

TARGET TAIWAN: MILITARY RISK FROM CHINESE CONQUEST

Lyle Goldstein
Director, Asia Program

December 23, 2025

A policy paper of the Asia Program
This explainer is part of the series “Target Taiwan.”



DEFP.ORG / @DEFPRIORITIES

KEY POINTS

1. Taiwan is not a trampoline for China to exert hegemony in East Asia. If China were to conquer Taiwan, it would do little to facilitate further Chinese military expansion.
2. The conventional wisdom that Taiwan would be the first "domino" to fall in a Chinese bid for hegemony is also wrong. Far from losing faith in U.S. defenses, should China attack Taiwan, U.S. allies are likely to become more attached to the United States and step up efforts to defend themselves.
3. China's policy toward Taiwan is ultimately driven by nationalism. Its desire to possess the island is unique and it lacks similar ambitions for Japan, the Philippines, and other nearby states.
4. Nor would China's conquest of Taiwan meaningfully advantage China if it aimed to attack other states, as its military power dissipates quickly beyond the first island chain due to unfavorable geography and U.S. military superiority.
5. Because China has powerful states on its periphery that are building up their defenses, the U.S. enjoys defense in depth and its Asian allies are secure—with or without Taiwan.

This explainer is the fifth and final in the Target Taiwan series. It asks a question that logically follows from the other papers: what might the region look like if Taiwan was annexed and controlled by Beijing? How dangerous would that be for the U.S. and its allies? Could Taiwan be used as a "trampoline" by China to make military incursions elsewhere?

This analysis concludes that a Chinese-controlled Taiwan would not significantly endanger U.S. national security. The U.S. position in the Asia-Pacific is and will remain strong, irrespective of any cross-strait conflict. U.S. allies like Japan and the Philippines will not be at significantly greater risk. Taiwan does have strategic importance for China, but its corresponding lack of strategic value to the U.S. is another reason not to get involved in a conflict.

Unfortunately, policymakers in Washington have often maintained the opposite. During the Biden administration, Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner stated that "Taiwan is located at a critical node within the first island chain, anchoring a network of U.S. allies and partners," which explained "why Taiwan's security is so important to the United States."¹ Such thinking is as misguided today as it was in 1950 when General Douglas MacArthur asserted that Taiwan represented "an unsinkable aircraft carrier."² Yet since then it has become something like conventional wisdom. The second Trump administration's National Security Strategy, published in December 2025, emphasizes Taiwan because the island "provides direct access to the Second Island Chain."³

This paper will argue against such claims and proceeds in five parts. First, it assesses the domino theory argument for defending Taiwan, noting that such reasoning is badly flawed and has precipitated many grave mistakes in the past. Second, it differentiates Taiwan from America's various regional allies in East Asia as an object of China's historical ambitions. Third, it discusses the limited advantage in military capabilities Taiwan would give China, chiefly concerning the impact on undersea warfare in the western Pacific as well as air and missile warfare in this theater. The fourth section explains how the island is of little consequence for the defense of America's allies and interests in the Asia-Pacific.⁴ The conclusion advocates relying more on



the strategic depth of the Asia-Pacific to safeguard U.S. national security and assesses Taiwan's future if Washington embraces a more realism and restraint-oriented posture.

This series has advocated for the United States to adopt an approach to the western Pacific centered on securing limited U.S. interests, conserving America's resources, and decreasing the chances of a catastrophic great power war. This paper continues in that spirit by showing that prolonging Taiwan's autonomy hardly rises to the level of a vital U.S. national security objective.⁵

EXAGGERATING TAIWAN'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

American strategists have often proclaimed that Taiwan functions as a critical first line of defense against Chinese expansion in the Asia-Pacific region. Elbridge Colby, currently serving as under secretary of defense for policy, contended in a 2021 book that "Taiwan tends to act as a cork in China's ability to project military power beyond it."⁶

Almost 15 years ago, Aaron Friedberg noted that forfeiting Taiwan could significantly damage U.S. national security by causing "America's alliances and strategic partnerships" to "wither."⁷ At the root of Friedberg's concern was the possibility that China's dominance in East Asia could allow it "to draw on the wealth and military capabilities of the region under its control, using it as a secure base from which to challenge American interests and perhaps even to attack the United States itself."⁸ He admits that this concern partly derives from what "the United States was able to do... throughout the twentieth century."⁹ But this is a classic mirror imaging fallacy—quite common among American strategists—that assumes China will behave as the U.S. did during its own rise to power on the world stage.

Michele Flournoy warns of conflict over Taiwan and asserts that if the United States fails to defend areas proximate to China, "U.S. influence would diminish in the very region on which the future prosperity and security of Americans most depends, lowering perceptions of U.S. power and leadership globally."¹⁰

These arguments are representative of the general thrust of U.S. defense policy in Asia. They advocate the defense of Taiwan less for the island's inherent value than what its fall would supposedly mean for other U.S. interests. Such arguments mix three errors: that U.S. allies in Asia would panic over the credibility of U.S. commitments to defend them and therefore appease China should the United States not defend Taiwan; that China's push to possess Taiwan is emblematic of a larger desire for territorial aggrandizement; and, most importantly, that Taiwan has vast military value for further Chinese expansion.

TAIWAN IS NOT A FIRST DOMINO

The argument about Taiwan's credibility is a kind of domino theory, of the sort that plagued the United States during the Cold War and encouraged the tragic war in Vietnam. The idea then was that if one Asian state slipped out of America's sphere of influence, this might trigger a wider catalytic collapse of Washington's position in the region, leading to an unalterable shift in the global balance of power.

Back then, there were various ideas about how these dominoes might fall, but the main one had to do with U.S. credibility. The idea was that U.S. allies, even in Europe, would lose heart and not resist communist



pressure if the U.S. did not demonstrate its commitment to Vietnam. As Defense Secretary Robert McNamara explained, “We seek an independent non-Communist South Vietnam. ...Unless we can achieve this objective... almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance.”¹¹

The trouble with domino arguments is that states judge others’ credibility less by analogy to other times and places than present-day interests and capabilities.¹² Hence U.S. allies in the Cold War did not worry about U.S. credibility over Vietnam when it came to threatening the Soviets on their behalf. And today, U.S. Asian allies like Japan and the Philippines, while they may prefer that the United States commit to Taiwan, understand that unlike Taiwan they are U.S. treaty allies and the U.S. ability to defend them is far greater due to their geography.

U.S. credibility to defend its allies simply is not at stake in Taiwan, given how unique the circumstances there are. Political scientist Stephen Walt aptly observes that after curtailing commitments in the past, “dominoes barely fell and core relationships were unaffected,” since “commitments are credible when interests are obvious to all.” Those who are worried about the durability of U.S. deterrent threats in Japan and beyond should see Taiwan as a drain because it soaks up resources better used elsewhere.

Paradoxically, it seems quite plausible that U.S. security guarantees to other Asian allies could be strengthened by a Chinese assault against Taiwan. As in the somewhat analogous situation of Ukraine, where the NATO alliance has expanded and increased its defense spending after Russia’s invasion, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would likely energize U.S. alliances in the Asia-Pacific.¹³ History suggests an attack on Taiwan, whether or not it succeeded, would lead the U.S. to seek to reassure allies in the region, likely by additional deployments. And because they would feel threatened, those allies would likely increase their own defense efforts and cooperation rather than bandwagon or appease China.

