blockade to an all-out attack. In order not to over-complicate this analytical effort, this explainer, like the others in this series, is focused on the high-end scenario—namely an all-out Chinese attack on Taiwan. Moreover, this explainer does not speculate on the details of exactly how the fighting might begin, though it is recognized that more aggressive Chinese coercive actions could elicit more stout responses from U.S. allies and partners than if Beijing was reacting to a crisis it had not initiated.



ALLIES IN VOGUE UNDER BIDEN, IN QUESTION UNDER TRUMP

Allies have had a crucial place in U.S. strategic thinking towards China going back decades. This position was substantially elevated during the Biden administration, partly as a reaction to the perceived neglect of alliances during the first Trump administration.

In his first major foreign policy speech at the State Department in February 2021, Biden emphasized that “America’s alliances are our greatest asset and leading with diplomacy means standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our allies and key partners once again.” He identified China explicitly as “our most serious competitor,” and promised to “compete from a position of strength” and “catalyze global action” by reenergizing U.S. engagement and leadership.³

 TAIWAN Population: 23.6 million			Active military personnel 169,000		Reserves 1,657,000	
GDP (2024) \$792 billion	Defense budget (2024) \$19.7 billion	 <1% of global defense spending	Approx. distance from Taiwan N/A	Nuclear-armed state No	Formal U.S. ally No	Recognizes Taiwan Yes
 Surface combatants 26	 Combat aircraft 430	 Submarines 4	Key facts: Taiwan is undergoing a large defense spending increase but still lags behind in reforms to its reserve and conscription system and military organization.			

Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Google Maps; Erin Hale, “How prepared is Taiwan for a war with China?,” *Al Jazeera*, October 10, 2023.

Biden’s chief foreign policy advisors tried to realize this vision for the Asia-Pacific. U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan in November 2021 delivered a speech at a prominent Australian think tank, the Lowy Institute, and asserted that the U.S. seeks “to build a latticework of alliances and partnerships globally that are fit for purpose for the twenty-first century” that “are not just about refurbishing the old bilateral alliances, or refurbishing NATO... but modernizing those elements of the latticework and adding new components as we go.”⁴

One month later, then-Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe suggested that Chinese coercion of Taiwan represented a major threat to Japan. Days later, then-U.S. secretary of defense Lloyd Austin spoke with his Japanese counterpart, Nobuo Kishi, and they reportedly agreed “to deepen defense cooperation to maintain regional deterrence.”⁵

Speaking in Jakarta at about the same time, then-secretary of state Antony Blinken said the U.S. has “an abiding interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait,” and asserted that “We’ll work with our allies and partners to defend the rules-based order that we’ve built together....”⁶



Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 understandably distracted top Biden administration officials from the Asia-Pacific region, but it also stoked their determination to rely ever more intensively on alliances, since further expanding and strengthening NATO has been a key Washington response to Russian aggression. Senior Biden administration officials explicitly linked their Ukraine strategy to the Taiwan issue, noting that China was watching "carefully."⁷ This implied senior U.S. leaders were considering applying similar formulas if they were to confront a Taiwan scenario. Blinken explained, "I think if China's looking at this [war in Ukraine]... they will draw lessons for how the world comes together, or doesn't."⁸

Not surprisingly, under Biden, alliances and coalitions formed a major theme of the U.S. National Security Strategy. In the cover letter signed by Biden, he emphasized the roles played by both AUKUS and the Quad in the Asia-Pacific region, and asserted that "partnerships amplify our capacity to respond to shared challenges."⁹ One of the clearest manifestations of the invigorated alliance strategy for defense in the Asia-Pacific was the dynamic process of trilateral defense integration among Seoul, Tokyo, and the U.S. during 2023, under which defense coordination meetings were held at a frenetic pace.

 UNITED STATES Population: 339.7 million			Active military personnel 1,326,050		Reserves 806,700	
GDP (2024) \$28 trillion	Defense budget (2024) \$911 billion	 41.1% of global defense spending	Approx. distance from Taiwan 6,900 mi.	Nuclear-armed state Yes	Formal U.S. ally N/A	Recognizes Taiwan No
 Surface combatants 122	 Combat aircraft 2,862	 Submarines 66	Key facts: Although the U.S. has been arming it for decades, Taiwan is not a treaty ally and the U.S. has no formal obligation to defend it from China.			

Sources: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Google Maps.

President Trump takes a very different view of the U.S. system of alliances. At a minimum, he seems to believe that alliance partners have taken advantage of American largesse and wants to see redress through burden-sharing. Trump's complaints against NATO members' underspending on defense are well known, though in the first Trump administration there were major tensions with both Japan and South Korea as well. A late 2019 report declared that both of these relationships were on the verge of "rupture" because Trump was "trying to shake down Seoul and Tokyo."¹⁰

On the other hand, there is no question that Secretary of State Marco Rubio believes that U.S. alliances, including in the Asia-Pacific, are "indispensable."¹¹ Despite tensions, it is likely that even under Trump, allies will play a key role in U.S. thinking about a Taiwan scenario.

With respect to Washington's long-maintained affection for alliances, one may reasonably note that constant talk of alliances and partners may reflect political imperatives rather than military ones. In recent U.S. wars, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, most allies gave only token forces, though those forces were touted in the U.S. with the goal of shoring up support both at home and abroad by increasing the wars' legitimacy. These same political imperatives likely apply to East Asia too.



On the other hand, some allied nations have contributed significant fighting forces to U.S. efforts on a regular basis, such as Australia.¹² In a Taiwan scenario, all possible contributions would likely be considered since the U.S. would be seeking a maximum coalition rather than a minimum one. Yet strategists should not be deceived by the alliance-focused rhetoric that is now so common in U.S. diplomacy but should rather focus narrowly and realistically on how such a scenario might play out if only a minimum of help is available.

Having established Washington's inclination to rely heavily on alliances in the Asia-Pacific, let us examine both the capabilities and willpower of the various relevant U.S. allies. These allies have been selected on the basis of having some geographic proximity to Taiwan, and thus come from three regions: East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific. A possible European role is also addressed. This analysis does not cover countries that support China (i.e. North Korea) or small islands that wouldn't be able to contribute much to a defense of Taiwan (i.e. Brunei). Such islands—others include the Marshall Islands and East Timor—could become targets for potential airbases if a larger war were to break out, but beyond that they wouldn't factor much into a Taiwan scenario, especially since many of them are quite distant from Taiwan itself.

The “bookends” of such an exploration are naturally Australia and Japan. Yet there are more than a few vital nuances concerning other allies, which inhabit a nebulous zone of inclining toward Washington's position while likely being unable to commit significant forces for the foreseeable future.

AUSTRALIA

Australia is a continent-sized nation and a member of the Quad, the Indo-Pacific-focused security group that also includes the U.S., Japan, and India. A close ally of the United States, Australia has supported the U.S. in nearly every military conflict of the last century. It's a party to the so-called AUKUS submarine cooperation plan, which unites Australia with the United Kingdom and the United States. Australia's relations with China have seen some improvement since mid-2022, but this comes after years of turbulence due to acute strains over trade, Chinese influence operations, and, perhaps most important, China's new reef bases in the South China Sea.

Australia has a powerful military but is reliant on the United States for sealift, which, combined with its sheer distance from Taiwan, could diminish its effectiveness in any Taiwan scenario. Australia is unlikely to provide much help at any rate, given that its left-wing Labor Party is in government and its economic prosperity is dependent in part on access to Chinese markets.

CAPACITY

Australia has strong and battle-tested armed forces. The country wields over 100 combat aircraft, 11 surface combatants, and six diesel submarines.¹³ Unlike India (see below), the military platforms in Australia are largely imported from the U.S., such as the F-18 Hornet fighter-attack aircraft, simplifying interoperability, logistics, and also maintenance. Canberra also possesses certain niche capabilities that could be especially useful in a Taiwan scenario, such as robust anti-submarine aircraft (both rotary-wing and fixed-wing) as well as special forces (e.g. diver units).¹⁴

Since late 2021, the U.S.-Australia relationship has been much in the news due to the announcement of the AUKUS deal. This agreement would allow Australia to access nuclear technology and build its own nuclear



submarine force with combat-ready nuclear boats available sometime after 2040.¹⁵ To close this very substantial time-lag, the agreement also envisions a number of interim steps, including Australia's acquisition of SSN-AUKUS submarines combining British and American technology by 2030, and the purchase of three to five American *Virginia*-class submarines in the early 2030s. The UK and U.S. will also start to "deploy their own nuclear-powered submarines in the region as part of 'Submarine Rotational Force-West.'"¹⁶

AUKUS' sharing of naval nuclear propulsion technology began officially in February 2022,¹⁷ while the Australian government moved the next month to establish its first nuclear submarine base on the country's eastern coast, along with a nuclear submarine fabrication facility.¹⁸ Australian civilian and military personnel began to embed in both the U.S. Navy and the Royal Navy during 2023.¹⁹ A new milestone was reached in the training of Australian nuclear submarine-qualified personnel with the announcement in late 2024 of a new training facility in southwestern Australia.²⁰

