

Defending Taiwan by Defending Ukraine The Interconnected Fates of the World's Democracies

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a wake-up call: it was time to move past the vision of a post-Cold War world in which regimes in Moscow and Beijing would become responsible stakeholders in a rules-based international order. What has emerged, instead, is an increasingly contentious world plagued by authoritarian aggression, most dangerously exemplified by the “no-limits partnership” between China and Russia, through which the two countries have bolstered each other’s repressive, expansionist agendas.

This remains, however, a globalized world of interconnected economies and societies: a single, indivisible theater in which the security of every country is intimately linked to the security of every other. That is particularly true of the world’s democracies, whose alliances and partnerships have come under assault by authoritarian powers intent on splitting and dividing the democratic world.

Some have argued that international support for defending Ukraine from Russian aggression is draining attention and resources away from the task of standing up to Chinese aggression. According to this view, the defense of Ukraine has left democracies such as Taiwan more vulnerable.

But that argument underestimates the extent to which the geostrategic interests of the world’s democracies are linked—as are the agendas of Moscow and Beijing. U.S. officials have concluded that since at least the second half of 2023, China

has been providing military support short of lethal arms to Russia, a significant shift since the initial phase of Russia's war on Ukraine, when Beijing took a somewhat more neutral stance. China has clearly decided that it has a strong interest not just in propping up Russia but in reshaping the geopolitical landscape in Europe.

With China and Russia in such close alignment, it is all the more imperative for democracies to act in coordination. To that end, the democracies of the world, led by the United States, must sustain their military, economic, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. The objective of this support goes beyond returning to the status quo ante in the European continent. By helping Ukraine, democracies can increase their relative strength against the Chinese-Russian coalition.

In this spirit, Taiwan welcomes the U.S. Congress's recent decision to continue American military support for Ukraine. Such a display of unabated and unquestionable resolve to safeguard democracy does not detract from the defense of places such as Taiwan: in fact, it is a key deterrent against adventurism on Beijing's part.

WHY TAIWAN MATTERS

Just as the fight to protect democracy in Ukraine has global implications, so, too, does the defense of Taiwan. According to Bloomberg Economics, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would cost the global economy around \$10 trillion, the equivalent of nearly ten percent of global GDP—dwarfing the impacts of the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global financial crisis of 2008–9. A Chinese blockade of Taiwan would result in less immediate destruction but would still cost the global economy around \$5 trillion.

The reason is simple: over 90 percent of advanced chips are produced in Taiwan, and approximately half of the global fleet of ships that carry shipping containers pass through the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is an indispensable and irreplaceable part of the global supply chain, and defending it requires a global effort. But the value of Taiwanese security is not merely economic; it is also geostrategic. Preserving the status quo in the strait is vital to maintaining the U.S. alliance system, the regional balance of power, and nuclear nonproliferation. These three critical pillars have kept the Indo-Pacific region stable and prosperous for generations and would be threatened were China to gain control of Taiwan. Economic losses and supply chain disruptions could be mitigated over time. But a geostrategic shift to the advantage of China's authoritarian expansionism would harm the world for decades to come.

In April, as Taiwan endured its biggest earthquake in the last 25 years, China continued to send warships and aircraft across the strait—even as its delegation to the UN had the audacity to thank the world for expressions of sympathy about the earthquake, as if Beijing spoke on Taiwan's behalf. In sharp contrast to China's feigned concern, over 80 countries expressed support for Taiwan, for which I extended my sincerest gratitude.

This is what Taiwan faces every day. But when China seeks to sow fear among the people of Taiwan through military coercion, diplomatic isolation, and information warfare, the Taiwanese people respond with a whole-of-nation effort. Taiwan is particularly proud to have multiple grassroots organizations dedicated to strengthening civil defense and countering Chinese disinformation. They are emblematic of Taiwan's democracy and resilience.

Taiwan's government has made great strides in meeting the security challenge posed by China. Under President Tsai Ing-wen's leadership, Taiwan has ramped up its efforts to enhance its self-defense. Last year, Taiwan increased its defense budget by around 14 percent, to approximately \$19 billion, or 2.5 percent of national GDP. Eight years ago, the defense budget equaled less than 2.0 percent of GDP.

Taiwan spends its resources on its most pressing needs. The primary focus has been on developing asymmetric warfare capabilities, implementing civil-defense reforms, and accelerating the indigenous defense industry. With broad public support, Taiwan also extended its training period for military conscripts from four months to one year.