UNPACKING CHINESE INTENTIONS

The confusion undermining U.S. Taiwan policy is not simply over a hackneyed interpretation of credibility, but a tendency to impute the most aggressive motives to perceived U.S. adversaries. It is a gross understatement to say the idea that China views Taiwan as a springboard to Asian empire lacks evidence. This error is a repeat of history. The original motive for U.S. intervention in Indochina was not concerns over South Vietnam or Hanoi’s aggressiveness, but Washington’s determination to prevent the expansion of Chinese communism.

China’s desire to control Taiwan is unique for historical and cultural reasons. No other territory, and certainly no U.S. ally, has that kind of attraction to China. As John Mearsheimer observes, “the Chinese feel an emotional attachment to the island that the Soviets never felt for Berlin, for example, making Washington’s commitment to defend it all the riskier.”¹⁴ China treats Taiwan differently from its neighbors because it does not view Taiwan as a neighboring country.

Taiwan’s ethno-linguistic ties to the mainland are deep. As noted above, the official language in Taipei is Mandarin Chinese. Many of the most revered artistic and archaeologic artifacts of Chinese civilization are held in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, since they were brought over by the Nationalist regime when it fled the mainland.¹⁵ An extensive Chinese presence on the island predates modern history, but Taiwan was formally integrated into China after the Qing Dynasty invaded in 1683 to destroy remnants of the prior Ming Dynasty. After that, China ruled Taiwan for two centuries until Japan conquered the island in 1895. At the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Nationalist forces fled the mainland and set up a new base on Taiwan, inaugurating the tensions that persist to this day.



No similar ties bind the Philippines, Japan, or any other U.S. ally to China. Japan and the Philippines have their own distinct languages, and neither has ever been part of China in any meaningful way.¹⁶ Beijing has never articulated territorial claims against either Tokyo or Manila, besides the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute.

MAP OF CONTROL OVER CHINA AND TAIWAN, 1941–1950



Sources: "Chinese Civil War," Encyclopedia Britannica; "Nationalist Taiwan," Omniatlas; "Battle of Chamdo," Omniatlas.

The main cause of Washington's nervousness with respect to Asia-Pacific security is the sincere anxieties of its friends in both Tokyo and Manila, who tend to exaggerate their insecurities to maintain U.S. defensive assistance. Yet an objective assessment of Chinese intentions and capabilities against both treaty allies reveals that such insecurities are substantially exaggerated. In fact, both island archipelagos are easily defended. Moreover, the added strength of other allies and partners, including Australia, India, South Korea, and Vietnam, suggests that Chinese military hegemony in the Asia-Pacific will remain a pipedream even in the event of a Chinese conquest of Taiwan.

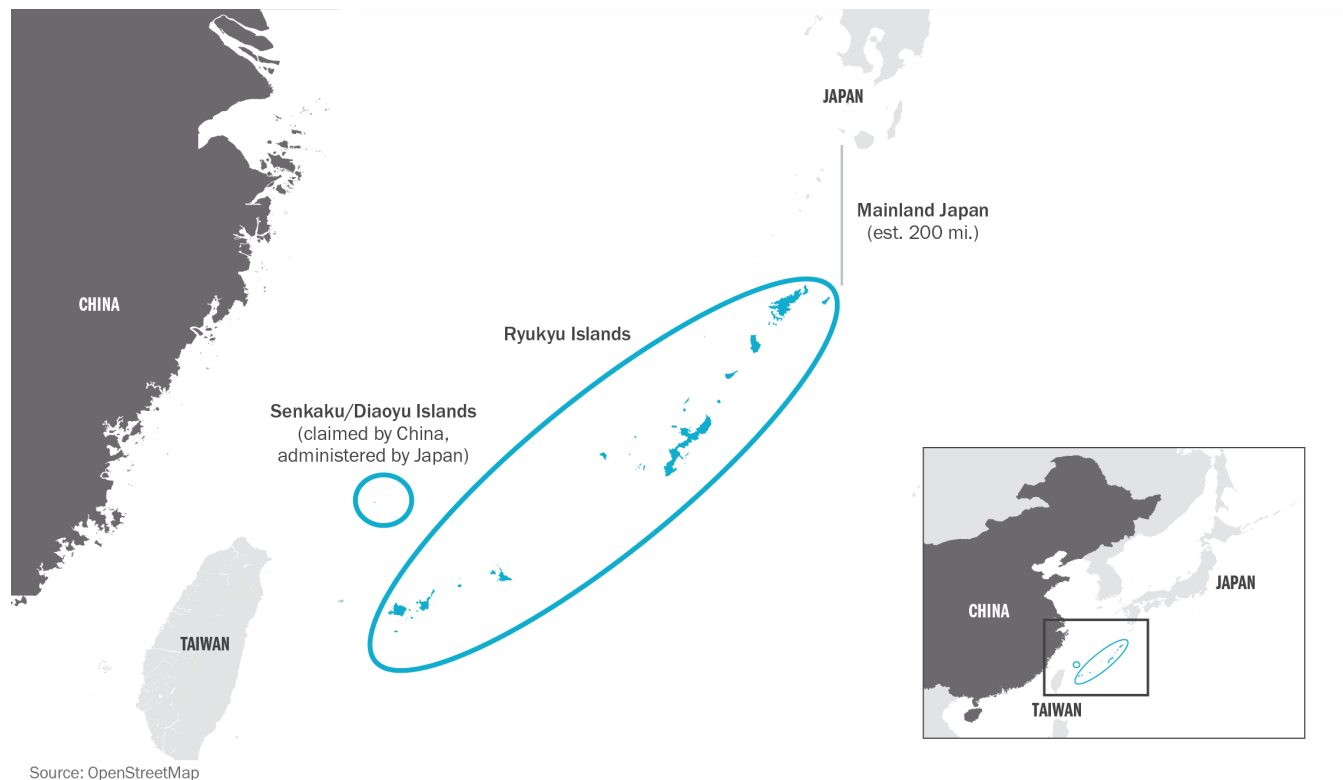
Over the last 15 years, significant tensions have surfaced in Japan-China relations, but these have never concerned Chinese military threats against Japan's home islands. Most of the threat discourse is connected to the disputed claims concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu islets. But as these are tiny, uninhabited, and more than 500 miles distant from Japan's main islands, this is hardly a threat to Japan's territorial integrity.¹⁷ It's no wonder the conflict over the islets has been almost entirely limited to close maneuvering by coast guard vessels. If these islets have any strategic value at all, it could be related to Taiwan, which is a mere 120 miles to the southwest. Tokyo's threat perception would decrease markedly if Japan's government could fully abjure the idea of defending Taiwan, its former colony.¹⁸

In fact, China's and Japan's security interests actually align to a degree, whether with respect to shipping lanes or ensuring North Korea doesn't do anything too destabilizing. Yet the relationship is haunted by a torturous history that has not been fully reconciled. Both sides tend to engage in extravagant shadowboxing, turning reasonably simple disputes into opportunities to stoke nationalism. Just one example of this occurred in November 2025 when comments about Taiwan by Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi sparked a sharp rhetorical and diplomatic response from Beijing.¹⁹ Still, there is no evidence that China has plans to conquer or control Japan.²⁰

Likewise, alleged threats to the Philippines are overstated. Again, and unlike the threat to Taiwan that Beijing articulates on a nearly weekly basis, there exist no Chinese claims to Philippines territory. In a parallel

to the Japan situation, the tensions between Manila and Beijing have almost entirely encompassed maritime claims over rocks and reefs, with the majority of these being uninhabited.