The air component of the U.S.-Australia military alliance is similarly dynamic. In mid-2023, the United States and Australia agreed to partner with Japan in order to undertake joint F-35 strike fighter training in Australia.²¹ U.S. nuclear-capable bombers have stepped up deployments to Australia and are likely to be based there semi-permanently.²² Airfield and logistical upgrades are underway "to support high-end warfighting."²³ Insofar as some U.S. strategists consider heavy bombers—with their large payloads and stand-off capabilities—to be crucial to a Taiwan campaign, Australia's myriad, large, and high-quality airstrips could hypothetically represent Canberra's most important contribution to a U.S. war in defense of Taiwan.²⁴

 AUSTRALIA Population: 26.5 million			Active military personnel 58,450		Reserves 21,450	
GDP (2024) \$1.69 trillion	Defense budget (2024) \$35.9 billion	 1.5% of global defense spending	Approx. distance from Taiwan 2,700 mi.	Nuclear-armed state No	Formal U.S. ally Yes	Recognizes Taiwan No
 Surface combatants 11	 Combat aircraft 143	 Submarines 6	Key facts: Australia's distance from the Asian mainland insulates it from direct threats to its own security.			

Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Google Maps.

Chinese military planners are watching these developments carefully. For example, a recent detailed article in *PLA Daily* observed that joint military exercises in July 2023 were unprecedented in scale and covered the entire territory of Australia. The article called them the most important U.S.-Australian logistical exercises since World War II. In addition, the article noted that many European nations, including France and Germany, sent troops to participate, which was said to reflect an intention to continue to promote the "Asia-Pacificization of NATO."²⁵ The issue of NATO's role in the Asia-Pacific is taken up in more detail below, but this article may demonstrate Chinese anxiety that Australia will be an important player in increasing Europe's role in Asia-Pacific security.

One very serious issue overhangs any role for Australia in the Asia-Pacific: lift. Australia has very limited sealift capabilities, which could hamstring its ability to deploy ground forces in the event of a Taiwan

scenario. Historically Australia has relied on the United States to provide the lift and logistical support for its forces to get to other places. For example, in the 2023 Indo-Pacific training exercise called Super Garuda Shield, the U.S. provided sealift for Australian armor to reach Indonesia.²⁶ This may not prove too dire a constraint in a Taiwan scenario given that it would likely be more of an air/sea battle than a ground forces battle. But it could still prove an impediment given that Australia is more than 3,500 miles from Taiwan, and the war could start quickly, leaving limited time to get forces to the theater.

WILLINGNESS

If Australia has capable armed forces, the question remains as to whether it has the will to use them in a Taiwan fight. Senior Australian decision-makers have addressed the Taiwan issue in a direct manner over the last few years, with then-defense minister Peter Dutton suggesting in early 2022 that if China invaded Taiwan it would not stop taking territory and could end up creating a new regional order.²⁷ Around that time, Australia moved to ink a defense agreement with Japan—a first between the two U.S. allies. They jointly agreed to opposition to “any destabilizing or coercive unilateral actions that seek to alter the status quo and increase tensions” in the East China Sea and stressed “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait....”²⁸

However, Canberra transitioned from Liberal to Labor party rule in May 2022, and the new Australian government has sought to improve ties with China. Australia-based China expert Richard McGregor notes that a major objective of the government under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is to lower the temperature of relations with Beijing. He cites evidence that they may have provided “guarantees [to Beijing] on limits of Australian interaction with Taiwan.”²⁹ Yet he asks whether Australia’s caution on the Taiwan issue is sustainable, noting that the AUKUS deal would appear to rest in the hands of the U.S. Congress: “Would they approve such transfers if they thought Australia was backsliding on Taiwan?”³⁰

On the economic side, Beijing will continue to hold leverage over Canberra insofar as China forms a major export market for Australian goods.³¹ Australia’s prospering economy over the last few decades is partly attributable to China’s extraordinary growth and need for Australia’s natural resources. Thus it is not surprising that Canberra’s commercial elites are skittish about a direct confrontation with Beijing. Australian politics have long been riven between pro-China and anti-China factions, and there is no reason to believe this dispute has been resolved. Former prime minister Paul Keating vocally criticized Canberra’s increasing inclination to defend Taiwan in late 2021, and assessed the AUKUS deal as follows: “Eight submarines against China when we get the submarines in 20 years’ time—it’ll be like throwing a handful of toothpicks at the mountain.”³²

It could also prove difficult for Australians to link their own security to that of Taiwan. Thus, Keating argued, “Taiwan is not a vital Australian interest... We have no alliance with Taipei. There is no piece of paper sitting in Canberra which has an alliance with Taipei.”³³

ANALYSIS

Australia brings numerous advantages to the United States’ alliance system in Asia, beyond a common culture and heritage of close military cooperation. The country is distant enough from China that it is not immediately vulnerable to the full range of China’s strike systems.³⁴ That makes it quite different from other U.S. allies, which are more proximate and hence more vulnerable to China’s arsenal of A2/AD weaponry.



Australia also has about a dozen surface combatants, as well as half a dozen diesel submarines that could marginally increase U.S. aggregate naval combat power in a Taiwan scenario.

Yet there are many reasons to believe that Australia does not offer a neat solution to Washington's Taiwan dilemma. While the aggregate of Australia's armed forces is decently impressive, it stands to reason that only a portion would be available to deploy in a Taiwan conflict. Since the AUKUS submarines are unlikely to arrive before the mid-2030s, it could be a decade or more before serious Australian submarine power could be brought to bear in a Taiwan scenario.³⁵ And even then it isn't guaranteed. Raising more questions about the feasibility of AUKUS, a 2023 appraisal observes that "Australia has struggled to crew its current subs" and moreover "America's navy is struggling to acquire enough Virginia-class subs for itself as it races to close the gap with China."³⁶ Tough issues related to the feasibility of AUKUS have not dissipated in 2024. One press report explains: "Fears that long-standing backlogs at U.S. shipyards and a shrinking submarine fleet could undercut willingness for the sales [of nuclear submarines to Australia] boiled over this week when the Biden administration cut its funding request for the Virginia class."³⁷

In addition, it's worth noting that if Australia becomes a hub for U.S. submarines in the meantime, that means it will become a target for Chinese missile strikes. Nor is Australian geography ideal: Canberra is more distant from Beijing than is London. In a Taiwan scenario, submarines would have to transit the narrow passages through the Indonesian archipelago and could encounter straits blocked by sea mines and other threats. The 2023 CSIS "First Battle" war game showed that even nuclear submarines have limitations in a Taiwan scenario, first and foremost with respect to their small magazine size.³⁸ CSIS's report also said that China would target shore facilities related to submarine operations, including especially those related to torpedo storage and handling.³⁹ CSIS notes that Australia would offer basing, access, and overflight, but cautions that Australian military forces would be "unavailable... for operations around Taiwan."⁴⁰ It seems safe to conclude that America's alliance with Australia would not be a game-changer in a Taiwan scenario.

INDIA

India is the most populous nation in the world (having taken that honor from China in 2023) and a rising economic power. It's a member of the Quad and shares a border with China yet its relations with both Washington and Beijing are complicated. Like Australia, India has much to recommend it as an ally of the United States. It evinces a similar disposition to confront China and it possesses nuclear weaponry. Yet it would be unwise to count on any major support from India in a Taiwan contingency, since India lacks major capabilities, faces other threats, and has demonstrated little inclination to challenge China on the specific issue of Taiwan.

CAPACITY

India has an enormous military with almost 1.5 million under arms and more than another million in its reserve forces. With 16 submarines, two aircraft carriers, 11 destroyers, and 16 frigates, New Delhi wields considerable naval capabilities.⁴¹ India claims the world's fourth largest air force, possessing nearly 1,000 combat aircraft. Yet such numbers can be deceiving.

