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While candidates for Taiwan's 2022 local elections have not yet fully started their campaigns, there is one looming political event that has been receiving [widespread media attention](#): a [referendum](#) on importing US beef and pork treated with ractopamine. (This is one of four referenda originally scheduled for [August 28](#), which have been [postponed to December 18](#) due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.) [Voters in Taiwan](#) will decide whether they support easing restrictions on US beef and pork imports, and the result of the referendum is likely to have implications for any prospective US-Taiwan Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The upcoming December vote follows a long history in Taiwan of using referenda to decide delicate foreign policy issues. However, [amendments](#) to the [referendum law](#) in 2017 have exacerbated the strategic and diplomatic challenges raised by referenda on foreign policy issues. For the protection of its critical foreign policy interests, the Taiwanese government should consider whether to make further changes to the referendum law.

The Referendum Act

Taiwan's referendum system was put in place with passage of the [Referendum Act](#) (公民投票法) of 2003. The stated goal of this act was to allow "[citizens to exercise their direct civil rights](#)." This version created steep hurdles for a referendum to pass the vote by stipulating that a [provision could only pass](#) if voter turnout was at least 50 percent of the last presidential election's turnout. The law also required signatures from [five percent](#) of the electorate to get a referendum on the ballot. Proponents of direct democracy criticized this original bill for its [high threshold margins](#) after seeing none of the first referenda votes meet the 50 percent turnout mark. Thus, [none](#) of the first referenda votes passed. Therefore, [Taiwan's government](#) felt changes were needed to move the country towards empowering its people to exercise direct democracy. Taiwan later revised the Referendum

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Act in 2017 and [lowered the thresholds](#). Today, only [1.5 percent](#) of the electorate's signatures are required to get a referendum on the ballot, and [25 percent](#) of the voters must turnout for the vote. The revision also lowered the voting age on referenda from [21 to 18 years of age](#), allowing more Taiwanese citizens to vote.

In Taiwan, there are [three types of issues](#) on which referenda can occur: referenda on laws, initiatives on legislative principles, and initiatives or referenda on "important policies." The author assumes that foreign policy falls into the category of "important policies," since most foreign policies are not codified in law but are instead made up of more abstract policy initiatives. While technically all of Taiwan's referenda are legally binding, for some issues, Taiwanese [legal experts](#) say that "authorities have the leeway to keep the results from ever being implemented." In reality, only referenda on laws are truly legally binding, as the outcome of referendum votes on these issues goes into effect [three days after the vote](#). For referenda on "important policies," the [law](#) stipulates that "the President or the authority shall take necessary disposition to realize the content of the proposal of [a] referendum." Because these votes are not legally binding, Taiwanese attorney Lu Chiou-yuan (呂秋遠) compared the most recent referendum campaign to a [NTD \\$1.5 billion survey](#), implying that the primary use for these referenda is to serve as a public opinion poll. The only accountability mechanism for voters to ensure politicians carry out these referendum outcomes lies through the electoral process. If it is important enough for voters to see these outcomes carried out, they can vote politicians out of office in the next election if they fail to deliver.

Referenda in Taiwan

In Taiwan, there have been three election cycles in which referenda questions were on the ballot, including in [2004](#), [2008](#), and [2018](#). While these referendum issues did include domestic issues, such as whether [same-sex marriage should be legal](#) and whether Taiwan should [continue using nuclear power](#), the most controversial referenda have focused on foreign policy issues. In the very first set of referenda in Taiwan in 2004, President Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) proposed a referendum to decide whether Taiwan should [acquire more advanced anti-missile weapons](#) to strengthen the island's self-defense capabilities against China. These

referenda [infuriated Beijing](#). China saw it as a "[precident for a plebiscite on sovereignty](#)" and warned that the vote could spark a war. US President George W. Bush, who was concerned about being dragged into the conflict with China during his administration's Global War on Terrorism, warned Chen against [upsetting the status quo](#). The vote ultimately [failed to reach the turnout threshold](#) required to make the result binding, with only a 45 percent turnout. However, of those who voted, nearly [93 percent voted in favor](#) of the referendum.

