

Three Questions to Ask About America Not Fighting a War with China

China has no reason to and many reasons not to attack Taiwan

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Before you read another story claiming war among China, Taiwan and the U.S. is getting [closer](#), or relations are entering [dangerous](#) territory, or long-standing issues may soon be settled by any means [necessary](#), ask yourself these three questions.

Why Would China Attack Taiwan?

Over the last decade Taiwan invested [\\$188.5 billion](#) in China, more than China’s investment in the United States. In 2019, the value of cross-strait trade was \$149.2 billion. Pre-Covid, travelers from China made 2.68 million visits to Taiwan. China [applied](#) in September to join the new Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. A week later, with no opposition voiced by Beijing, Taiwan applied to join as well. China is Taiwan’s largest trading partner. “One country, two systems” has not only kept the peace for decades, it has proven damn profitable. Why bomb one of your best customers?

Apart from the potential the nuclear destruction of the Chinese state (the U.S. has 10 nukes for every [Chinese](#) one) why would China consider a war that would provoke the U.S.? Total Chinese investment in the U.S. is [\\$145 billion](#). U.S. investment in China passed [\\$1 trillion](#). The Chinese are literally betting the house on America’s success.

A failed invasion of Taiwan would topple Xi if not the whole power structure. An invasion is impractical. Chinese amphibious forces would be under fire from Taiwan’s F-16s armed with [Harpoon](#) anti-ship missiles practically as they left harbor. Taiwan will soon field a land-based anti-ship [missile](#) with 200 mile range. Estimates are China would need to land a [million](#) soldiers on day one (on D-Day the Allies put ashore [156,000](#)) against Taiwan’s fortified rocky west coast, navigating among tiny islets themselves laden with anti-ship weapons. China’s primary amphibious assault ship, the [Type 075](#), carries about only 1,000 men, and China currently has only [three](#) such ships. Its conscript troops are unblooded in combat. Meanwhile American and British forces patrol the waters. Aircraft from Guam, Okinawa, and Korea

could shut down the skies, and decimate Chinese aircraft on the ground. This is not Normandy. It is also not another of the counterinsurgency struggles which defeated America. It is the Big Power conflict played out in the Strait instead of the Fulda Gap, the war U.S. has been preparing to fight against someone since the 1960s.

No risk vs. gain calculation would end up concluding the best option was war. And discard the irrational actor scenario; Chinese leaders have always believed in historical cycles. They waited close to 300 years to end the foreign Qing dynasty. They waited out Britain for hundreds of years for the peaceful return of Hong Kong, same with Portugal and Macau. Chinese diplomacy is patient, not reactive. There is no fierce urgency to reunification. One [waits](#) to win.

Why now?

In fiction one of the important tools is the Change Event, the thing that answers the question of why now? Why did the mild-mannered accountant suddenly become a vigilante? Oh, his daughter was kidnapped. So where is the “why now” part of China-Taiwan?

One of the most compelling arguments China plans no war is they haven’t yet fought any wars. No shots have been fired over the disputed islands, which have disputed for decades. Taiwan broke away in 1949 and the last [shot](#) fired was in the 1950s. Chinese troops entered Vietnam only after the U.S. began its own campaign of regime change there, and briefly in 1979 during a border scuffle. China joined the Korean War only after the U.S. threatened to cross into Chinese territory. Xi’s reunification rhetoric is essentially the same as Mao’s.

China is an autocracy (unchanged since 1949), and has not promoted things like free speech in Hong Kong or Tibet, never mind in Beijing or Shanghai. We don’t have to like that, but it is nothing new and has nothing to do with invading Taiwan. China did little when some of the [leaders](#) of the Tienanmen protests turned up in Taiwan, another worried over “why now” event.

My own first brush with a “why now” event was in the 1980s, when I went to Taiwan as an American diplomat. Taiwan was crawling out from under four decades of authoritarian rule, and taking its first difficult democratic steps. After decades of speech suppression, a lot of people were testing their legs, saying all sorts of crazy stuff about independence. Among ourselves we called it “the D word,” as independence in Mandarin is romanized *duli*. One emerging political party was even called the Taiwan Independence party, and was likely to grab a few seats in the legislature. The U.S. mission was fearful this could serve as a trigger to Beijing. “Big China” had made clear a declaration of independence was a red line.

Beijing’s reaction was soon apparent: Taiwan’s stores started to feature mainland goods; the end of the hated Kuomintang opened up a new market. Even before this thaw you could sort of fly from Taipei to China, something that many people on both sides of the strait were desperate to do to visit relatives. The catch was the flight had to touch down in then-British Hong Kong. In 2008 these flights were made direct, with no need for the Hong Kong stopover. Today six China-based airlines and five from Taiwan operate direct flights. The line of progress has been in one direction, far at odds with war.

Why Would Anyone Think the U.S. Would Not Defend Taiwan?

Post-Afghanistan, some [speculate](#) the U.S. would not defend Taiwan. It makes no sense; if

the U.S. stood on the sidelines as China attacked, that would end the post-WWII U.S. alliance system in Asia, and would temp war on the Korean peninsula. It would likely spur Japan and Korea to go nuclear. The global economy would fall into chaos and the dollar would collapse. Who knows what would happen to global supply lines.

The Taiwan Relations Act (Biden as a young senator voted for it) says Washington will “consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States” and the U.S. will “maintain the capacity to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.” The language was purposefully written by the parties concerned in 1979 to incorporate flexibility without being provocative, and cannot be read today as a signal of weakness. Diplomats on all three sides understand this.

I have been in rooms with both Chinese and Taiwan representatives, and PLA and U.S. military personnel. Though sabers get rattled, particularly in front of the cameras, every action by every player assumes the U.S. will defend Taiwan. There is simply no ambiguity. When Joe Biden broke code and [blurted](#) out the U.S. will indeed defend Taiwan it was one of the few honest statements by any politician in Washington.

The U.S. has [troops](#) on Taiwan. The U.S. sells Taiwan some of our most modern weapons. Even as Xi spoke of reunification during the October political holidays the HMS Queen Elizabeth, USS Carl Vinson, USS Ronald Reagan, and Japan’s Ise conducted joint [operations](#) in the China Sea. The U.S. is selling [nuclear](#) submarines to [Australia](#) to boast patrols in the South China Sea. The U.S. frequently conducts “freedom of navigation” exercises in the area. The U.S. recently brought India into the [Quad](#) Pact against China, and convinced [Japan](#) to abandon its neutral stance on Taiwan. Congress will take up the Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act, which would authorize Biden to [initiate](#) war on China.

China has no reason to and many reasons not to attack Taiwan. For 70 some years their relationship has become more open and more interactive. Strategic ambiguity — some call it deterrence — has worked. Nothing about any of that has changed.

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