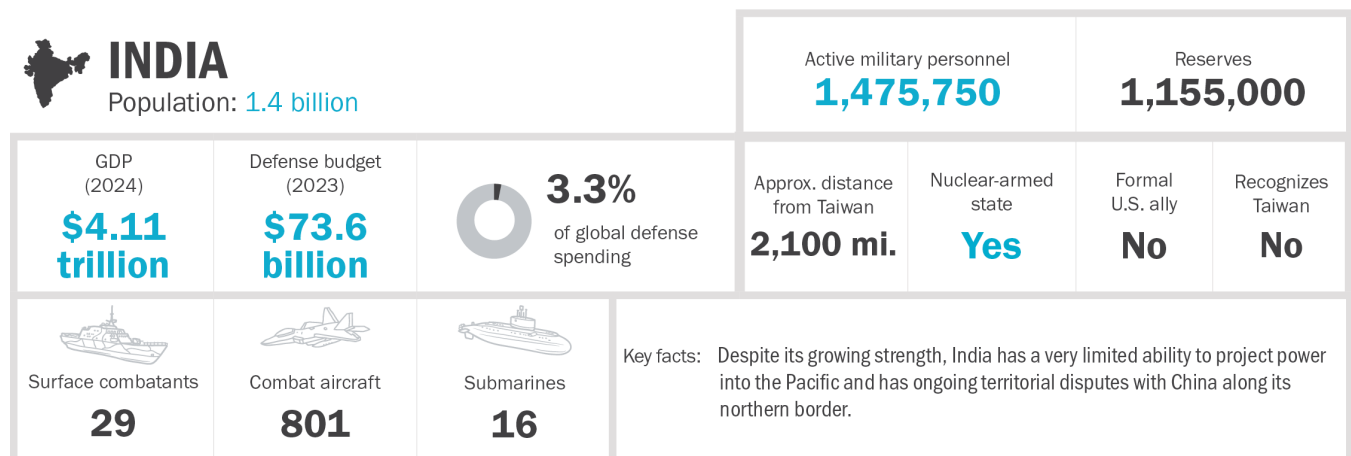
Despite its vast size, India's military is seriously constrained in its ability to project power far beyond the subcontinent. This begins with its defense spending: Prime Minister Modi's government has embraced a renewed focus on domestic policy after 2024's tighter-than-expected general election, leaving defense



priorities languishing.⁴² India's defense spending for FY2025 at \$74 billion sits at 1.9 percent of its GDP, the lowest it has been since the 1950s.⁴³

Between India's nearly 900 combat aircraft exist just six aerial refueling tankers, severely limiting the reach of New Delhi's striking power.⁴⁴ Indian airpower has also long been dogged by force sustainment issues doubtlessly made worse by a shrinking defense budget. In 2021, it was reported that the Indian Air Force could count just 31 of its 42 squadrons as operational.⁴⁵ Tellingly, the Indian Air Force's primary mission is offensive counterair operations, indicating an institutional assumption that it is meant to operate close to home in short-range strike packages mainly geared toward the Pakistani threat, rather than in any kind of Taiwan scenario.⁴⁶

India's navy is also hamstrung by a lack of logistical reach. India's lone naval base outside the subcontinent is located off Mauritius in the southern Indian Ocean nowhere near the Strait of Malacca, the gateway for Indian vessels looking to enter the Pacific.⁴⁷ By the numbers alone, India's navy is unprepared to conduct significant operations far beyond the Indian Ocean. Despite the ambitions of some Indian navalists, India only fields 20 amphibious vessels and three fleet replenishment oilers. It does not operate a single hospital ship.⁴⁸ India has only ever launched one military operation outside the subcontinent proper—a peacekeeping operation in Sri Lanka in 1987—further suggesting that its military's institutional knowledge of operating far from home is extremely limited.⁴⁹



Sources: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Google Maps.

As with its air force, India's navy is also overly dependent on foreign purchases of weapons and other military hardware.⁵⁰ Taking the Indian submarine force as but one example, it operates French, German, and Russian designs.⁵¹ This may partly explain the record of deadly accidents that continues to plague India's armed forces.⁵²

WILLINGNESS

One analysis recently noted of the prospect for a "Milk Tea Alliance" that would unite India and Taiwan, "As the border issue resurfaces, India is seeking opportunities to balance and challenge China, and so the 'Taiwan card' is once again emerging as a strategic bargaining chip."⁵³ While the content of this discussion is generally political, diplomatic, and economic, it is relevant that Indian warships have been visiting the western Pacific since at least 2007 during the annual Malabar exercises.

On the other hand, India in August 2022 reaffirmed its commitment to a One China policy and to the “exercise of restraint.”⁵⁴ Like all Indian prime ministers before him, Narendra Modi has pursued a largely independent foreign policy. In 2023, Modi did respond to U.S. inquiries by commissioning a study examining possible Indian responses to a Taiwan invasion, including “a more extreme scenario... for India to get directly involved along their northern border, opening a new theater of war for China.”⁵⁵ But this was not a statement of intent so much as an exploration of options. Analysts generally doubt India has the motivation to get involved in a Taiwan conflict.⁵⁶

Recently, there has been quite a bit of excitement in American naval circles about the possibilities for repair and maintenance of U.S. warships in Indian ports.⁵⁷ But it seems prudent to ask if such yards could transition successfully to the complex wartime repairs needed by battle-damaged combatants.

ANALYSIS

Even though China-India relations have been strained since a series of clashes on the two countries’ mountainous border starting in May 2020, New Delhi has nevertheless been relatively cautious, including in partnering with the United States. Strategist Ashley Tellis argues that the U.S. should not have illusions about India’s willingness to assist in a military crisis with China: “Washington’s current expectations of India are misplaced. India’s significant weaknesses compared with China, and its inescapable proximity to it, guarantee that New Delhi will never involve itself in any U.S. confrontation with Beijing that does not directly threaten its own security.”⁵⁸

One may speculate that if India is capable of intensifying its challenge to China across its land border, namely in and around Tibet, this may well cause Beijing to be more cautious with respect to Taiwan. However, this hypothesis has so far not been borne out, since China now appears to be simultaneously investing heavily in naval and aerospace power, while steadily upgrading its mountain warfare capabilities and infrastructure. It is quite plausible that, if New Delhi were to intervene in a Taiwan scenario, China could threaten action on the Himalayan border, where most analyses give China the military edge.⁵⁹

Many in Washington place great faith in the future potential of the Quad, but New Delhi’s distance from Taipei—the two cities are more than 2,700 miles apart—as well as its focus on Pakistan and its solid ties to Russia all suggest that India will be a non-factor in any hypothetical Taiwan scenario.⁶⁰ Even if India were to become far more willing to defend Taiwan, it would lack the ability to project power there for the foreseeable future.

SOUTH KOREA

The Republic of Korea occupies the southern half of the Korean Peninsula in East Asia. Its capital Seoul is less than 1,000 miles from Taipei, which is significantly closer than the American military hub of Guam. South Korea is a longstanding ally of the United States, and a partnership between the two nations to stymie Chinese aggression against Taiwan would bring major advantages. South Korea’s armed forces, like India’s, are large, and unlike India’s they would be much more proximate to a Taiwan fight. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons to think that South Korea will abjure from any major participation in a Taiwan scenario, due to the straightforward reasons that it prioritizes the North Korean threat and that Seoul has strong economic ties to Beijing. Such tendencies, moreover, are only likely to be reinforced by the political turbulence that convulsed Seoul in December 2024.⁶¹



CAPACITY

South Korea counts 3,600,000 personnel in its armed forces, with over half a million in the active force—more than double that of Japan, which has a larger economy and population. South Korea’s forces are not just large but maintain a high degree of professionalism, as well as relevant capabilities, including submarines, destroyers, and even ballistic missile forces. Seoul has incrementally increased its defense expenditures and has demonstrated that it will not be easily bullied by Beijing, for example on the issue of missile defense deployments.⁶² South Korea may even possess unique ISR capabilities for monitoring the Chinese armed forces, in part due to its proximity.

South Korea has strong ground forces, as well as substantial air and naval might that could be particularly relevant to a Taiwan scenario. In November 2024, South Korea is expected to receive its first KDX III, reputed to be the world’s most heavily armed destroyer, and this will be the first of six vessels of this class.⁶³ The South Korean Navy also opened a giant new base off the southern coast of South Korea on the island of Jeju back in 2016, which gets their forces closer to Taiwan than the mainland.⁶⁴ That facility has been described as a “strategic base capable of serving as a blue-water springboard” that can dock and maintain a flotilla of 30 warships.⁶⁵ In July 2023, the *USS Annapolis* docked at the Jeju base to take on supplies.⁶⁶

 SOUTH KOREA Population: 52 million			Active military personnel 500,000		Reserves 3,100,000	
GDP (2024) \$1.78 trillion	Defense budget (2024) \$45.5 billion	 2% of global defense spending	Approx. distance from Taiwan 900 mi.	Nuclear-armed state No	Formal U.S. ally Yes	Recognizes Taiwan No
 Surface combatants 25	 Combat aircraft 616	 Submarines 20	Key facts: South Korean security prioritizes the ongoing threat from North Korea, limiting its willingness to confront China in a war with Taiwan.			

Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Google Maps.