Taiwan can expect robust support from like-minded countries only if it makes a strong commitment to self-defense. That was the first and most important lesson Taiwan learned from Ukraine's defense against Russia; because the Ukrainians were willing to fight for their democracy, the rest of the world was willing to help. And our determination to defend ourselves will grow only stronger under our new president, William Lai.

HOW TAIWAN PERSEVERES

China has already altered the status quo in several ways in the Indo-Pacific region. For starters, Beijing has militarized the South China Sea despite its public pledge not to do so. The Chinese have built ports with potential military uses under its "string of pearls" strategy, including in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Last year, Beijing signed a security pact with the Solomon Islands and similar agreements with other Pacific island countries.

China's strategy rests on two assumptions. The first is that China must lower the potential cost of annexing Taiwan by force by making it harder for the United States to carry out a military deployment to defend the island in the event of a Chinese attack. The second is that controlling Taiwan would help Beijing project power beyond the so-called first island chain, threatening access to shipping lanes and reducing the security of many U.S. allies in the region.

Preventing those developments will require an unprecedented level of determination and coordination on the part of the world's democracies. The long-standing trilateral security relationship among Australia, Japan, and the United States, and the emerging AUKUS partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, provide an anchor of stability. The nascent partnership among Japan, the Philippines, and the United States will complement those arrangements. And the recently upgraded security cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the United States will ensure stability in Northeast Asia, which is closely linked to peace in the Taiwan Strait. These interconnected coalitions are the strongest guarantor of a favorable geostrategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

Indeed, peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait can be maintained only by viewing and treating it as an international issue. Leaders on the other side of the strait claim otherwise, of course, and tirelessly frame the future of Taiwan as an issue to be resolved among "the Chinese." But the harder Beijing pushes that false narrative, the more Taiwan is proved to be on the right track.

WHAT TAIWAN NEEDS

Still, the international community could do even more to deter Chinese aggression. There are three areas that like-minded

countries could address more assertively to preserve the status quo.

The first is China's gray-zone coercion, which involves activities such as disinformation campaigns, election interference plots, and military provocations such as jet sorties that routinely cross the median line of the Taiwan Strait. Such operations pose a daily psychological and security challenge to Taiwan that is no less dire than the threat of a blockade or an invasion, and failing to respond to them would have a disastrous impact on Taiwan's morale. In addition to providing Taiwan with political and moral support in the face of this coercion, other democracies should also put a price tag on such Chinese tactics, demonstrating to Beijing that provocations have consequences.

The second area where Taiwan needs more help is economic integration. China must not be allowed to dictate Taiwan's economic ties with the world. And strengthening economic partnerships with Taiwan would help other democracies foster resilient supply chains for their own economies. Taipei and Washington are currently negotiating the second phase of the U.S.-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade, a trade deal that will help Taiwan's small and medium-sized enterprises integrate into the global trading system. Once that agreement is completed, Taiwan hopes to sign an economic partnership agreement with the European Union and to join the trade deal known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. These agreements will not only strengthen the economies of Taiwan and its partners but demonstrate to Beijing that the world's democracies are making long-term investments in Taiwan's future.

The third area where Taiwan's friends could do still more is in pushing back against the misinterpretation of a UN resolution that

Beijing promulgates to justify its encroachments on Taiwan's rights. Taiwan urges like-minded countries to join the United States in rejecting China's distortion of UN General Assembly Resolution 2758, which was adopted in 1971 and gave the so-called Chinese seat at the UN to the government in Beijing—but did not, as China claims, enshrine into international law the false idea that Taiwan is a mere province of China. More countries should also exercise their right to freedom of navigation in the Taiwan Strait, which Beijing refuses to recognize as international waters. When China sees countries keeping their ships out of the strait, it concludes that its bullying tactics are working.

Taiwan is a responsible member of the international community, and its position on maintaining the cross-Strait status quo will not change. But it needs the world's democracies to do their utmost to help maintain peace through strength and unity. By continuing to support Ukraine in its fight for survival in the face of Russian aggression, the world's democracies have demonstrated exactly the kind of resolve and moral clarity that Taiwan also needs from them. We cannot allow this century to witness the birth of a world order in which authoritarians can stamp out justice and freedom. In the coming years, the fate of Taiwan, like that of Ukraine, will be a crucial test that the world's democracies must not fail.