Four years later, Taiwanese voters were faced with another referendum vote on an issue with international implications. Two questions were posed in the 2008 elections, both dealing with UN representation. Both the Democratic People's Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT, 中國國民黨) proposed alternative questions for the referendum on what name the government should use to participate in the UN. The [DPP-supported question](#) asked: "Do you agree that the government should apply for UN membership under the name 'Taiwan'?" Meanwhile [the KMT-supported question](#) asked: "Do you approve of applying to return to the United Nations and to join other international organizations under the name 'Republic of China', or 'Taiwan', or other name that is conducive to success and preserves our nation's dignity?" Regardless of the preference, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) [warned](#) Taiwan that it "it cannot unilaterally decide its political future." Washington feared that China's warnings might lead to a military attack on Taiwan, so it stationed two aircraft carriers to the east of the island to respond to any "[provocative situation](#)." In the end, only [35 percent voted](#), and neither question in the referendum reached the [required turnout threshold](#). It is likely that opponents of each question simply chose not to answer it since the DPP's question had [94 percent of voters](#) expressing support, while the question proposed by the KMT had [87 percent vote in favor](#). The results suggest that Taiwanese voters were split on the issue.

In the 2018 referendum vote, foreign policy issues played a less contentious but still important role. Some foreign policy issues that were addressed in referenda included [Taiwan's title](#) for competing in the Tokyo Olympics and [food imports from Fukushima](#). In the

lead-up to the vote, [China warned](#) that Taiwan “could lose its right to compete [in the Olympics] if it tries to change its name” from Chinese Taipei (中華台北). Beijing also [pressured the East Asian Olympic Committee](#) to prevent Taichung from hosting the 2019 East Asian Youth Games, an outcome that undid years of work by Taiwanese officials. After Taiwanese voters chose to maintain the ban on food from Fukushima, Japan’s *de-facto* Ambassador to Taiwan Mikio Numata said [he felt deep regret](#) that “a political tool [was used] to undermine the sound relationship between Japan and Taiwan and economic exchanges.” Tokyo even considered initiating a [dispute complaint](#) to the World Trade Organization (WTO) over this ruling, suggesting that Taiwan’s voters did not recognize how this referendum could potentially break international laws.

Media outlets and political parties are currently gearing up for the next round of referendum questions. The most widely discussed referendum question involves importing US pork and beef treated with the additive ractopamine (originally scheduled to take place on [August 28](#), but now moved to December). President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) [eased the ban on such imports](#) in 2020; previously, this ban had been seen as [preventing talks on a US-Taiwan free trade agreement](#). While [observers in the United States and abroad celebrated](#) this move, Taiwanese citizens were more split. [DPP supporters defended the action](#) for its potential to strengthen economic ties with Washington, while [KMT supporters protested](#) the weakening of food safety requirements. The KMT thus [proposed](#) tackling this issue through a referendum. However, the outcome could have foreign policy implications and could potentially work against Taipei’s interests. If referendum results lead to the ban’s reinstatement, it could hinder [chances for a US-Taiwan FTA](#) in the near future. Moreover, Taiwan’s officials could feel politically constrained by such a referendum outcome. On the other hand, Taipei could also use the results to its advantage when negotiating an FTA with the United States. The two sides last [met on June 30th](#) when they held talks through the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, which could lay the groundwork for a more formalized US-Taiwan FTA. If voters in Taiwan vote to block US beef and pork imports, Taiwanese officials could bring the results of the referendum to show Washington that this is not an issue on which their citizens are willing to compromise.

Recommendations

Taiwan should consider amending the Referendum Act to prevent critical foreign policy issues from becoming hyper-politicized through the referenda process. [Matt Qvortrup](#), an expert in referenda at Coventry University, has argued that, for direct “democracy to work, it has to be limited to relatively few issues.” Perhaps, in order to make direct democracy perform better, foreign policy can be taken off the table. Diplomatic relationships take years to develop. When partners perceive slights, such as import bans or attempts to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, there are likely to be ramifications, both diplomatically and militarily. In foreign policy matters, Taiwan should consider if it makes sense for voters to have a constraining influence if these referenda on “important issues” mainly serve as public opinion polls.