WILLINGNESS

While Australia, as noted above, has a new government that is more cautious in dealing with China, the opposite had been true for South Korea. In May 2022, a conservative government led by Yoon Suk Yeol assumed the reins of power in Seoul, taking over from a much more progressive leadership under Moon Jae-in. Although South Korea has steadily increased its defense expenditures over the last decade, which are consistently over 2 percent of its GDP, President Yoon asked for a 4.6 percent increase in 2023.⁶⁷ South Korea’s impressive achievements in defense preparedness and armaments production have made it a major supplier for Europe’s process of rearmament in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁶⁸

A visit by a nuclear-armed U.S. submarine, an SSBN, to South Korea in mid-2023 marked an upgraded deterrent effort as part of the Washington Declaration that accompanied President Yoon’s state visit to the

United States in April 2023. Not surprisingly, Beijing has expressed concern about the increasing U.S.-South Korean collaboration in the domain of nuclear strategy.⁶⁹

Yoon's declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024 failed to gain widespread support, as the legislature proved stalwart in defense of South Korea's democratic institutions. These dramatic events led to Yoon's downfall and placed his defense and foreign policy initiatives very much in doubt. The successor government to Yoon, under current South Korean president Lee Jae Myung, has been less supportive of higher defense expenditures and sought a rapprochement with Beijing.

These tumultuous developments in Seoul underline other obvious limitations to any South Korean participation in a Taiwan war. First and foremost, the country's military remains focused on the threat from North Korea, a nation with well over a million in uniform, and so will be highly reluctant to shift forces far to the south. Second, South Korea has a reasonably good relationship with China, and recognizes the value of that relationship for stabilizing the delicate North-South issue. Seoul has opted to distance itself to some extent from U.S. policies with respect to China.

Undoubtedly, Beijing was perturbed by the tightening relationship between Washington and Seoul over the last few years, noting that Taiwan appeared on the agenda of the bilateral relationship for the first time.⁷⁰ China's leaders have been substantially relieved to see Yoon's downfall and the consequent rise, once again, of South Korea's progressives. Of course, the economic factor also looms very large, with China as South Korea's top trading partner and \$268 billion in trade turnover between them during 2023.⁷¹ While it's true that Seoul's exports to China have fallen recently, due largely to new technology restrictions, there is little doubt that South Korea's economy remains somewhat dependent on good relations with China.

ANALYSIS

Given South Korea's proximity to China, and hence its vulnerability to coercion, especially in wartime, it is not surprising that Seoul is anxious to avoid being dragged into a U.S.-China war by its alliance with the United States. One could imagine, given how tight U.S.-South Korean cooperation is, that South Korea might offer enhanced ISR to support U.S. forces. Sensors in South Korea are capable of looking deeply into China and thus provide a valuable intelligence resource.⁷² Likewise, South Korean naval and air forces regularly operate in close proximity to Chinese forces, for example around the Yellow Sea area.

Yet Seoul is so sensitive on this issue that it is quite conceivable that U.S. forces would not be permitted to operate out of South Korean bases in a Taiwan scenario. Indeed, the 2023 CSIS "First Battle" war game assumes no active South Korean participation in a Taiwan scenario. If this proves the case, the question is not whether Washington can actively use its bases in South Korea for the war effort, but whether U.S. forces in Korea can or cannot be withdrawn to join the war over Taiwan.⁷³ South Korea seems likely to contribute little to nothing if Taiwan is invaded and this inclination has only been strengthened by the recent political events in the South Korean capital.

PHILIPPINES

The Philippines is in a much different situation than the countries surveyed above. The archipelago of islands in Southeast Asia would have enormous importance to U.S. forces in any Taiwan scenario due to its proximity. The northern island of Luzon is about 250 miles from Taiwan, but some smaller Philippines



islands are just 100 miles to the south. An ever-intensifying dispute between Manila and Beijing regarding maritime claims in the South China Sea, currently focused on Second Thomas Shoal but involving many other locations too, has caused the Philippines government to seek closer security ties with the United States. This builds upon the close cultural ties between the two countries, as the islands were once an American colony, and U.S. forces were key to liberating the Philippines from Japan during World War II.

Still, the Philippines' proximity to China and weak armed forces make it unlikely Manila will play a meaningful role in a Taiwan scenario. The country's president has assured Beijing that any U.S. deployments in his country will not be used against China. And the Philippines is simply too vulnerable to China, militarily and economically, to want to risk joining a conflict over Taiwan.

CAPACITY

One of the Philippines' biggest assets in a Taiwan scenario would be its geography, which is quite conducive to supporting U.S. military operations. The Philippines would offer significant strategic depth, allowing the Pentagon to build up more forces closer to the fight. That would substantially increase the number of American aircraft sorties, raise the possibility of injecting ground troops into the fight, and enable the rearming and refueling of warships. A dramatic development in 2024 was the U.S. deployment of mobile medium-range *Typhon* missiles to the Philippines for the first time.⁷⁴ Chinese strategists registered disquiet about a new system that could range not only the Taiwan Strait but most of the Chinese mainland as well.⁷⁵ Moreover, the Philippines' many disparate islands could enable the creation of "turtle defenses" featuring advanced irregular ground forces and defending "complex" terrain.⁷⁶ It's worth pointing out, however, that the Philippines Constitution formally bans the creation of foreign bases on Philippines' territory.

Even amid an upswing in U.S.-Philippines relations, as well as amenable geography and cultural compatibilities, there should be no illusions about Manila generating usable combat power for a Taiwan scenario. The Philippines has joined U.S. war efforts in East Asia twice before, in Korea and Vietnam, but always in a limited capacity and with vast U.S. support. At the height of its involvement in Vietnam, the Philippines had only 2,000 troops in the country.⁷⁷ A conflict with China would require a much more robust effort, yet the Filipino armed forces are ill-equipped to project power without sizable American assistance.

The Philippines' military is underfunded and almost completely lacking in sophisticated weaponry. It's hardly considered capable of protecting the Philippines, let alone contributing to the defense of Taiwan. The bulk of the Filipino navy consists of patrol boats and its sealift capability is limited to just 21 amphibious vessels of various kinds.⁷⁸ Its airlift capacity is even more dire. While the Filipino military operates some 36 fixed-wing transport aircraft, the overwhelming majority are foreign-procured light transports like the Airbus C-295M with a carrying capacity of perhaps two infantry platoons. The air force operates just three larger Lockheed C-130s.⁷⁹ The Philippines thus has a glaringly limited ability to ferry forces and equipment through a contested theater to a war zone whether by sea or air.

With just one squadron of 12 Korean-made light combat aircraft, the Filipino Air Force could make little contribution to an air campaign around Taiwan.⁸⁰ The same is true for the Philippines' paltry naval forces that consist now of just two South Korean-made frigates along with a handful of aging U.S.-made *Hamilton*-class cutters.⁸¹ Although Manila has ambitious plans to orient its military away from internal security roles and toward external threats, these plans are very far from realization and may be detached from budgetary realities.⁸²



WILLINGNESS

Manila has tended to bounce between extremes in its navigation of the evolving U.S.-China rivalry. A decade ago, the Philippines brazenly challenged China in the Court of Arbitration at the Hague on sovereignty issues in the South China Sea.⁸³ But soon thereafter, their maverick president Rodrigo Duterte told the U.S. president to “go to hell” and threatened to end all military cooperation with Washington.⁸⁴ Now, the relationship appears to have come full circle with current President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. tilting heavily toward the United States and allowing increased U.S. military access at four critical sites in the Philippines. According to one report, “The locations are significant, with [islands] Isabela and Cagayan facing north towards Taiwan....”⁸⁵ During spring 2023, moreover, the U.S. and the Philippines launched their largest ever joint war games.⁸⁶

 PHILIPPINES Population: 116.4 million			Active military personnel 146,250		Reserves 131,000	
GDP (2024) \$476 billion	Defense budget (2023) \$6.18 billion	 <1% of global defense spending	Approx. distance from Taiwan 250 mi.	Nuclear-armed state No	Formal U.S. ally Yes	Recognizes Taiwan No
 Surface combatants 2	 Combat aircraft 36	 Submarines 0	Key facts: Despite being a U.S. ally, the Philippines has assured Beijing that U.S. troop deployments will not be used against China.			

Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Google Maps; Karen Lema, “Philippines tells China sites for U.S. military pact not for ‘offensive action,’” Reuters, April 10, 2023.

China-Philippines relations were in almost constant crisis during 2024 with ships maneuvering in dangerous ways, including especially at the Second Thomas Shoal, but also near Scarborough Shoal and Sabina Shoal. Chinese bullying in these circumstances sparked the anger of Filipinos, who are seeking to defend their fishing rights in contested waters, along with possible future drilling for hydrocarbons.⁸⁷

Nevertheless the Philippines is understandably keen to avoid a war over Taiwan, with its northernmost islands only 118 miles from Taiwan and more than 150,000 Filipinos working on the island.⁸⁸ Despite its pivot toward the United States, the Philippines still hews closely to a letter-of-the-law reading of its One China policy.⁸⁹ Additionally a survey from May 2024 found that 86 percent of Filipinos wanted their country to remain neutral in the event of a Taiwan conflict.⁹⁰

ANALYSIS

The Philippines is likely to stay neutral if China invades Taiwan.⁹¹ President Marcos has assured Beijing that U.S. military deployments into his country would not be used against China.⁹²

It remains uncertain whether the U.S. would gain access to Filipino military facilities in a Taiwan contingency, especially for use in operations in and around Taiwan (as opposed to in defense of the Philippines itself). ISR and logistics support could represent less risky approaches for the Philippines to back the U.S. in such



dangerous circumstances. The Philippines might offer some support to the U.S. by allowing various sensors to be based in their territory. These sensors could be important to helping U.S. forces gain a complete picture of China's attack in a Taiwan scenario. Likewise Manila might allow some limited help on logistics. A hint of how such support could play out in a Taiwan emergency came in 2024 when rumors suggested that large amounts of aviation fuel had been transferred by the U.S. from Hawaii to the Philippines. Yet that same mini-controversy also showed some of the major political and strategic obstacles to such cooperation in military logistics.⁹³ Overall the Philippines is unlikely to contribute anything decisive to a Taiwan scenario.

