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Taiwan: Defense and Military Issues

U.S. policy toward Taiwan (which also calls itself the Republic of China or ROC) has long prioritized the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. The United States supports Taiwan's efforts to deter the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) from using force to gain control of the archipelago, which the PRC claims as its territory but has never controlled. The U.S. government has sought to strengthen its own ability to deter PRC military aggression. The PRC, for its part, claims the United States uses Taiwan as a "pawn" to undermine and contain China. Congress and the President have enacted legislation aimed at strengthening U.S.-Taiwan defense ties. A key challenge for U.S. policymakers is supporting Taiwan's defense without triggering the conflict that U.S. policy seeks to prevent. For more information, see CRS Report, *Taiwan Defense Issues for Congress*.

Figure 1. Taiwan



Source: Graphic by CRS.

Taiwan's Security Situation

Taiwan's leaders have tasked Taiwan's technologically advanced military with deterring—and if necessary, defeating—PRC military aggression. Taiwan enjoys strategic advantages, including geography and climate. The Taiwan Strait is some 70 nautical miles (nm) wide at its narrowest point, and some 220 nm wide at its widest. Weather conditions make the Strait perilous to navigate at certain times of the year. Taiwan's mountainous terrain and densely populated west coast are largely unsuitable for amphibious landing and invasion operations. Taiwan's leaders since 2017 have grown the defense budget; from 2019 to 2023, spending increased by an average of nearly 5% per year, and as a percentage of GDP increased from 2% to 2.5%. In August 2024, Taiwan President Lai Ching-te announced that Taiwan's defense budget would increase by 6% in 2025, to approximately \$19.7 billion. In 2022,

Taiwan embarked on a "realignment" of its military force structure, including the extension of compulsory military service from four months to one year (implemented beginning in 2024) and efforts to expand reserve, civil defense, and territorial defense capabilities. Taiwan's defense relationship with the United States also confers political and military advantages.

Taiwan faces an increasingly asymmetric power balance across the Strait. The Communist Party of China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has undergone a decades-long modernization program focused primarily on developing the capabilities needed to annex Taiwan. Some observers assess that the PLA is, or soon will be, able to execute a range of military campaigns against Taiwan. The PLA trains for operations such as missile strikes, seizures of Taiwan's small outlying islands, blockades, and—the riskiest and most challenging campaign for the PLA—an amphibious landing and takeover of Taiwan's main island.

Taiwan also faces defense challenges at home. Civil-military relations are strained for historical, political, and bureaucratic reasons. The archipelago's energy, food, water, internet, and other critical infrastructure systems are vulnerable to external disruption. According to some observers, Taiwan's civil defense preparedness is insufficient, and its military struggles to recruit, retain, and train personnel. At a societal level, it is not clear what costs—in terms of economic security, physical safety and security, and lives—Taiwan's people would be willing or able to bear in the face of PRC armed aggression.

Biden Administration officials state that a PRC invasion of Taiwan is "neither imminent nor inevitable." In 2023, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Burns said PRC leader Xi Jinping had instructed the PLA "to be ready by 2027 to conduct a successful invasion. Now that does not mean that he's decided to conduct an invasion in 2027 or any other year. But it's a reminder of the seriousness of his focus and his ambition."

PRC Gray Zone Pressure Against Taiwan

The PRC engages in persistent non-combat operations that some analysts say are eroding Taiwan's military advantages and readiness. Such "gray zone" actions include

- large and increasingly complex military exercises near Taiwan;
- near-daily air operations in the vicinity of Taiwan, including frequent sorties across the so-called "median line," an informal north-south line bisecting the Strait that PLA aircraft rarely crossed prior to 2022;
- routine naval patrols across the median line, some as close as 24 nm from Taiwan's main island;

- unmanned combat aerial vehicle flights near and encircling Taiwan; and
- stepped-up air and maritime activities near Kinmen—an outlying island administered by Taiwan near the PRC city of Xiamen—including reported flights of unmanned aerial vehicles in the airspace over Kinmen in 2022 and an increase in coast guard patrols around Kinmen “to strengthen law enforcement inspections” since a February 2024 clash between Taiwan’s coast guard and a PRC vessel that left two PRC citizens dead.

The PRC government often ramps up such activities following high-profile engagements between senior U.S. policymakers and Taiwan leaders.