PACIFIC ISLANDS DISPUTED BY JAPAN AND CHINA



China and Japan have disputed claims to islands in the western Pacific, but these islets are tiny, distant from both countries, and likely of marginal value to Tokyo and Beijing.

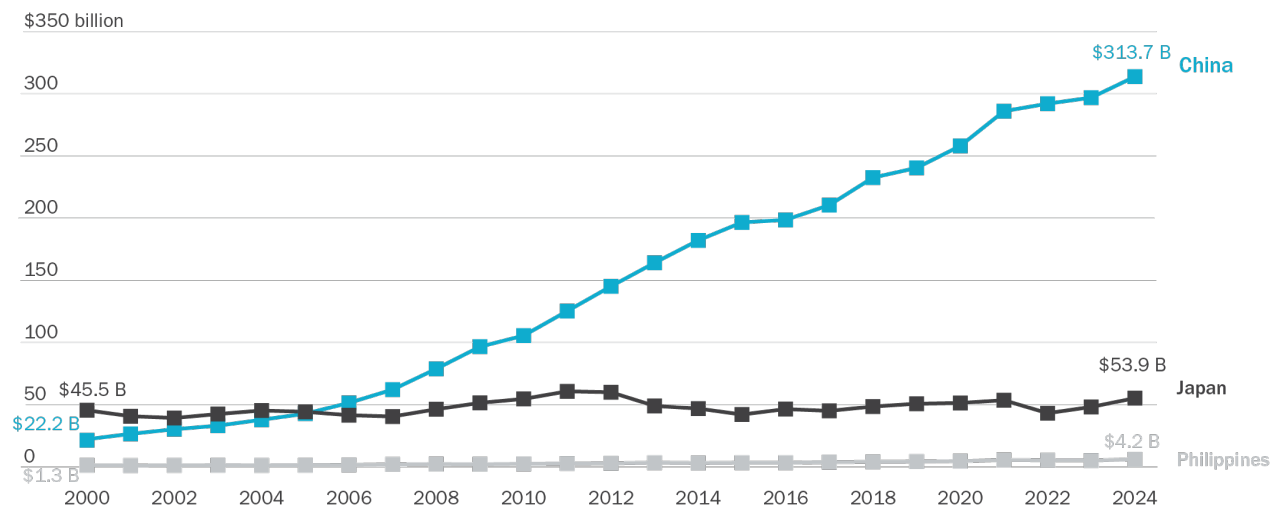
The 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident saw the U.S. approach direct military confrontation with China. The crisis resulted from a Philippines fishing enforcement action against China about 160 miles west of Subic Bay. The resolution to the crisis, which left China with effective control of the reef, caused significant consternation in Washington, but the Obama administration wisely concluded that this reef was not worth risking a war with China.²¹ Tensions continue to build between Manila and Beijing concerning the status of various maritime features.²² Fishing rights form a particularly sensitive area of the Philippines-China dispute.²³ However, that hardly makes this bilateral relationship unique.²⁴

To underline the point that Tokyo and Manila perceive little direct threat from China, one need only look at their respective defense spending, which historically amounts to just 1 percent of GDP for both states. By comparison, NATO countries are pledging to spend 3.5 percent, the U.S. spends 3.4 percent, and Israel spends well in excess of 5 percent.²⁵ If China were to conquer Taiwan, it would be logical for both Japan and the Philippines to substantially increase their defense spending, following the pattern of Germany in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

One reason to doubt China's territorial ambitions will extend beyond Taiwan is that China's policy with respect to the use of force has been remarkably peaceful over the last 50 years, especially when compared to other great powers like Russia and the United States. Perhaps that is why even Friedberg concedes that

“China’s leaders do not seek confrontation” and China “is unlikely to engage in outright military conquest....”²⁶

MILITARY SPENDING BY CHINA, JAPAN, AND THE PHILIPPINES



Source: “Military Expenditure Database,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

Notes: Measured in constant 2021 U.S. dollars. The figures for Japan include the budgeted amount for the Special Action Committee on Okinawa and exclude military pensions. The figures for the Philippines are slightly overstated as they include spending on Veterans Affairs.

Japan and the Philippines historically spend little on their defense though this could change if China were to invade Taiwan.

Border tensions persist with several of China’s neighbors, most notably India, where a deadly clash occurred as recently as 2020.²⁷ But this violence has not escalated to war. Beijing has maintained peaceful relations with almost all of its neighbors in recent decades, and those neighbors include states that are significantly militarily weaker than China, such as Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Laos.²⁸

Even if Beijing did harbor aggressive intentions, it would be constrained by geography and the natural workings of the balance of power.²⁹ Moreover, Chinese objectives have not changed as it’s grown more powerful.³⁰ Thus the argument that a binge of Chinese aggression would follow a Taiwan conflict does not stand up to scrutiny.

China will play a larger role in world affairs due to its growing power. Yet there is little reason to think that these aspirations for greater influence—a natural outcome of shifts in world politics underway for many decades—are connected to territorial acquisitions beyond Taiwan.



TAIWAN WOULD ADD LITTLE TO CHINESE MILITARY CAPABILITIES

Many analysts believe that China's control of Taiwan would function as a trampoline, allowing China to threaten other countries, including U.S. allies like Japan and the Philippines. This section argues this isn't so. China's control of Taiwan would not significantly alter the basic balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region.

It's true that in some discreet areas, possession of Taiwan would somewhat improve China's strategic position. This is discussed below with a special focus on undersea warfare and surveillance for targeting purposes. However, this would not change the fundamental fact that China's military threat dissipates with distance, notably between its mainland and the Philippines or Japan, and even more so with the United States, which lies 6,500 nautical miles across the Pacific. China's advance a mere 200 miles further east would alter little about this equation.

TAIWAN AS KEY TO THE BARRIER CONSTRAINING CHINESE SUBMARINES

Let's turn first to the submarine issue since it is often assumed by U.S. military strategists that Taiwan basing could be a key enabler for China's improving submarine force.

Undersea warfare in particular could see some impact from Chinese control over Taiwan. That is due to bathymetric (sea-bottom) conditions in the western Pacific. The Chinese Navy has long struggled with the twin problems of having shallow waters off its coasts and needing to have its fleet sortie through narrow straits. This serves to make their operations more detectable, predictable, and vulnerable to adversary interdiction.

For submarines, it is particularly valuable to enter deep waters quickly in order to improve stealth—to evade detection and enemy attack. That is why Beijing has invested heavily in its fleet and especially its submarine facilities on Hainan Island (Yalong Bay), where deeper waters are more easily accessed than in northern China. Taiwan's eastern coast offers similarly deep waters within easy reach, so Taiwan basing for Chinese submarines could significantly improve China's submarine force. A related point is that the U.S. may possess acoustic listening systems that are operated in and around Taiwan's waters.³¹ Such intelligence assets could be lost if Taiwan were controlled by Beijing.

This issue is explored in-depth in research by Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge. They conclude that Taiwan represents a "militarily valuable piece of territory."³² They base their analysis on the Cold War-era strategy of hemming in the Soviet submarine fleet through the use of hydrophone (listening) arrays on the sea bottom at the critical choke point of the GIUK Gap, the relatively narrow passages between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom.³³ They explain, "A large fleet of truly quiet [submarines] deployed off the east coast of Taiwan would strengthen China's ability to threaten the SLOCs on which Korea, Japan, and other nations depend for seaborne oil supplies, as well as maritime trade more generally."³⁴ (SLOCs stands for sea lines of communication.)