Additionally, if Taiwan cannot keep critical foreign policy issues out of the referendum process, it should consider raising the thresholds for votes to pass to at least ensure that the decision will be made by a more representative sample of the people. The fact that, at current thresholds, [13 percent of voters](#) (half of the required 26 percent turnout) could potentially disrupt US-Taiwan relations and the delicate cross-Strait relationship is alarming. Whether exclusively for foreign policy questions or for all referenda, Taiwan should return to the thresholds in the 2003 Referendum Act. While certainly not perfect, at least [26 percent of voters](#) (half of the proposed 50 percent required turnout) would need to agree on the trajectory of these bilateral relationships. This need not necessarily hamper direct democracy: in the United Kingdom, [turnout for the Brexit vote was 72 percent](#), suggesting that a large majority felt strongly one way or the other. Insisting that a more significant percentage of the Taiwanese electorate vote on critical foreign policy issues may help ensure a more thorough foreign policy decision-making process.

These changes may be denounced by [direct democracy advocates](#) who argue that implementing these changes return the country to a situation where all referenda are doomed to fail. Nonetheless, the failure of the first two referenda votes may not be an indictment of the direct democracy process in Taiwan. Instead, it could be a sign that enough voters felt it was not in their immediate interest to have referenda votes con-

strain delicate diplomatic relationships. As Taiwanese voters look to the upcoming referendum on US pork and beef imports, Taipei must consider whether these sensitive foreign policy issues could be better left out of the referendum process.

The main point: The upcoming referendum vote in December on US pork and beef imports follows a long history in Taiwan of using referenda to address foreign policy questions. Because the outcome of this vote, and others like it, has repercussions for Taiwan's economic and strategic positioning globally, the Taiwanese government needs to consider whether referenda are the best way of addressing these issues.

Fighting with the Army You Have: An Alternate Vision of Taiwan Defense Reform and US-Taiwan Security Cooperation (Part 2)

By: Eric Chan

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Over the last 20 years, there has been a steady stream of Western military observers advocating for the development of asymmetric Taiwanese military capabilities, while castigating the state of Taiwan defense reform. These articles usually come with the implication that Taiwan is not serious about its defense—and sometimes, such statements are not all that implicit.

In [Part 1](#), I discussed how Taiwanese and Western definitions of *deterrence* and *asymmetry* often mean that the two sides are talking past each other. In this part, I will look at the ways in which the legacy of past US-Taiwan security cooperation has complicated prospects for reform. I then propose a few methods by which security cooperation can be optimized to address US and Taiwan political/military needs.

The Historical Legacy of an Americanized Military

The historical legacy of US-Taiwan security cooperation is evident to even a casual observer of the Taiwan mili-

tary: it is visible in structure, equipment, uniforms, and even unit logos. This is the result of decades of partnership, particularly from the era of the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty of 1955-1980 (中美共同防禦條約).

At the height of the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1958, [almost 20,000 Americans](#) were stationed on Taiwan, with US advisors and technicians responsible for training, integration, and maintenance of Taiwan air defense, radar and communications, aircraft, and naval ports. This left a heavy imprint on the Taiwan military, with each individual service [seeking to emulate the tactics and operational methods](#) of their American counterparts. The Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) was particularly prone to this, as ROCAF units such as [the Black Cat Squadron](#) were not just trained by the Americans but also closely integrated with the US Air Force (USAF) and the Central Intelligence Agency. The legacy of this era was a large ROCAF that was funded, trained, and armed/equipped along USAF lines, with similar strengths (such as exquisitely-trained pilots) and similar weaknesses (such as a significant logistics tail). Just as the USAF developed something of a so-called “fighter mafia” glorifying air-to-air combat, so too did the ROCAF.

Thus, well-intentioned Western advice for the ROCAF to focus on asymmetric defense—such as focusing on ground-based missiles, while shifting away from manned fighter aircraft—not only goes against political imperatives such as the need to confront People's Republic of China (PRC) gray zone warfare incursions, but also against *institutional* history, culture, and structure. These are very real institutional and political concerns that are difficult to address simply via exhortations for Taiwan to get “serious” about defense. In the United States, for instance, it took two wars (the Vietnam War and the invasion of Grenada) as well as the very public botching of the 1980 Iranian hostage rescue mission to act as a catalyst to partially overcome inter-service rivalry with the [Goldwater-Nichols Act](#).