The normalization of PLA operations ever closer to Taiwan’s islands in peacetime could undermine Taipei’s ability to assess whether the PLA is using “routine” operations or exercises to obscure preparations for an attack. PLA use of such operations as cover for an attack could significantly shorten the time Taiwan has to respond. Gray zone activities also provide the PLA with training and intelligence-gathering opportunities. They strain Taiwan’s forces, which face growing operational and maintenance costs associated with responding to PLA activities. Some observers assess Beijing uses these coercive but nonviolent operations to sow doubt in Taiwan’s people about Taiwan’s military capabilities and to create political pressure for Taipei to acquiesce to Beijing’s insistence on unification.

U.S. Support for Taiwan’s Defense

The United States has maintained unofficial defense ties with Taiwan since 1980, when President Carter terminated a 1954 U.S.-ROC mutual defense treaty. (The United States terminated diplomatic relations with Taiwan and withdrew its military personnel in 1979.) The robust defense relationship includes arms transfers; routine bilateral defense dialogues and planning; and training activities in both the United States and Taiwan, including, since 2023, using International Military Education and Training (IMET) funds. U.S.-Taiwan defense relations have substantially contributed to Taiwan’s military capabilities.

U.S. Strategy and Policy

The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA, P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. §§3301 et seq.), enacted immediately following the termination of official relations, includes multiple security-related provisions. Among other things, the TRA states that it is U.S. policy to “make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability” and “to maintain the capacity of the United States 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 TRA does not require the United States to defend Taiwan, but by stating it is U.S. policy to maintain the capacity to do so, the TRA creates “strategic ambiguity” about potential U.S. actions in the event of a PRC attack. Some observers advocate making a formal commitment to defend Taiwan. Supporters of a shift to “strategic clarity” argue such clarity is necessary to deter an increasingly capable and assertive PRC. Supporters of strategic

ambiguity argue the long-standing policy encourages restraint by both Beijing and Taipei and incentivizes Taipei to invest more in its own defense.

Successive U.S. administrations have encouraged Taiwan to pursue an “asymmetric” strategy to make it prohibitively costly for the PRC to annex Taiwan by force. This approach envisions Taiwan investing in capabilities intended to cripple an amphibious invasion through a combination of anti-ship missiles, naval mines, and other similarly small, distributable, and relatively inexpensive weapons systems. Taiwan’s government has adopted this approach to some extent, but some (including some stakeholders in Taiwan’s defense establishment) argue that Taiwan must continue to invest in conventional capabilities (e.g., fighter jets and large warships) to deter gray zone coercion short of an invasion. Uncertainty as to whether, how, and for how long the United States might aid Taiwan in the event of an attack informs these debates.

Arms Transfers

Over the past seven decades, Taiwan has consistently been one of the largest purchasers of U.S. defense equipment through the Foreign Military Sales process. Some observers argue Taiwan’s military is insufficiently equipped to defeat a PRC armed attack. Further, some observers argue the war in Ukraine has revealed problems with the U.S. defense industrial base and have raised concerns about defense suppliers’ ability to produce and deliver weapons to Taiwan in a timely fashion. In part as a response to these concerns, Congress has taken steps to increase and expedite arms transfers to Taiwan, including but not limited to:

Foreign Military Financing (FMF). The Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act (TERA; Title LV, Subtitle A of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY2023, P.L. 117-263) for the first time authorized the provision of FMF (essentially, loans or grants a foreign government may use to purchase U.S. arms) for Taiwan, although Congress did not appropriate funds for those grants. The State Department later notified Congress of its intent to obligate \$135 million for FMF for Taiwan using other authorities. The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47) makes available not less than \$300 million in FMF for Taiwan. Emergency supplemental appropriations for FY2024 (P.L. 118-50) include an additional \$2 billion for FMF for the Indo-Pacific; Taiwan could be a recipient.

Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA). TERA amended the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 U.S.C. §2318(a)(3)) to make PDA available to Taiwan for the first time, authorizing the provision to Taiwan of up to \$1 billion annually in defense articles and services from U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) stocks. Seven months later, the Biden Administration notified Congress of its intent to exercise this authority to transfer \$345 million of defense equipment to Taiwan. P.L. 118-50 appropriates \$1.9 billion for the replacement of DOD stocks transferred to Taiwan via PDA and for reimbursement of DOD defense services and military education and training provided to Taiwan or to countries that “provided support to Taiwan at the request of the United States.”

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