While the conclusion that Taiwan would help development of PLA Navy submarine operations is reasonable, it is not a game-changer for several reasons. First, if China can attack the U.S. anti-submarine barriers built around Taiwan, their defensive value would be reduced, as Green and Talmadge concede. And as Jonathan Caverley notes in a recent article, U.S. arrays in the region are “easily located” and we would assume China is planning to attack them.³⁵ The GIUK barrier of Cold War fame was likely more feasible in wartime than would be an ASW barrier on either side of Taiwan. That is because Iceland and Greenland are each more than 1,000 miles away from Russian territory. Therefore, the GIUK barrier could be much more effectively defended in wartime than Taiwan, which lies a mere 100 miles from China.

Second, China will face a challenge in egressing its submarines whether or not it controls Taiwan. Caverley contends that the U.S. may still use hydrophones advantageously in this area without Taiwan, and even argues that Chinese submarine bases on Taiwan would be more vulnerable to U.S. attacks.³⁶ He concludes, “Taiwan simply does not enhance China’s undersea threat to US forces.”³⁷

U.S. UNDERSEA LISTENING ARRAYS IN EAST ASIA



Source: Desmond Ball and Richard Tanter, *The Tools of Owatsumi: Japan's Ocean Surveillance and Coastal Defence Capabilities* (Canberra, AU: Australian National University Press, 2015), 54.

Third, the idea that anti-submarine defenses off Taiwan are essential to penning in Chinese submarines and thus to defending SLOCs implies that these SLOCs are fairly secure otherwise. But that is not the case. The Center for Strategic and International Studies’ 2023 “First Battle” simulation, for example, is pessimistic about operating surface forces anywhere in the vicinity of Taiwan, including the Philippines Sea. The report observes, “Chinese long-range missile strikes... almost always succeeded in overcoming U.S. naval defenses. Typically, the United States lost both forward-deployed carriers within the first turn or two.”³⁸ Submarines, even if they can operate freely beyond Taiwan, contain relatively limited striking power compared to aircraft and missiles.³⁹

In the long run, China's submarine force is steadily advancing, and will increasingly operate in all the world's oceans.⁴⁰ But the future status of Taiwan will not significantly influence that trajectory. The marginal gains to Chinese submarines from controlling Taiwan would not be significant.

TAIWAN'S IMPACT ON INTELLIGENCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND RECONNAISSANCE (ISR)

How would Taiwan figure into the critical ISR equation that might determine the vital aerial contest above the Pacific? If the U.S. lost access to Taiwan, the Pentagon could lose its powerful radars on the island. Taiwan has built, with U.S. assistance, a large early warning radar at a cost of \$1.4 billion on a mountaintop at Leshan that apparently can see 3,000 miles.⁴¹ These radars monitor Chinese missile launches and air activity with considerable fidelity. The loss of this early warning radar platform would certainly make it easier for Chinese aircraft to egress into the Pacific.

At the same time, controlling Taiwan would also allow China to install its own radar there, enabling it to find and target ships and aircraft at greater range. Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich studied the potential for China's so-called anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy to project power into the wider Pacific and concluded that China cannot "extend A2/AD's effects over distances great enough to threaten most U.S. allies if China's opponents take reasonable precautions. The entirety of the Japanese home islands, for example, will likely remain beyond A2/AD's reach, as [will] the entirety of the Philippines...."⁴² Due to its proximity to the mainland, Taiwan is an entirely different situation, according to the Biddle/Oelrich analysis, and is plainly "much more exposed."⁴³

This limitation is mainly due to Chinese dependence on shore-based radar, which cannot see beyond the horizon because of the curvature of the earth. Possessing Taiwan would thus extend the lethal range of China's missiles about 200 miles (the distance from China's coast to Taiwan's eastern edge). Hence radars based in Taiwan by the PLA would not do much to help conquer the Philippines or Japan—they are too far away.

Facing Japan, China has plenty of coastline that is significantly closer to the main islands of Kyushu and Honshu than is Taiwan. That is not entirely true for the Philippines, since Luzon, that country's largest island, is closer to Taiwan than mainland China. A hypothetical air battle over Luzon could be impacted by coastal and aerial radars operating out of a Chinese-occupied Taiwan. But as discussed below, the Philippines, like Japan and unlike Taiwan, has impressive strategic depth and China's ISR capabilities for most of the archipelagic campaign would not be improved by assets deployed from Taiwan.

Admittedly, China's possession of Taiwan could aid the PLA in menacing regional sea lanes. It's true that large portions of East Asia's maritime commerce flow along the eastern coast of Taiwan. These lanes connect Japan and South Korea to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The PLA would be somewhat better positioned, assuming its conquest of Taiwan, to interdict this important commerce, applying airpower, short-range missiles, and naval and coast guard vessels. Still, it's worth noting that the PLA is already quite capable at present of shutting down these SLOCs yet Beijing has never made any moves in this direction.⁴⁴

In a wartime situation, the U.S. Navy along with allied nations could very plausibly protect other critical SLOCs in the region—maintaining key shipping links between North America and these U.S. allies in the region. For example, U.S. maritime access to Japan and South Korea via the North Pacific would not be



challenged at all by Chinese control over Taiwan. So while China's possession of Taiwan might pose problems for allies in terms of SLOCs, it would hardly constitute a fatal blow.

In addition, the value of the ISR assets China might gain by conquering Taiwan is diminished by China's rapidly improving space-based remote sensing capability. Caverley explains that the Chinese surveillance satellite network is now "dense and robust," that China can reconstitute its satellite network rapidly, and that China can track U.S. satellites. That last point suggests China and the United States might refrain for targeting each other's satellites in a war. Other major steps in Beijing's ISR upgrade have been myriad navy and air force manned platforms, a series of giant ground-based radars, as well as a large and varied constellation of drones.⁴⁵

To be sure, the range and effectiveness of these assets could be marginally increased by using Taiwan as a launching and command/control center. But the bottom line is that Beijing has enough ISR assets that adding Taiwan's would not make a major difference. Concerning the implications for the aerial battle in the western Pacific, Caverley concludes that "the military implications of operating airborne surveillance and launching shorter-range munitions from Taiwan... while not zero, are modest."⁴⁶ He explains that Chinese aircraft and missile launchers on Taiwan itself could be targeted.

As pointed out in the first two Defense Priorities explainers in this series, the Chinese military presents major problems—an almost impregnable fortress—if confronted in its own backyard. Yet the further east into the Pacific that the battle extends, the fewer are China's advantages.

BEYOND THE FIRST ISLAND CHAIN, THE PLA WILL REMAIN RELATIVELY WEAK

Beijing's abilities to develop expeditionary operations at a significant distance from China remain in doubt. True, the PLA Navy has made progress in developing aircraft carrier battle groups, but China's aircraft carrier force is not only limited in size and lacks nuclear propulsion but has only very recently moved beyond the testing phase for its fixed-wing airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft.⁴⁷ This is no small issue in the enormous domain of the central Pacific where China's carrier fleet could present targets without being able to target American "shooter" units with precision.