The Historical Legacy of Security Cooperation Without Coordination

The second historical legacy of US-Taiwan security cooperation is that of the strategic-level [restrained alliance](#) up to 1979; and after 1979, the *restrained partnership*. Even in the era of the Mutual Defense Treaty,



Images: The ROCAF (中華民國空軍) celebration of the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the US American Volunteer Group (the Flying Tigers, 飛虎隊). The public and private attention that the ROCAF gives to the Flying Tigers is a testament to how the legacy of US security cooperation permeates the institutional history and culture of the Taiwan military, given that the Flying Tigers predates US security cooperation in Taiwan by a decade. (Source: [ROCAF Facebook page](#))

differences between the strategic goals of the US (Taiwan as a defensive bulwark against Communist China) and Taiwan [reclamation of the mainland, as planned for in “[Project National Glory](#)” (國光計劃)] meant [certain limits on operational coordination](#). This dropped to zero coordination following the US transfer of diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, with limited US Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to Taiwan throughout the 1980s.

Following the Tiananmen Square massacre (六四天安門事件) and the end of the Cold War, the George H.W. Bush administration restarted FMS on its current basis: roughly 6-8 notifications a year, with notable declines in 2003-2006 and 2012-2014.

As the dates of those exceptions imply, a significant number of factors played a role in FMS to Taiwan: the US relationship with the PRC (2003-2006 was the era of the US/PRC talk of cooperation In the Global War

on Terror; 2012-2014 was the era of the attempted US “reset” in relations with the PRC), [US administration perceptions of Taiwan’s political leadership](#), and

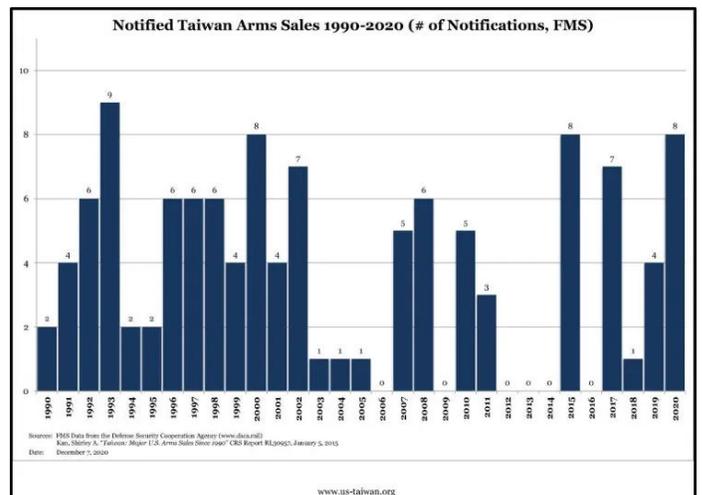


Image: Number of US notifications of arms sales to Taiwan, 1990-2020. (Source: [US-Taiwan Business Council](#).)

Taiwanese political approval of special defense budgeting. All of these factors had enormous and largely deleterious effects in how the US conducted security cooperation with Taiwan, and how Taiwan conducted its own defense reform. While the vastly increased PRC threat over the last decade has driven US arms sales to Taiwan to new heights, the level of overall coordination between the two sides has remained relatively low, with relatively few venues outside the strategic-level Monterey Talks (which were in any case originally designed to [avoid discussion of arms sales](#)).

Recommendations for an Improved US-Taiwan Security Relationship

The factors considered in this and my [prior piece](#) indicate several ways forward to optimize US-Taiwan security cooperation.

1. *Establish and prioritize closer strategic coordination, operational defense planning, and defense acquisition ties between the US and Taiwan.*

In US Defense Security Cooperation Agency FMS announcements, [there is a standard line](#): “The proposed sale of this equipment and support will not alter the basic military balance in the region.” This is ironically true for FMS to Taiwan, which can be slow and irregular to the point that it cannot keep up with the scale of PRC military modernization. US FMS tends to treat Taiwan as a “standard” defense partner with substandard restrictions. This means that Taiwan FMS cases must go through [additional convoluted processes, at regular procedural handling speeds](#) despite INDOPACOM identifying the [defense of Taiwan as vital to US national security](#). This is worsened by the fact that even after the Department of Defense process, Taiwan arms sales are [often not evaluated in a regular, consistent manner by the rest of the US government](#).