INDONESIA, MALAYSIA, NEW ZEALAND, PAPUA NEW GUINEA, SINGAPORE, THAILAND, AND VIETNAM

Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam are all in either East Asia or Oceania and have some proximity to China, but they are least likely to meaningfully contribute to any U.S. coalition to defend Taiwan. Some could plausibly offer base access or even token forces, but none are likely to be active and militarily decisive allies of the U.S. in a Taiwan scenario.

CAPACITY

These diverse states are generally lacking in strong, expeditionary-oriented armed forces and would likely be reticent to get involved in a high-intensity superpower military clash. Let's discuss just a few examples.

Malaysia's armed forces have been undergoing a modest modernization program with defense spending rising from \$3.7 billion to \$4 billion from 2022 to 2023. Still, the focus seems to be on technological renovations rather than building up power projection capabilities at scale.⁹⁴

Thailand, a U.S. treaty ally, has a fairly small military—spending just over 1 percent of its GDP on defense—and is limited in its reach.⁹⁵ The extent of its force projection capability is limited to small-scale peacekeeping efforts. Fresh fissures with its backers in Washington, which supply most of its aircraft, have opened over the latter's refusal to supply Bangkok with F-35s.⁹⁶

As far as the small states of Southeast Asia are concerned, Singapore is an unusual case. The small island city-state fields a disproportionately large military. It has a modest professional corps of some 50,000 personnel but an impressive quarter million in reserves. It boasts a large and sophisticated air force with 100 modern multirole fighters, equaling those of the Royal Thai Air Force, which defends a country 13 times more populous.

But it is doubtful that Singapore can project hard power into a Taiwan war zone without U.S. support. While it does have 11 aerial tankers, which would technically allow its aircraft to range to Taiwan, its sealift capabilities are extremely limited with just four amphibious vessels and a handful of logistical ships.⁹⁷ Singapore's military is structured to defend Singapore proper and the surrounding airspace and seaways on which its commercial vitality depends.

Vietnam boasts a medium-sized air force and navy, including eight *Kilo*-class diesel submarines imported from Russia.⁹⁸ Such boats could, at least in theory, be relevant to the defense of Taiwan. Papua New Guinea has been leaning in to its defense relationship with Washington by making certain potentially valuable locations available to the U.S. armed forces, as discussed below. On the other hand, it has just a few hundred personnel in its armed forces and a handful of small boats and aircraft.⁹⁹

There is some possibility that in a Taiwan scenario, the U.S. might opt to respond to Chinese aggression by counter-blockading China, especially with respect to its key maritime transport nodes through Southeast Asia. In that case, basing and ISR sensors in many of the above states could become more relevant.

WILLINGNESS

Indonesia might one day wield significant military power, but for now its armed forces are mostly focused on internal security. Moreover, this large island archipelago has a strong tradition of non-alignment. While there have been occasional flare-ups in the South China Sea, Indonesia-China relations are generally in good shape, as exemplified by President Joko Widodo's mid-2023 visit to China.¹⁰⁰ China and Indonesia did \$133 billion in trade with each other in 2022 and Beijing is by far Indonesia's foremost trading partner.¹⁰¹ Taiwan is also Indonesia's largest destination for migrant workers. But then this, in conjunction with Indonesia's One China policy, points to a desire to deter a Taiwan conflict rather than side with the United States in one.

Malaysia saw tensions flare with Beijing in 2021 concerning a large sortie of Chinese aircraft into the South China Sea, as well as various maritime disputes.¹⁰² Still, there is no hint of any interest by Kuala Lumpur in consideration of a military role in a Taiwan scenario.¹⁰³ Given that Malaysia is importing major Chinese military equipment, it is unlikely to be seriously contemplating aligning against China in a military context.¹⁰⁴ A fall 2023 report by the U.S. Institute of Peace suggested that Malaysia "will not take sides" in the growing superpower rivalry.¹⁰⁵ Malaysia as recently as June 2024 vocally indicated its support for Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, further indicating it's unlikely to help the U.S. in a conflict.¹⁰⁶

New Zealand and Singapore seem to invite possibilities. Wellington, like Australia, has a long history of intervening alongside American troops, but its foreign policy on the whole is more complicated than might first appear, prizing independence and pursuing good relations with Beijing.

Unlike most of the states in Southeast Asia, Singapore has a long tradition of cooperative military training with Taiwan.¹⁰⁷ It has also often followed the lead of Washington and other Western capitals, setting it apart from its Asian neighbors, for example in the Ukraine war.¹⁰⁸ But Singapore has pursued close relations with Beijing and is a rare country where public opinion towards China runs positive.¹⁰⁹ While both Singapore and New Zealand have close ties to Washington, neither is an official treaty ally of the U.S. bound by a mutual defense agreement.¹¹⁰

If Singapore and New Zealand offer at least possibilities for allied coordination, that seems far-fetched with respect to Thailand. Although the U.S. formally has an alliance relationship with Thailand, this has been in a state of decay since a military coup back in 2014. Thailand is still reliant on U.S. military aid but has been enhancing its military cooperation with China; it's also joined the Belt and Road Initiative and unlike many other East Asian nations, it has no territorial disputes with Beijing.¹¹¹

Finally, there is Vietnam, which has by far the most formidable military of all these Southeast Asian countries. Hanoi has occasionally made clear that it will not bend to Chinese threats, and its relations with the United States have improved in recent years. In mid-2023, the *USS Ronald Reagan* carrier strike group

made a visit to Vietnam, the third American carrier to do so since 2018.¹¹² Notably, at nearly the same time, the Vietnamese and Chinese navies conducted their thirty-fourth joint maritime patrol of the Gulf of Tonkin.¹¹³

Yet Hanoi is not eager to pick sides among the two superpowers.¹¹⁴ This reticence can be seen in its official policy called the “four no’s”: no military alliances; no siding with one country over another; no foreign military bases or use of Vietnamese territory to oppose other countries; and no use of force or threats to use force in international relations. Given this tradition, it is difficult to see Vietnam getting involved in a Taiwan scenario. Additionally, from a military standpoint, Vietnam is quite vulnerable to Chinese coercion, not least because its capital is only about 100 miles from the Chinese mainland. Hanoi may consequently focus on the sensitive South China Sea issue but will probably not align closely with Washington nor seek a role on Taiwan.

ANALYSIS

The prospects for meaningful assistance from these countries are bleak. The two with the geopolitical heft to develop into genuine middle-rank military powers, Indonesia and Vietnam, show little disposition to get involved in a Taiwan scenario. It’s worth noting that nearly all states in the Asia-Pacific consistently affirm the One China policy as a precondition of stable relations with Beijing.¹¹⁵

It is true that among some of these countries are pockets of excellence that could prove useful in a Taiwan scenario, whether New Zealand’s new squadron of advanced P-8 anti-submarine aircraft or a couple dozen Singaporean F-15 fighters. Still, those numbers are quite small in the larger scope of this hypothetical war, and many of these countries simply have other priorities. For example, Singapore has the most technologically advanced, well-drilled, and expeditionary military on this list, but the main reason for this is that Singapore is surrounded by much bigger and sometimes unstable neighbors.¹¹⁶ This logical prioritization of homeland security could prevent Singapore from actively sending its forces into a Taiwan conflict.

That may partially explain why the U.S. is now working on developing six bases in Papua New Guinea. It seems the Pentagon views that country’s geography as favorable.¹¹⁷ Yet that seems a questionable assumption given that Papua New Guinea is well over 2,000 miles from Taiwan, even more distant than Guam. Moreover, it is less than 200 miles from Australia, raising a significant question of redundancy.