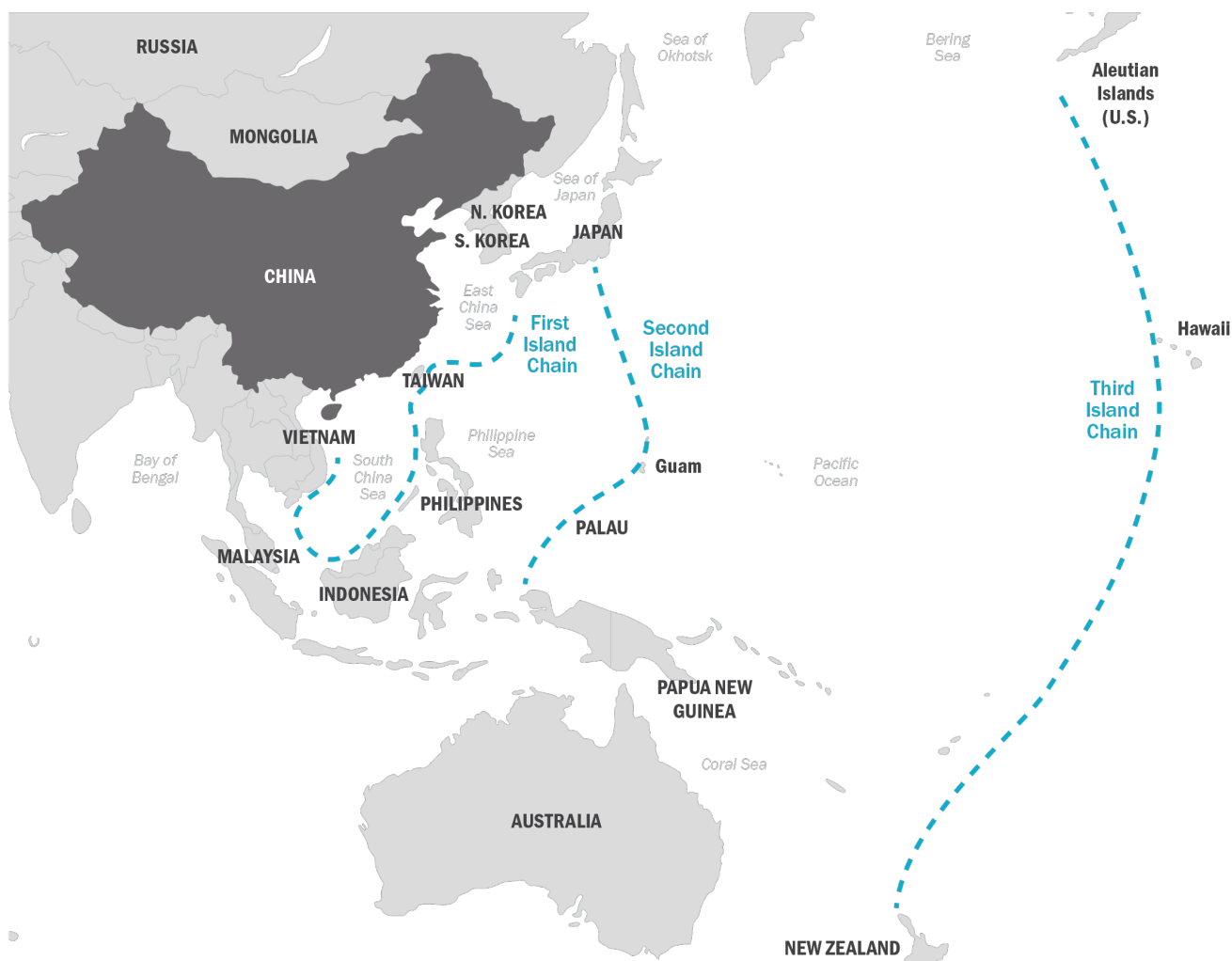
Yet the most important enablers for naval combat operations over extended distances will remain ordnance, and particularly fuel. The PLA Navy is not yet a fully blue-water force, at least compared to the United States, but they have made substantial progress in that direction.⁴⁸ Replenishment ships and their operations have been a clear priority for the PLA over the last two decades. But maintaining an anti-piracy squadron is a very long way from supporting extended combat operations, especially against a well-armed and more experienced opponent. Oilers in particular appear to form a major point of vulnerability for PLA forces, at least if they operate at any significant distance from the mainland, since they are few in number and easily tracked. Lacking a network of hardened, dispersed bases in the central Pacific, these tanker ships may comprise a "center of gravity" for the Chinese fleet, at least in the foreseeable future.

China does now have the edge with certain capabilities, for example with hypersonic, ballistic, and supersonic anti-ship missiles. But the U.S. retains a decisive advantage when it comes to major blue water capabilities, including especially nuclear submarines and nuclear aircraft carriers, but also surface combatants and maritime patrol aircraft. None of these crucial advantages would be seriously undermined by Chinese control of Taiwan. To the contrary, by pulling U.S. forces back from under the dangerous A2/AD



envelope formed by Chinese aircraft, missiles, and diesel submarines, American forces would be much better prepared in case of an actual U.S.-China war, which the U.S. would want fought out in the Pacific rather than in China's backyard.

EAST ASIAN ISLAND CHAINS IN THE PACIFIC



Source: Wilson Vorndick, "China's Reach Has Grown, So Should The Island Chains," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 22, 2018.

China is hemmed in by three island chains in the Pacific with its ability to project power significantly diminishing past the first chain.

A final point worth considering concerns the strategic geography of Taiwan. As Mike Sweeney points out, the island of Taiwan has much greater value as a means for striking into China than it does for making assaults into the wider Pacific.⁴⁹ Japan made extensive use of the island during its campaigns into China and Southeast Asia during the Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II. No wonder Beijing is obsessed with Taiwan. On the other hand, the island is in no way critical to the U.S. defense of its allies and interests in the wider Pacific.



MANY STATES WILL OPPOSE CHINA

So far, this paper has addressed China's limited intent and capabilities to target U.S. allies in East Asia, even if it possesses Taiwan. Next it will turn to the existing balance of power between China and the allies of greater concern. Its analysis will show that these states are quite defensible, making any added military benefit from Taiwan even less important than it would be if the balance of power were more in China's favor.

Japan and the Philippines are in quite different positions from the point of view of military strength. Japan fields strong self-defense forces with hundreds of fighters and a very substantial force of destroyers and submarines. Tokyo wields some of the most advanced weaponry in the world, a fact that Beijing is well aware of.⁵⁰ Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Japan was increasing its defense expenditures, but the Ukraine war brought for Japan elevated perceptions of threat and perhaps a new awareness that deterrence may not succeed.

Major points of Japanese development include missile defense and front-line combat jets.⁵¹ Tokyo is in the process of importing large numbers of F-35s from the United States. There are still major weak points in Japan's defenses, such as munitions stocks and a lack of hardened aircraft shelters.⁵² Tokyo is additionally fortifying its southern islands with land-based, mobile missile systems, a process that Chinese strategists are watching very closely.⁵³ The Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force is also pushing into new areas, wielding small-sized aircraft carriers but also maintaining core strengths particularly with respect to undersea warfare.