Moreover, security cooperation is typically executed on a somewhat *ad hoc* basis. US technical experts and FMS practitioners are often disconnected from Taiwan political-military expertise, an arrangement that often provides openings for defense contractors to provide both the US government as well as Taiwan with [contradictory advice](#). This begets constant delays in acquisitions and even basic maintenance, to the detriment of both conventional and asymmetric capabilities.

Thus, establishing a program of regular, institutionalized defense planning and acquisition discussions would allow the US and Taiwan to outline a common operating picture, coordinate and prioritize platform acquisition, and better understand how these capabilities fit into each other’s defense planning.

2. *Assist Taiwan with building both a viable stand-in as well as a standoff force.*

US pressure for asymmetry is driven by concerns that Taiwan platforms are not survivable given the expected PLA [Joint Firepower Strike](#) campaign. However, American concerns do not translate well in Taiwan due to the combination of domestic political and morale issues, the PRC gray zone offensive, and institutional resistance to a drastic military overhaul. One way to square the circle is for Taiwan to urgently acquire additional F-16Vs as a “stand-in force” to replace the Taiwan Air Force’s aging Mirage-2000s and Indigenous Defense Fighters (IDFs), both of which have [extremely high operating costs and are plagued with maintenance issues](#). This would allow Taiwan to more sustainably, selectively, and credibly respond to PLAAF incursions.

Additionally, the United States could offer the ROCAF’s ultimate dream—the F-35—contingent on the fulfillment of a number of provisions, such as ensuring that the F-35s are stationed in the United States for training, similar to how a number of [Taiwan F-16s are stationed at Luke AFB with the 21st Fighter Squadron](#). These F-35s could then operate as Taiwan’s “standoff force,” which would be invaluable given the expected significant rate of aircraft attrition in any high-end fight. Given the magnitude of this carrot, other provisos to the sale could then include ensuring adequate munitions stocks and investing in additional missiles, ground-based defense, electronic warfare capabilities, etc. This would be similar to how the US [sale of the M1A2T tanks to Taiwan was packaged with a separate, smaller sale of Stinger man-portable missiles](#), which allowed Taiwan to gain asymmetric capabilities while addressing military institutional concerns.

3. *Extend Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to Taiwan to complement existing FMS.*

Israel and its military are often held up as a [model for Taiwan](#); however, Israel is also the recipient of an annu-

al infusion of [USD \\$3.3 billion](#) in [FMF](#), which makes up roughly 15-20 percent of the Israeli defense budget. Offering Taiwan FMF assistance in conjunction with existing FMS would likely be the quickest way for Taiwan to gain asymmetric capabilities, and would provide the US with greater influence over the military reform process. Moreover, this would be a powerful way of refuting arguments that US security cooperation is designed to enrich the US at the expense of Taiwan.

Conclusion

Taiwan asymmetric military reform has been discussed exhaustively for years. However, differences in definitions of asymmetry and deterrence, institutional resistance from a military that has long seen the US military as the gold standard to replicate, and a lack of coordination in planning, have kept both reform and security cooperation from working at a maximum level of effectiveness. On a more strategic level, the dual nature of the PRC gray zone and invasion challenge precludes an either/or vision of Taiwan military reform. This vision is itself an artifact of the years when Taiwan was seen, at best, as just another security partner of the United States; and at worst, as an irritant in US-PRC relations. The nature of the threat has changed, and so must the US and Taiwan response.

The main point: For US assistance to Taiwan defense reform to be effective, the United States and Taiwan must be able to coordinate their efforts in a way that realistically and respectfully addresses the defense needs of both sides.

The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Future Stability in the Taiwan Strait

By: J. Michael Cole

J. Michael Cole is a senior non-resident fellow at the Global Taiwan Institute.

The “[fall](#)” of Afghanistan to the Taliban on August 15, with President Ashraf Ghani [fleeing the country](#) on the same day, will likely lead many analysts to conclude that the two-decades-long US-led effort in the country has ended in failure. For some, the reputational blow to the United States stemming from this “[complete](#)

[failure](#)” will have repercussions for other longstanding American security commitments, including Taiwan.

[Propagandists for the Chinese regime](#) will be encouraged to cultivate the view, already being spread in other circles, that the Biden Administration’s decision to leave Afghanistan should serve as a [warning](#) to countries like Taiwan not to rely too deeply on US security assistance. For them, no amount of reassurances by top US officials, including national security adviser [Jake Sullivan](#), will be sufficient to disabuse them of the belief that the US can no longer be counted on. Others, meanwhile, have claimed that the decision has left President Biden’s reputation [in tatters](#).