Nevertheless, the geographical value of many of these states, including Papua New Guinea, could increase in two variations of the Taiwan scenario. First, it is conceivable that a U.S. response to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan could involve attempting to blockade Chinese shipping, as mentioned above, especially in and around the Strait of Malacca. Second, as the AUKUS nuclear submarine deal develops further, one can anticipate both U.S. and Australian nuclear submarines surging north in a wartime scenario. In that case, the security of the maritime chokepoints north of Australia, as discussed above, could become more important. It is noteworthy that Jakarta has not embraced the AUKUS submarine deal with enthusiasm, to put it mildly, and some Western strategists are even worried Indonesia could pose problems for the agreement’s implementation.¹¹⁸



EUROPE

Leading European states, including France, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany, have all leaned hard in the direction of the Asia-Pacific over the last several years, including in the military domain. For the first time in its history, China has become a planning factor in major NATO strategic documents.¹¹⁹ After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, however, the prospect of Europe playing a significant role in a Taiwan scenario went from remote to farfetched. This relatively new European interest in Asia-Pacific security seems most likely to be about satisfying, at least at a symbolic level, Washington's consistent requests for support. And with Europe and the U.S. experiencing strains under the second Trump administration, the likelihood of the Europeans contributing much to a Taiwan scenario may have only waned further.

CAPACITY

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have put in rather stark relief the problematic nature of orienting European defense planning toward preparations for intervention in case of a Taiwan scenario. To put it bluntly, if Europe has difficulties providing sufficient forces to defend allied partners in Eastern Europe, it seems outlandish to think it could play a substantial role in the defense of Taiwan. The distances are simply too great and the forces are too small. Nor, for the most part, are they the right type of forces. Surface ships and even carrier groups may make for ideal photo-ops, but they have limited survivability under the combat conditions that reflect the reality of China's efficient A2/AD technology, which links surveillance data to accurate missile and air defense systems.

The crux of any meaningful European force deployment in a region as far afield as the western Pacific is naval power. Yet European navies have shrunk dramatically over the last generation and have not been able to demonstrate credible power projection capabilities on a global scale since the twentieth century. Between the UK, France, Germany, and Italy, there are just eight amphibious ships and 54 landing vessels of various types.¹²⁰ The ability to surge substantial forces into the region via sealift is thus limited. It's true that France and the United Kingdom each possess half a dozen nuclear attack submarines, which could be useful in a Taiwan scenario. But even if both countries were able to deploy half these forces, they would likely be too late, lack sufficient firepower, and have trouble sustaining combat operations at such an extreme distance, particularly as regards torpedo rearming.¹²¹

France is the only European state with any notable force presence in the Indo-Pacific. The French armed forces retain two permanent areas of responsibility in the south Pacific and one in the Indian Ocean accounting for some 60 percent of France's total overseas force presence. However, their scope and scale are limited. France has just 8,000 personnel deployed across this vast theater with its nearest territorial possession being New Caledonia to the east of Australia, over 4,000 miles from Taiwan.¹²² The UK has just one Pacific possession, the Pitcairn Islands, with a population of 50 situated some 8,000 miles from Taiwan and defended by just two *River*-class offshore patrol vessels whose crews outnumber the islands' population.¹²³ European nations also have some bases beyond their territorial holdings in the western Pacific—the UK has fuel installations in Singapore for instance. But the use of those facilities lies at the discretion of their host nations, and as we've seen countries like Singapore seem unlikely to get involved in a Taiwan scenario.

Substantial assistance from the U.S. would be required for European militaries to project useful power into

the western Pacific, most importantly the use of U.S. bases at Guam or Okinawa. This was borne out by the recent deployment of the Italian Navy's flagship *Cavour* and its attendant strike group to the Pacific for interoperability exercises with the U.S. and Japan. The *Cavour* strike group was operating well within friendly waters and even made a stop-off at Guam, always under the umbrella of U.S. regional power.¹²⁴ It is unlikely that a similar European force would be able to operate for long in the western Pacific independent of the substantial aid provided by U.S. births and bases, and even less so in the contested environment of a high-intensity warzone.

WILLINGNESS

European nations have lately sent military forces into the Asia-Pacific region. A Royal Navy carrier strike group journeyed into the Asia-Pacific during the latter half of 2021, with one UK defense expert noting, "This is significant since the hot spots of the Sino-American competition are at sea, notably in the East and South China Seas and across the Strait of Taiwan."¹²⁵ This deployment came after another noteworthy deployment to the Asia-Pacific of a French nuclear submarine in 2021. A Dutch frigate had also accompanied the earlier British squadron, and Germany got into the action as well, dispatching the frigate *Bayern* to the South China Sea in late 2021.

In addition to these voyages, the European Union and European capitals have released plenty of statements about Taiwan, which indicate a heightened awareness of tensions in the region. In 2023, for example, Germany published its first ever China strategy, which acknowledged that it had "economic and technological interests" in Taiwan.¹²⁶

White papers shouldn't be confused with willingness. however. The EU has long sought a third way between Washington and Beijing on a host of issues, informed by its lucrative trading relationship with the Chinese. China is by far the EU's largest external exporter of goods while the EU exports its third most goods to China.¹²⁷ The EU is particularly dependent on Chinese rare earths and critical metals, so much so that one analysis compares it to Europe's erstwhile reliance on Russian natural gas.¹²⁸

These economic ties, along with the devastation that a Taiwan conflict could wreak on the world economy, make the EU likelier to work to prevent a Taiwan invasion than intervene militarily against China. The same analysis cited above questions whether the EU could even muster up a unified package of sanctions against Beijing, given that all 27 EU member states would need to approve amid powerful economic disincentives.¹²⁹ It's also worth pointing out that the European Union has a One China policy and that the EU tends on the whole to be more amenable to Chinese interests than the United States.

But the biggest reason Europe is unlikely to make a difference in a Taiwan scenario is that it is distracted by Ukraine and in the even longer term by the threat from Russia. The Russo-Ukrainian War is understandably viewed as more of a threat to Europeans than a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which is a good 5,000 miles away even from Ukraine. Much has been written about how Europeans are becoming fatigued over the drawn-out combat on their Ukrainian doorstep. Given at least some degree of weariness, it's unlikely many of them would support getting involved in another war with far lower stakes for them personally. And even when the Ukraine war ends, the threat from Russia will remain a dominant concern in Europe, regardless of what white papers say about China.

It is conceivable that symbolic, small contingents of forces could be dispatched by European states, but their impact on the combat situation would likely be negligible.

ANALYSIS

There is an unfortunate parallel to Europe's role in the American war in Afghanistan. Many European forces served heroically in that conflict and made honorable sacrifices, but while European leaders talked a lot about Afghanistan, they ultimately committed only small increments of troops. The only impact seems to have been to delude Americans that the grand-looking coalition could prevail, when in fact NATO-Europe lacked the capabilities to make sufficient commitments. This could be described as the nefarious "cheerleading effect."

If anything, the prospects for European contributions to a Taiwan scenario seem even less probable than they were in Afghanistan. In a Taiwan war, given the distance and timing, European nations are likely to contribute nothing, or perhaps some largely symbolic logistics or intelligence support. The British could contribute a submarine or two, and European nations could slap sanctions on China, but the overall effect is likely to be closer to cheerleading than any kind of difference-maker.

JAPAN

Japan is a prosperous and populous island nation in East Asia and boasts the third-largest economy on earth. It is far and away the most important U.S. ally in the Asia-Pacific and, unlike many of the countries discussed above, its relevance to a Taiwan scenario cannot be doubted. Indeed, many arguments for the defense of Taiwan assert that the island is intrinsically tied to Japan's defense.¹³⁰ The remainder of this explainer will focus on the vital question of Japan's possible role in a Taiwan scenario.

Overall, there are many unknowns in this calculation, so that Japan's support certainly cannot be considered a sure thing. Moreover, such a vast political-military crisis would be completely unprecedented in Japan's post-war history.

The political situation in Tokyo is also somewhat unstable with Japan on its fourth prime minister in the last five years; Japan is also likely feeling reverberations from the political tumult in nearby South Korea. If Tokyo did decide to cooperate with the U.S. in a Taiwan scenario, it might intensify this political instability. Worse, it could be dependent on a long, drawn-out decision-making process, and could involve numerous strings attached to the use of bases and the employment of Japanese forces.¹³¹

Let's review some vital historical facts before endeavoring to understand the contemporary political dynamics. Japan's major role in Taiwan's history dates from 1895, when at the end of the Sino-Japanese War China was forced to cede the island of Taiwan to the Japanese.¹³² Taiwan became Tokyo's first major colonial project and remained under Japanese control until 1945. Japan encountered some resistance during this period, including uprisings on three different occasions, one of which, according to a 2022 scholarly volume, witnessed the indigenous Seediq people "brought to the brink of genocide" by the Japanese.¹³³ Yet Vogel also notes that "The standard of living in Taiwan rose rapidly under Japanese rule, and by 1945, it was, on average, much higher than that on the Chinese mainland."¹³⁴ Many Taiwanese ended up serving in the Japanese army during World War II, including some who were sent to Japanese-occupied China, because they knew the language and culture.¹³⁵ The legacy of Japan's rule in Taiwan is thus significant, and strong economic and cultural ties continue to bind Taiwan with Japan today.