The Philippines' defense capabilities are much more limited. Some incremental progress has been made in developing the Philippines' navy and coast guard while Philippines' maritime forces have taken some hand-me-downs from other navies and coast guards, including South Korean frigates.⁵⁴ Notably, the Philippines is exploring cooperation with India on developing a land-based, mobile anti-ship system.⁵⁵ Such systems hold promise for making the Philippines into a harder target. In early 2025, it was announced that Manila intends to purchase submarines for the first time.⁵⁶

If China did intend to attack either Japan or the Philippines—and as discussed above, there's no reason to think it does—both states could mount a very strong defense against China due to geography. Japan's and the Philippines' main islands are substantially more distant from the Chinese coast: more than 500 miles versus 90 miles across the Taiwan Strait. Such distances would make any Chinese amphibious invasion significantly more difficult, requiring more time and larger, ocean-going ships.⁵⁷ The distance would also significantly decrease the amount of firepower that China could bring to bear. As an example, China could apply its full force of hundreds of attack and transport helicopters over the small distances required in a Taiwan scenario but not against either Japan or the Philippines. The same applies to other relatively short-range systems, whether rocket artillery or many drone capabilities.⁵⁸

Both archipelagos represent auspiciously defensible terrain in that both have enormous strategic depth, meaning space where defending forces can fall back. Taiwan is not even 100 miles across at its widest point, and its substantial and steep mountains face east, away from China, making a Chinese invasion much simpler. By contrast, Japan and Philippines both have highly defensible terrain, such as dense mountains and jungles, as well as hundreds of miles of islands on which to consolidate strong defenses in relatively secure rear areas if under attack.



China might succeed in seizing a Philippines island, such as Palawan, however unlikely, but the PLA could not aspire to control the whole Philippines archipelago, let alone Japan. As noted above, China's ability to harass sea lanes relevant to these two states would increase if China controlled Taiwan, and it could plausibly have an impact on hypothetical aerial combat over the Philippines. But these changes would be marginal in the scope of the large and difficult military campaigns that would be required to conquer either country, especially Japan.

As farfetched as an unprovoked attack by China against Japan or the Philippines is, the prospect is even more remote against other major states of the Asia-Pacific. Vietnam is both proximate to China and has fought a war with Beijing in recent memory (1979), but historically Hanoi has spent more on defense as a percentage of its GDP than either Manila or Tokyo.⁵⁹ Both India and Australia are distant from China's core areas, so large-scale aggression remains almost inconceivable.

The same is true for South Korea, which only really fears China in the context of a total superpower showdown on the Korean Peninsula. Fortunately, that scenario is unlikely. Moreover, South Korea already possesses a very robust military with reasonably large armed forces across the spectrum of military capabilities. South Korean fighter and submarine strength could pose a definite challenge to Chinese ambitions if Beijing were to flex its muscles in Northeast Asia. The vital security interests of Australia, India, and South Korea would not be severely impacted by Chinese control of Taiwan.

The good news for U.S. decision-makers is that none of these significant powers face serious threats from China. In Defense Priorities' third explainer in this series, "Target Taiwan: Limits of Allied Support" the likely reaction of these important countries is analyzed in some detail, but it's worth repeating that *none* of these countries are likely to intervene in a decisive way in a Taiwan scenario.⁶⁰

Instead, each is likely to follow the pattern, to varying degrees, of contemporary Germany since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and ramp up defense spending.⁶¹ That should give Americans further confidence that the potential loss of Taiwan to China does not objectively undermine U.S. national security. In fact, as in Europe after the Ukraine invasion, the U.S. position will paradoxically be improved, because countries in the region will more readily take responsibility for their own security.

THE U.S. ENJOYS DEFENSE IN DEPTH AND SHOULD EXPLOIT IT

Strategists have long remarked on the favorable geographical positioning of the U.S. With two large moats, the country is practically impregnable.⁶² This unassailable position should establish that Washington need not overreact to developments in the Asia-Pacific, including the rise of China.

A strategy of "defense in depth" in Asia would not include Taiwan. Its key objective would be to exploit the vast space of the Pacific by adopting a more flexible set of defense lines that seek battle where it is auspicious for U.S. forces. To try to fight China on Taiwan is to fight a war on the ground that is most beneficial to China, where it can bring the full weight of its power to bear, with U.S. forces operating hundreds of miles from their nearest bases along a tenuous logistics pipeline that would reach more than 5,000 miles across the Pacific. To be sure, the main advantage of not defending Taiwan is that it most likely obviates war with China altogether. But if America must fight to stop an expansionist China—and that is unlikely—it should be done from a favorable strategic position.



Pulling back U.S. forces from exposed forward positions amounts to wise military strategy for numerous reasons. American forces operating “forward” and under the Chinese A2/AD bubble are vulnerable to Chinese attack, whether from submarines, mines, air, or missile strikes. These forces make an inviting target for a hypothetical adversary that may look to land a stunning first blow.⁶³ Caverley rightly warns that “the biggest operational effect” of a Taiwan scenario “might be large portions of the Seventh Fleet at the bottom of the ocean.”⁶⁴

U.S. BASES IN OR NEAR THE PACIFIC



Notably, the U.S. armed forces that prevailed in the Second World War were trained and equipped on or near U.S. territory.⁶⁵ The focus of U.S. naval forces in the Asia-Pacific should not be parading around to flaunt their strength in every corner of this vast region, which burns readiness.⁶⁶ The focus should be on the U.S. West Coast, Hawaii, and Alaska. Alaska in particular provides vast empty spaces and austere environments to practice in earnest for high-intensity warfare.

TAIWAN ON ITS OWN

This explainer has illustrated that Taiwan’s defense is not at all crucial to U.S. national security. To the contrary, U.S. national security will be damaged if Washington attempts to protect this highly exposed and vulnerable position. But what of Taiwan’s future? If excluded from the U.S. defense perimeter, is the island

condemned to conquest and tyranny? Perhaps. That may befit an island that is unfortunately located just off the coast of a hostile superpower yet has not invested heavily in its defense in recent decades.

Still, Chinese conquest of Taiwan isn't a foregone conclusion even when it is outside the American defense perimeter. First and foremost, Taipei will likely act more cautiously under these circumstances.⁶⁷ It might arm more heavily for defense against invasion or blockade and avoid provocative flirtations with independence. Beijing might well decide to live with the status quo with the understanding that the U.S. is neither acting to support Taiwanese independence nor trying to use it to bottle up Chinese forces. In other words, a Taiwan delinked from the U.S. would present significantly less of a threat to China and thus be less of a target.

Additionally, Beijing would know that even though it could likely conquer Taiwan, it would still pay a very considerable cost, not just in the war itself but in economic and moral sanctions. A final reason to hope that cooler heads prevail is that the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that Taiwan residents defending their homes with Western-made weapons may draw major blood from the PLA, prompting only a pyrrhic victory for China and a lose-lose situation in general.

STEPPING AWAY FROM TAIWAN'S DEFENSE

A U.S. that steps away fully from any Taiwan defense commitment will be significantly better off. It will be less likely to get involved in a catastrophic war with China that could turn into a nuclear disaster of apocalyptic dimensions. It will be less likely to spend trillions of taxpayer dollars on preparing for a military scenario that it likely cannot win due to basic geography and asymmetric interests. It will be less likely to sleepwalk into a new cold war that will have devastating consequences for everything from economic development to nuclear proliferation to climate change.

As noted above, Taiwan constitutes a vital national security interest for China. During World War II, the island proved to be an invaluable base for Japanese aggression into China. But Taiwan has no parallel, vital strategic interest for U.S. national security. True, it might confer some intelligence advantages to the Pentagon, whether monitoring Chinese airspace or tracking submarines off its immediate coast. Yet maintaining such a strategic position, which after all came about as a consequence of China's civil war, would constitute a fool's errand on a grand scale.

The relatively minor targeting benefits are certainly not worth risking a near-term war with a rising nuclear power. As Caverley writes, "Going to war because of Taiwan's perceived military value could destroy the operational balance to save it."⁶⁸

Will China eventually wield enormous economic influence in the Pacific and throughout the whole world? Probably, but China's desire to build roads and rails and sell the world micro-electronics does not amount to a national security threat. China has lived in peace with its neighbors for almost half a century and there is little to no evidence that it plans to change this.