This view, however, is deeply flawed. For one thing, while US-led efforts at nation-building in Afghanistan can be said to have come [well short of stated objectives](#), the primary mission—one of counterterrorism, to erode al-Qaeda’s ability to use the territory to orchestrate and launch future terror attacks against the United States or its allies—has been [relatively successful](#). The Taliban, despite emerging victorious after 20 years of war, can nevertheless be expected to have learned a few lessons from allowing a global terrorist entity to use Afghanistan as a springboard for such activities, chief among them the costs to its ability to remain in power if ever the US military were once again compelled to unseat it.

What also needs to be said about the US experience in Afghanistan is that, despite the costs and much-less-than-optimal exit from the country, it has, for better or worse, demonstrated persistence. To argue that its decision to leave Afghanistan serves as a warning to countries like Taiwan that are dependent on its security guarantees to reduce their expectations is invidious: notwithstanding the results, the United States and its allies from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) stayed the course much longer than anyone had expected when the first US soldiers set foot on Afghan soil soon after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Not Isolationism, But Rebalancing

Rather than regard it as retrenchment and a return to an isolationist posture, the US pullout from Afghanistan should instead be regarded as the latest in a series of actions that aim to rebalance US strategy and

capabilities toward the region of utmost importance to the United States: the Indo-Pacific. Although the US presence in Afghanistan in recent years had drawn down considerably from a combat role to one of training and support to the Afghan security apparatus, that commitment nevertheless continued to sap resources and served as a distraction at a time when the US military and diplomatic apparatus needed to deepen its engagement with countries in the Indo-Pacific.

While instability in Afghanistan will continue to pose a modicum of threat to US and regional security, this is one that can nevertheless be managed by the United States and regional security partners. For the foreseeable future, though, Afghanistan will not represent the kind of threat that an assertive and increasingly authoritarian China poses to a region crucially important to the global economy and to the sustainment of the United States as a force for stability. The Taliban and other extremist groups in Afghanistan may threaten neighboring countries, but they do not represent an existential threat to the world order: China does, as do, to a lesser extent, North Korea, Iran, and Russia. (If, at some point in future, Afghanistan once again provides hospitality to organizations like al-Qaeda or ISIS that plan on launching attacks against the United States or its allies, then the response should be limited to counterterrorism while avoiding the quicksand of state-building.)

A rebalance was therefore in order, and it is, at long last, happening. Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency no longer have the primacy that they did during the first decade of the 21st century; the decision to remove US forces from Afghanistan is a recognition that priorities have changed, and that the United States can no longer, if it ever could, afford to remain deeply involved in Afghanistan while the world's second-largest economy was using that distraction (along with that of the United States' Iraq misadventure) to rearrange the chessboard to its advantage.

There is a high likelihood that Beijing will use the United States' exit from Afghanistan to exacerbate its propaganda against countries like Taiwan and Japan in a bid to cause apprehensions about the reliability and sustainability of US commitments. Through these, it will seek to fuel fears of abandonment with the hope that such perceptions will convince leaders to cut a

deal with China. Another element of Chinese propaganda will depict the withdrawal as an abject failure and another example of the weakness of the US-led order, no doubt to be contrasted with the infallibility of the alternative proposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).



Image: PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) (right) meets with Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (left) and other Taliban leaders in Tianjin on July 28. (Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China](#))

It is rather unlikely, however, that Beijing will believe its own rhetoric on the matter and regard the US pull-back as an indication that Washington has abandoned all of its commitments to its partners around the world—a conclusion which could, in turn, encourage the Chinese regime to engage in more risk-taking in the Indo-Pacific, perhaps even to initiate a campaign to annex Taiwan. This would constitute a highly risky miscalculation on Beijing's part, which has had plenty of opportunities over the past seven months of the Biden Administration to learn what its strategic outlook looks like. Still, to further reduce the risks of Beijing's miscalculation, the United States should do everything in its power to reaffirm its longstanding commitments to its allies and partners, including Taiwan. This would serve to reassure decision makers in those capitals (and US officials have already been [communicating](#) the ramifications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan), and to signal to Beijing, in no uncertain terms, that the time isn't ripe for destabilizing adventurism. In fact, with commitments to Afghanistan a thing of the past, the United States should from now on be more clear-

ly focused on its strategic posture and equipped with greater resolve to ensure stability in those areas that characterize its new geopolitical template.