Japan and China have long had tense relations. This is thanks largely to Japan's history of atrocities against the Chinese during and before World War II, most notably the infamous Nanjing Massacre. Chinese nationalism in the modern era has been built on a foundation of anti-Japanese sentiment, going back to the Sino-Japanese War but really crystallizing with the May Fourth Movement of 1919 when the Allies attempted to reward Japan at Versailles with Chinese territories in Shandong Province. Thus, in the Chinese mind, there is a straight line connecting Japan's annexation of Taiwan to the May Fourth Movement to the subsequent Nanjing Massacre and all the horrors surrounding Japan's aggression against China. Resentment in China towards Japan still runs strong.

A more recent turning point between the two countries came with the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, which saw China conduct a series of missile tests in the waters around Taiwan. June Teufel Dreyer, a specialist on Asia-Pacific security, explains: “Japan became alarmed. Concerned with its maritime security, the need to protect important investments in Taiwan, and feeling a degree of kinship based on Japan's prior ownership as well as a shared sense of being democratic island-states, Japanese analysts noted that, should Taiwan be absorbed into the PRC, China's territorial waters would be extended uncomfortably close to Japanese shores....”¹³⁶

In the years since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, Tokyo has continued to focus on China. The perceived threat has been impacted by developments in both the South China Sea and particularly the East China Sea since 2010. The Senkaku-Diaoyu islands, contested by both Japan and China, are less than 100 miles northeast of Taiwan and often viewed by both strategists and scholars as relevant to a Taiwan scenario.¹³⁷ For all of these reasons—as well as due to its basic proximity—Japan would be a major player in any Taiwan scenario. Should it choose to get involved, it could plausibly turn out to be the only regional ally the United States would need, given both its proximity and the strength of its self-defense forces.

Yet it's worth pointing out that the Japanese are keen to avoid a major military conflict that might approximate the scale and destruction of the Pacific War during World War II that left a very deep scar on the Japanese political psyche. This aversion, combined with Japan's recent lack of military experience, would likely serve to restrain Tokyo in a Taiwan scenario. Its most likely course of action would be a middle way, allowing the U.S. to use some bases but not deploying its armed forces directly into combat.

CAPACITY

Japan's post-World War II constitution famously renounces the right to wage war and the island nation over the last 30 years has spent only about 1 percent of its GDP on defense. Yet a dramatic shift came in December 2022, as the *New York Times* reported: “Japan... announced a new national security strategy that will double the amount earmarked for the country's military defense, breaking with decades-long precedent on spending restraints as it seeks to strengthen its military capabilities to counter China's rising power.”¹³⁸ This change had become possible because polls of the Japanese public had indicated widespread support for a defense buildup.

According to the *Times* article, the aim is to reach a defense spending level of \$80 billion by 2027 and thus the 2 percent of GDP that is the so-called NATO standard. However, this still only amounts to 10 percent of what the U.S. currently spends on defense.¹³⁹ Further, as Japan specialists are quick to point out, “there is no guarantee that achieving these spending levels will be fiscally or politically sustainable in the long run... Indeed, it is no secret that Japan faces severe demographic, economic, and fiscal headwinds.”¹⁴⁰ Recent polls in Japan do not support tax increases to pay for the military buildup.¹⁴¹ Prime Minister Ishiba recently

announced he's stepping down, suggesting it might not be easy for the ruling party to execute its national security ambitions.¹⁴²

From a strictly military point of view, there are reasons to think Japan's contributions would be crucial to defending Taiwan. Japan has a relatively large navy, even if it is not called a "navy." Its surface combatants and submarines are rated as some of the most advanced in the world.¹⁴³ Japan not only affords the U.S. a major base at Okinawa, less than 200 miles from Taiwan, but the whole chain of islands known as the Ryukyus offers myriad basing options proximate to the battle space. Japan initiated work on a large new base on Mageshina Island in January 2023 that is intended to "reinforce Japan's defenses in the nearby Ryukyu Islands."¹⁴⁴ Since U.S. armed forces would be operating at a great distance from U.S. territorial bases, even accounting for Asia-Pacific locations in Guam or Hawaii, these much more proximate Japanese bases, though hard to defend against Chinese strikes, would be key for rearming and refueling, as well as resting crews and repairing battle damage. Moreover, Tokyo for decades has focused on domains of military power that could be most helpful to the U.S. in wartime, including ballistic missile defense, anti-submarine warfare, and mine countermeasures.¹⁴⁵

The U.S.-Japan alliance, however, confronts significant challenges, including in the vital military domain. Strategist Barry Posen observes that the usual "bromides" served up at frequent official meetings "obscure deep and obsolete inequities embedded in the alliance. Japan does far less for its own defense than it should or could."¹⁴⁶ He notes that "Japan does not seek joint planning, apparently out of fear that if it did, the United States might ask it to commit more explicitly to real military action in its own defense."¹⁴⁷ A 2015 RAND assessment of the prospects for air combat in a Taiwan scenario emphasized that the Kadena base on Okinawa would "play a key" role, but also noted, "By 2017, Kadena could be within range of hundreds of MRBMs [Medium Range Ballistic Missiles] and perhaps more than 1,000 DH-10s [cruise missiles]."¹⁴⁸ These early estimates are confirmed by a more current analysis of Chinese strike capabilities.¹⁴⁹

 JAPAN Population: 123.7 million			Active military personnel 247,000		Reserves 55,900	
GDP (2024) \$4.3 trillion	Defense budget (2024) \$53.9 billion	 2.2% of global defense spending	Approx. distance from Taiwan 1,300 mi.	Nuclear-armed state No	Formal U.S. ally Yes	Recognizes Taiwan No
 Surface combatants 52	 Combat aircraft 594	 Submarines 24	Key facts: Japan recently increased its defense spending to record levels in the postwar era, marking the thirteenth consecutive year it has expanded its defense budget.			

Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies; Google Maps; Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Japanese Cabinet Approves Record Defense Budget; China Launches New Amphibious Warship," U.S. Naval Institute News, December 27, 2024.

With respect to the other smaller islands in the Ryukyu chain, legitimate questions can be asked as to whether they really are suitable for defense, given their size and status as obvious targets in the age of precision strikes. Not surprisingly, the Chinese military press is following all aspects of Japanese military modernization very carefully, examining Tokyo's efforts to build a long-range missile force that would likely include purchasing *Tomahawk* missiles as well as deploying hypersonic weapons.¹⁵⁰ A Chinese defense magazine ran a special issue in June 2023 with seven in-depth articles on Japan's buildup in the Ryukyu Islands, suggesting these new facilities and capabilities will constitute high-priority targets for the PLA.¹⁵¹

WILLINGNESS

For the Japanese, Taiwan's semi-permanent separation from China is advantageous. Japanese strategists have come to see Taiwan as an essential bulwark against Chinese expansion into the Pacific—a kind of cork in the bottle. Yet just how far Japan would go to protect Taiwan is a murky question. Sheila Smith, an expert on Japanese defense policy, reports that many Japanese felt uneasy about the Trump administration's "willingness to challenge the 'one China' policy...." She explains, "suddenly Tokyo began to wonder if a Trump administration might be too risky in its management of China."¹⁵² Yet in late December 2020, Japan's deputy defense minister put out a statement calling Taiwan a "red line" and urging president-elect Biden to "be strong" on this issue.¹⁵³

Given the massive amount of money that Tokyo spends lobbying the American capital, it was not particularly surprising that within a week of his inauguration, President Biden was already publicly reaffirming the U.S. commitment to defend Japan's islets in the East China Sea, even though they are completely uninhabited.¹⁵⁴ In April 2021, Biden met with Prime Minister Yoshida Suga and they jointly expressed concern over peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Suga gave way to Fumio Kishida, who previously served as foreign minister. Notably, he seems to have been former prime minister Shinzo Abe's favored choice and Kishida's grandfather reportedly owned stores in Taiwan, so there is a familial connection.¹⁵⁵ Abe, who led Japan from 2012–2020, spent his time after stepping down from the top job advocating for Japan to prepare to intervene alongside the U.S. in a Taiwan scenario. The July 2022 assassination of Abe, together with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have seemingly catalyzed the Japanese national security establishment into a much more dynamic posture.