If we focus narrowly on capabilities, moreover, it also becomes clear that China is not headed for global hegemony. The PLA is built toward national unification with Taiwan. Achieving that will not transform it into juggernaut that asserts military control over the rest of East Asia.

Much of this discussion has concerned Japan and the Philippines, because many assume these two states are in the greatest danger if China succeeds in conquering Taiwan. Yet the primary danger to both Tokyo and Manila is that both these countries are sucked into a volatile Taiwan scenario and become logical targets for Chinese attack. If these states were to repudiate any involvement in a Taiwan scenario, the whole of the Asia-Pacific would assume a more peaceful demeanor and Washington could focus on a realistic and affordable defense strategy that is truly defensive.

Taiwan is no trampoline for Chinese conquest across the Asia-Pacific. We have seen that there is no evidence Beijing has such ambitions. We have also seen that the trampoline itself has little “bounce,” since it would not afford the PLA new capabilities or significant basing possibilities. True, there would be some gains for Chinese airpower, ISR, and submarine deployments, but these are negligible. Even if the PLA sought to jump on this trampoline—a dubious prospect—such moves would fall flat due to the challenging strategic geography of the western Pacific that affords American allies very formidable positions to defend.

China can take Taiwan, but it can’t harm U.S. national security by doing so. If Washington were to wisely detach itself from this defense burden, it would place America in a more feasible, realistic, and sturdy strategic position in the Asia-Pacific.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Statement by Dr. Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs,” United States Senate, December 8, 2021, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821_Ratner_Testimony1.pdf.
- ² Notably, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Omar Bradley dissented from MacArthur’s assessment, explaining that “the Joint Chiefs of Staff do not believe that the mere loss of Formosa would jeopardize our whole Pacific position,” quoted in John Caverley, “So What: Reassessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan,” *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 3 (summer 2025), 31.
- ³ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” White House, November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.
- ⁴ On the trouble with the semiconductor rationale for defending Taiwan, see Christopher McCallion, “Semiconductors Are Not a Reason to Defend Taiwan,” *Defense Priorities*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/semiconductors-are-not-a-reason-to-defend-taiwan/>.
- ⁵ A similar argument is made in Michael D. Swaine, “Taiwan: Defending a Non-Vital US Interest,” *Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2025), 165–185.
- ⁶ Elbridge Colby, *Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Competition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 116.
- ⁷ Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011), 177.
- ⁸ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 7.
- ⁹ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 254.
- ¹⁰ Michele Flournoy, “America’s Military Risks Losing Its Edge,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-20/flournoy-americas-military-risks-losing-its-edge>.
- ¹¹ “The Domino Theory,” Global Security.org, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/vietnam2-domino-theory.htm>.
- ¹² Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 212; Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 3, 143.
- ¹³ Stephen Walt, “Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate Over How to Respond to China,” *International Security* 49, no. 4 (spring 2025), 67.
- ¹⁴ Mearsheimer, “The Inevitable Rivalry,” *Foreign Affairs*, November–December 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war>.
- ¹⁵ The author had occasion to visit this superb, well-maintained museum in Taipei in April 2023. It was striking that none of the displays the author witnessed had any relationship to Taiwan artifacts but *all* concerned the mainland, especially given that the name of the museum is the National Palace Museum [國立故宮博物院].
- ¹⁶ Both archipelagos, or pieces of them, have occasionally paid tribute to the Chinese emperor, but these circumstances have been relatively rare. Most importantly, there has never been any use of Chinese force or exertion of governing Chinese authority over these domains.
- ¹⁷ Duan Xiaolin and Hao Yufan, “Surprising Stability in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Since 2012,” *Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 2, 59–75, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2516977>.
- ¹⁸ Japan’s complex relationship with Taiwan, which includes half a century of colonial rule from 1895–1945, is discussed in some detail in the third DEFP explainer in this series. Lyle Goldstein, “Target Taiwan: Limits of Allied Support,” *Defense Priorities*, October 16, 2025, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/target-taiwan-limits-of-allied-support/>.
- ¹⁹ David Pierson, “China, Evoking World War II, Urges Europe to Take Its Side Against Japan,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/02/world/asia/china-japan-taiwan-europe.html>.
- ²⁰ Occasionally the idea that Beijing could lay claim to Okinawa surfaces in the bilateral relationship, mainly in the form of rumors or conjectures by historians. See, for example, “A Weak Link in the Island Chain,” *Economist*, November 15, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2014/11/15/a-weak-link-in-the-island-chain>. At the end of 2025, historical links between China and the Ryukyu Islands are once again in the news. See, for example, Xie Bizhen [谢必震], “Ryukyu Studies Are Not Just an Academic Need” [琉球研究不仅仅是学术需要], *Global Times* [环球时报], November 26, 2025, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/4PlxdZPUOvq>. Such discussions do not represent sincere territorial claims but rather an obvious political imperative to retaliate for Japanese statements on Taiwan that are viewed as egregious.
- ²¹ See, for example, Ely Ratner, “Learning the Lessons of Scarborough Reef,” *National Interest*, November 21, 2013, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/learning-the-lessons-scarborough-reef-9442>.
- ²² Rene Acosta, “China Coast Guard Attacks Resupply Mission for Filipino Troops on BRP *Sierra Madre*,” USNI News, November 18, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/11/18/china-coast-guard-attacks-resupply-mission-for-filipino-troops-on-brp-sierra-madre>.