This dynamic posture can be seen with the current Japanese prime minister Ishiba Shigeru, a former minister of defense. Ishiba is expected to be a strong supporter of the U.S.-Japan alliance, though he has called for it to be less "asymmetrical."¹⁵⁶ During a visit to Taiwan, he declared that "today's Ukraine might become tomorrow's East Asia." Nevertheless, when prompted, he wouldn't label a Taiwan scenario a "survival-threatening situation," meaning the Japan Self-Defense Force could only provide logistical support to U.S. forces rather than take an active military role.¹⁵⁷

The Japanese public still has a long-standing post-war aversion to the use of military force. Attempts by Abe and Japanese conservatives to reform the peace constitution of Japan have faced numerous roadblocks and even aroused protests, particularly in Okinawa.¹⁵⁸ A poll taken by the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper in May 2023 found that 80 percent of Japanese were worried that Japan could be swept up in a conflict if China were to invade Taiwan. And while 56 percent thought that the Japanese Self-Defense Forces could provide limited support to U.S. forces such as refueling and logistics, only 11 percent said the Japanese military should actively work with the United States to stop the Chinese.¹⁵⁹ This hesitation could filter up to the legislative level. If Japan were to enter a Taiwan scenario, it would likely first need approval from the Japanese legislature, the National Diet, and even assuming this was granted, it would take time that Taiwan simply would not have.¹⁶⁰

Another possibility is that a Taiwan scenario could begin with China striking U.S. bases in Japan. This would force Japan's hand to an extent because repelling a Taiwan invasion would suddenly overlap with Japanese self-defense, likely persuading Japan to at least allow the United States to use bases there. Yet it's also worth pointing out that American bases in Japan, especially the facility at Okinawa, are unpopular with the Japanese public and often draw sizable demonstrations calling for a U.S. withdrawal.¹⁶¹ It is therefore possible that Japanese public opinion could react against both Beijing and Washington, engendering

reluctance to get involved in what's seen as an American-led war. Also, early Chinese strikes on U.S. bases seem unlikely, since such strikes might draw the U.S. into Taiwan's defense, something China is obviously eager to avoid. If China invades Taiwan, it would be more likely to make vigorous diplomatic overtures to Japan to facilitate a break with the United States, hoping that Tokyo would stay out of the conflict and thus prevent its bases from being used for Taiwan's defense.

ANALYSIS

Major uncertainties continue to linger over Japan's participation in a Taiwan scenario. The "base case" or overall assessment of the CSIS 2023 "First Battle" wargame is that Japan will immediately allow the U.S. to operate from bases on Japanese soil and will allow Japanese forces to engage against China when attacked.¹⁶² Moreover, the CSIS authors note that the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement allows for some ambiguity as to whether Japanese permission is required for U.S. forces to fly combat missions from there.¹⁶³

On the other hand, it is possible, if unlikely, that Tokyo adopts full neutrality and denies the U.S. the ability to use its bases there to defend Taiwan. That would severely constrict U.S. military operations in Taiwan's defense. China would also be able to plausibly threaten air, missile, and drone strikes against Japanese cities or alternatively to mine Japan's ports. Beijing could also try to pressure the Japanese government by threatening key sectors of Japan's economy like energy, agriculture, and transport infrastructure.¹⁶⁴ It could even issue nuclear threats. Such threats could backfire, of course, since they might clarify Japan's stakes in resisting Chinese coercion. Nevertheless, they could also prove effective and keep Japan out.

Even if Tokyo does not opt for full neutrality, it is quite likely that the Japanese leadership would only allow Japan's military to undertake defensive operations. As the CSIS report notes, "In this scenario, legal or political restraints prevent the JSDF from conducting operations away from Japanese territory." In this "excursion case," for example, anti-submarine (ASW) operations were only permitted along Japan's "eastern approaches."¹⁶⁵

Putting aside the possibility of Japanese neutrality or severe limitations on JSDF operations, it's worthwhile to briefly examine the CSIS game's rather optimistic "base case." According to CSIS, compared to even the projected U.S. losses in a war, "the JMSDF suffered even more heavily, as all its assets fall within the range of Chinese anti-ship missile systems, which include anti-ship ballistic missiles and long-range ASCMs as well as submarines and shorter-range munitions."¹⁶⁶ In the "base case" scenario, Japanese losses amount to 112 aircraft and 26 ships.¹⁶⁷ In a more pessimistic scenario, the Japanese behaved cautiously with the use of surface forces since "any surface ship that approached Taiwan was destroyed...."¹⁶⁸

In the unlikely event Tokyo allows its forces to be used in combat in and around Taiwan, the CSIS wargamers envision Japanese submarines attacking the Chinese amphibious fleet and also Japanese aircraft adding to combat air patrols over Taiwan.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the CSIS report observes that Chinese attacks against Japanese bases are likely to be "highly effective, destroying hundreds of massed U.S. and Japanese aircraft on the ground."¹⁷⁰

To be sure, Japan wields an impressive force of two dozen diesel submarines. However, this is not likely to be decisive in a Taiwan scenario due primarily to the shallow bathymetry of the Taiwan Strait, Chinese countermeasures like sea mines, insufficient numbers of submarines, and small magazine size—a problem mentioned in the discussion of AUKUS. And again it is quite unlikely that Japan's force of submarines would

even be deployed into combat in the Taiwan Strait for the simple reason that Beijing would have incentive to strike Japanese cities if Japan's submarines sortied out of base in the initial phase of a Taiwan scenario.

True, the Ukraine war combined with aggressive posturing by both Pyongyang and Beijing may have altered the tenor of Japanese discussions about national security. U.S. and Japanese forces are exercising more frequently and on a larger scale than in the past. It was likely not coincidental that Biden was standing next to Kishida in May 2022 when he suggested that the U.S. is committed to defense of Taiwan.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, convivial and simplified political rhetoric during peacetime is one thing, but crisis coordination on the brink of a potentially catastrophic war is quite another. The disjunction between Washington and Tokyo was again on display after the Hiroshima Summit in May 2023, when the Japanese readout mentioned Taiwan explicitly, but there was no such mention in the White House version.¹⁷²

The elephant in the room when it comes to seamless U.S.-Japan joint military planning for a hypothetical Taiwan scenario is Tokyo's stark inexperience in the national security domain—both at a leadership and a societal level. In combination, these factors suggest that Tokyo is unlikely to approve a direct military intervention.

ALLIANCES ARE NOT A CURE-ALL

This explainer has illustrated that the alliance argument for the defense of Taiwan is largely a delusion. Australians and Japanese, let alone South Koreans and Indians and the French, are not the cavalry that are going to ride to the rescue. While Australia and Japan express concern over Taiwan, they cannot match these expressions with real combat power. According to Zach Cooper and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, both Tokyo and Canberra “would likely desire more defensive roles, acting as the alliance's shields rather than its spears.”¹⁷³ Japan could also severely compromise U.S. defensive efforts in Taiwan by refusing to allow the U.S. fly missions.

The other powers discussed in this study will likely be irrelevant to a Taiwan scenario, contributing trivial forces at best and more likely offering limited ISR and logistics support. The essence of the problem is that Taiwan does not really have any allies other than the United States, and even if these states were to try and help, it wouldn't make any significant difference. The problem with Washington's delusion with respect to allies is it may well leave American forces in the lurch. Hope is not a strategy and Washington needs to be realistic when it comes to competing with China in the Asia-Pacific.

Another argument some analysts like to make is that, as this competition between America and China heats up, as China rises as a power, China's neighbors will be more likely to work with the United States to balance Beijing. This could be true, but it seems unlikely to much affect a Taiwan scenario. China is not Nazi Germany, a military powerhouse with boundless hegemonic ambitions that poses an existential threat to its neighbors. American treaty allies Japan and the Philippines are fundamentally secure no matter what happens to Taiwan. South Korea has bigger concerns to its north. Australia and India are both very remote. All of this holds true no matter how much alliances are in vogue, how much tough talk emanates from regional capitals, and how much strategists might theorize about Taiwan being a “cork in the bottle.”

It also holds true because America's allies have far more at stake in confronting China than does the United States. The proximity of states like Japan and the Philippines will force policymakers there to ask tough questions like: is it in our national interest to intervene against China? Is risking a war and even a nuclear attack over Taiwan reasonable? What of the commercial damage that could be wrought by antagonizing the



local economic powerhouse? The answers to those questions may not preclude a minimal and even pro-American and pro-Taiwan role, but America's allies can only be expected to take on so much risk. Matters of economic health and national survival will inevitably supersede rhetorical tough talk and cultural resentments.

Just as there isn't a military response that constitutes a "silver bullet" in a Taiwan scenario, so too are alliances not a cure-all. Policymakers in Washington would be wise to bear this in mind: if Taiwan is invaded, it's likely that, so far as both military power and willpower go, America and Taiwan would largely stand alone. This is why it's so important that America help maintain the peace by getting its policy towards Taiwan and China right. That's the subject of the next paper in this series.



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¹⁷² For the Japanese readout, see “Japan-US Summit Meeting,” Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 18, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/page4e_001402.html. For the U.S. readout, see “Readout of President Biden’s Meeting with Prime Minister Kishida of Japan,” White House, May 18, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/18/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-prime-minister-kishida-of-japan-3/>.

¹⁷³ Zach Cooper and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Asian Allies and Partners in a Taiwan Contingency: What Should the United States Expect?” American Enterprise Institute, 2022, <https://www.defendingtaiwan.com/asian-allies-and-partners-in-a-taiwan-contingency-what-should-the-united-states-expect/>.