- ²³ Jason Gutierrez, "Overwhelmed by Chinese Fleets, Filipino Fishermen 'Protest and Adapt,'" *New York Times*, July 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/11/world/asia/philippines-south-china-sea-fishermen.html>.
- ²⁴ Christina Gallardo, "Why France and Britain Can't Stop Fighting about Fish," *Politico*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-french-fishing-war-post-brexite-relations/>.
- ²⁵ Xiao Liang, Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Lorenzo Scarazzato, Zubaida Karim, and Jade Guibertaeau Ricard, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024" SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2025, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2504_fs_milex_2024.pdf.
- ²⁶ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 7.
- ²⁷ "Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute," International Crisis Group, Report no. 334, November 14, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india-china/334-thin-ice-himalayas-handling-india-china-border-dispute>.
- ²⁸ See, for example, M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 314–15.
- ²⁹ Robert Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (spring 1999): 81–118; Walt, "Hedging on Hegemony," 45, 47, 60.
- ³⁰ David C. Kang, Jackies S. H. Wong, and Zenobia T. Chan, "What Does China Want?" *International Security* 50, no. 1 (summer 2025), 75.
- ³¹ Ian Easton and Randall Schriver, "Standing Watch: Taiwan and Maritime Domain Awareness in the Western Pacific," 2049 Institute, 2014, 7, https://project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/141216_Taiwan_Maritime_Domain_Awareness_Easton_Schriver.pdf.
- ³² Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *International Security* 47, no.1 (summer 2022), 45.
- ³³ Green and Talmadge, "Then What?" 18.
- ³⁴ Green and Talmadge, "Then What?" 37. Green and Talmadge may underestimate the capabilities of the Chinese submarine force by relying on old data—the acoustic signature of the Chinese Type 093 dates from a 2009 estimate and so is now more than 15 years out of date, even though that submarine has had numerous upgrades.
- ³⁵ Caverley, "So What," 43.
- ³⁶ Caverley, "So What," 45.
- ³⁷ Caverley, "So What," 42.
- ³⁸ Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 9, 2023, 112, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/230109_Cancian_FirstBattle_NextWar.pdf?VersionId=XIDrFCUHt8OZSOYW_9PWx3xtc0ScGHn.
- ³⁹ Caverley, "So What," 45.
- ⁴⁰ See, for example, my analysis of a paper published by authors from the Qingdao Chinese Navy Submarine Academy. Lyle Goldstein, "Is This the Future of Chinese Submarine Power," *National Interest*, June 20, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-future-chinese-submarine-power-21229>.
- ⁴¹ "A Dossier on the Pave Paws Radar Installation on Leshan, Taiwan," Federation of American Scientists, March 8, 2013, <https://man.fas.org/eprint/leshan.pdf>.
- ⁴² Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (July 2016), 41.
- ⁴³ Biddle and Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific," 41.
- ⁴⁴ Satoshi Amako, "The Senkaku Islands Incident and China-Japan Relations," East Asia Forum, October 25, 2010, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2010/10/25/the-senkaku-islands-incident-and-japan-china-relations/>; Moongi Lee, "The Crisis in China-South Korea Relations: Lessons from History and the Ways Forward," East Asia Foundation Policy Debates, July 5, 2023, https://www.keaf.org/en/book/EAF_Policy_Debates/The_Crisis_in_South_Korea_China_Relations_Lessons_from_History_and_Ways_Forward?ckattempt=2.
- ⁴⁵ Thomas McCabe (LTC USAF-ret.), "Chinese Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2528263/chinese-intelligence-surveillance-and-reconnaissance-systems/>; and Caverley, "So What," 40.
- ⁴⁶ Caverley, "So What," 42.
- ⁴⁷ See, for example, H.I. Sutton, "First Image of China's Carrier-based AEW Aircraft," *Forbes*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/08/29/first-image-of-chinas-new-carrier-based-aew-plane/>.
- ⁴⁸ Michael McDevitt (RADM, USN-ret.) quoted in Edward Lundquist, "For China, Key to Becoming a Blue Water Navy and a Peer Competitor Has Been Sustainment at Sea," *Defense Transportation Journal*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.ndtahq.com/for-china-key-to-becoming-a-blue-water-navy-and-a-peer-competitor-has-been-sustainment-at-sea/>. See also Mike Sweeney, "Challenges to



Chinese Blue Water Operations,” Defense Priorities, April 30, 2024, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/challenges-to-chinese-blue-water-operations/>.

⁴⁹ Mike Sweeney, “How Militarily Useful Would Taiwan Be to China?” Defense Priorities, August 12, 2022, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/how-militarily-useful-would-taiwan-be-to-china/>.

⁵⁰ See, for example, this detailed Chinese expert assessment of new developments in the Japanese submarine force, @LyleGoldstein, “Chinese defense experts discuss Japan’s newest Taigei-class of conventional submarines. CCTV7, CCTV7, Guofang Junshi,” X, June 14, 2023, <https://x.com/lylegoldstein/status/1669179179420598276?s=20>.

⁵¹ Juster Domingo, “Japan Receives New F-35 Lightning Fighters from the US,” *Defense Post*, May 8, 2025, <https://thedefensepost.com/2025/05/08/japan-f-35-lightning-fighters/>.

⁵² Gabriel Dominguez, “U.S. Falling Behind on Aircraft Shelters in Asia as China’s Missile Arsenal Grows,” *Japan Times*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/01/10/asia-pacific/us-bases-asia-pacific/>; and Jeffrey Hornung, “Six Lessons from Ukraine for Japanese Defense Planners,” War on the Rocks, June 21, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/06/six-lessons-from-ukraine-for-japanese-defense-planners/>.

⁵³ Ben Dooley and Hisako Ueno, “The Island Paradise Near the Front Line of Tensions Over Taiwan,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/world/asia/ishigaki-japan-missiles-taiwan.html>. For Chinese monitoring of these developments, see, for example, @LyleGoldstein, “Chinese strategists study Japanese defense upgrades, including new weaponry and position of munitions bunkers,” X, April 12, 2024, <https://x.com/lylegoldstein/status/1778921342856810538>.

⁵⁴ The progress of the transformation of the Filipino armed forces remains disputed among local experts. Author interviews, Manila, January 2025. “South Korea Delivers High-Tech Miguel Malvar-class Frigate to Boost Philippine Naval Power,” Army Recognition, March 31, 2025, <https://armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2025/south-korea-delivers-high-tech-miguel-malvar-class-frigate-to-boost-philippine-naval-power>.

⁵⁵ “Philippines to receive second batch of BrahMos missile system from India,” Reuters, April 23, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/philippines-receive-second-batch-brahmos-missile-system-india-2025-04-23/>.

⁵⁶ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, “Philippines to Procure Submarines for Archipelagic Defense,” Naval News, February 13, 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/02/philippines-to-procure-submarines-for-archipelagic-defense/>.

⁵⁷ As discussed above, China’s possession of Taiwan would bring it somewhat closer to the Philippines. It is true that in the Second World War, Japan did use Taiwan as a springboard to attack the Philippines. The issue of improved air basing for a hypothetical battle for Luzon was discussed in a previous section. But overall I judge the more salient consideration to be the vast strategic depth that the Philippines will maintain even if the PLA has marginally improved options against the northern island of Luzon.

⁵⁸ On ranging rocket artillery across the Taiwan Strait, see, for example, Kapil Kajal, “China Deploys PHL-16 MLRS along Taiwan Strait,” *Janes*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/china-deploys-phl-16-mlrs-along-taiwan-strait>.

⁵⁹ Gordon Arthur, “Vietnam’s Defense Market Provides New Opportunities, Unique Challenges for Western Firms,” *Breaking Defense*, May 5, 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/05/vietnams-defense-market-presents-new-opportunities-unique-challenges-for-western-firms/>.

⁶⁰ Lyle Goldstein, “Target Taiwan: Limits of Allied Support,” Defense Priorities, October 16, 2025, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/target-taiwan-limits-of-allied-support/>.

⁶¹ “Germany Set for Massive Rearmament as Divide with US Widens,” *France 24*, May 3, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250305-germany-set-for-massive-rearmament-as-divide-with-us-widens>.

⁶² Walt, “Hedging against Hegemony,” 51.

⁶³ Cancian, Cancian, and Heglinbotham, “The First Battle of the Next War,” 5.

⁶⁴ Caverley, “So What,” 30.

⁶⁵ Rapid and significant inter-war naval doctrinal evolution is described in Trent Hone, “Building a Doctrine: U.S. Naval Tactics and Battle Plans in the Interwar Period,” *International Journal of Naval History* 1, no. 2 (2002), https://www.ijnhonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/hone_doctrine-in-the-usn_-rev10-02.pdf.

⁶⁶ Robert Work, “A Slavish Devotion to Forward Presence Has Nearly Broken the US Navy,” *USNI Proceedings* 147 (December 2021), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/december/slavish-devotion-forward-presence-has-nearly-broken-us-navy>.

⁶⁷ See, for example, the discussion by Taiwanese former Culture Minister Yingtai Lung in Yingtai Lung, “The Clock Is Ticking for Taiwan,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/01/opinion/taiwan-china-trump.html>. Explaining that Taiwan should not rely on the U.S., Lung explains that “rejecting and antagonizing China is no longer a viable path forward.”

⁶⁸ Caverley, “So What,” 50.