China Next?

Mocking editorials and posturing notwithstanding, Beijing is not entirely in celebratory mode over the US' decision to leave Afghanistan. Despite the low-intensity warfare that continued over the years, the US presence nevertheless had a stabilizing effect on the country. That presence will be no more, and with that comes a return to uncertainty, radical rule, and the high likelihood of a re-fragmentation of Afghanistan as various competing militant organizations—of which the Taliban is just one among many—will have lost their focus of unity. [Extremist groups](#) that temporarily set their differences aside to combat a common external enemy—the United States plus ISAF—are expected to return to the status quo ante of violent rivalries.

For China, this means the potential for [greater instability spilling from Afghanistan into Central Asia](#) and greater mobility for extremist organizations—including radical elements who may be inclined to target the Chinese state due to its actions in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR, 新疆維吾爾自治區). Regional instability will in turn threaten China's ambitions surrounding its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, 一帶一路). It is not surprising, therefore, that weeks before the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, senior Chinese officials, including State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅), had held [meetings](#) with top Afghan Taliban officials, including the Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Beijing has also signaled its intention to play a greater role in the Afghan economy, from [reconstruction](#) to greater access to the [extractive industry](#). A more visible Chinese presence—presumably in collaboration with China's regional partner, Pakistan—will not only turn China into a new player in the [proxy contest between India and Pakistan](#) conducted in Afghanistan and the disputed Kashmir region, but also risks leading to a securitization of its civilian presence in Afghanistan if, and when, its own nationals become the objects of local discontent. Thus, what at the outset may look like a god-given opportunity for China to fill the vacuum left by the US/ISAF withdrawal by [cozying up to the Taliban](#) could turn into a distraction that saps Chinese capabilities—one that could require greater People's Libera-

tion Army (PLA, 中國人民解放軍) and People's Armed Police (PAP, 中國人民武裝警察部隊) forces along an increasingly unstable Central Asian border region.

Such an outcome would, in turn, reduce pressure on Taiwan and claimants in the East and South China Seas, as the Chinese will be unlikely to encourage the emergence of two simultaneous security contingencies on two separate fronts. As such, instability in Afghanistan, accompanied by a greater role for China in attempts to stabilize the country and its peripheries, could lead to greater stability in the Taiwan Strait, where only a major "provocation" would compel the Chinese regime to exacerbate tensions.

The main point: Portrayed as a defeat for two decades of US efforts in the war-ravaged country, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is instead a necessary strategic adjustment that will help Washington focus its attention and capabilities on the part of the world where a real existential threat to the world order has been reconfiguring the chessboard: the Indo-Pacific.

Taiwan's New Weapons Acquisitions and the Continuing Debate Over Defense Strategy

By: John Dotson

John Dotson is the deputy director of the Global Taiwan Institute and associate editor of the Global Taiwan Brief.

On August 4, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) [announced](#) the first official US arms sale to Taiwan of the Biden Administration: that of 40 M109A6 "Paladin" self-propelled howitzers, with an accompanying package of support vehicles and additional equipment, for an estimated cost of USD \$750 million. The purchase of the mobile artillery systems, following the announced USD \$2 billion dollar [purchase](#) of 108 M1A2T Abrams Tanks in 2019, represents another significant addition to the order of battle of the Republic of China (ROC) Army. Per a [statement](#) from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部), the howitzers "should help improve the rapid response and fire support capabilities of Taiwan's ground forces and build up our defensive capabilities." The traditionally pro-Pan Green *Taipei Times* [praised](#)

[the sale](#) as a sign of continuing US engagement with Taiwan, commenting that “The good news is that fears of a return to the past practice of piecemeal weapons sales, begrudgingly approved by Washington [...] have been unfounded.”

By contrast, the announced arms sale drew swift and predictable condemnation from state outlets of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The nationalist *Global Times* [asserted](#) that “the Biden administration is doggedly playing the ‘Taiwan card,’” and that “the arms sales were a vicious provocation and in line with US strategy to create trouble for China.” On August 6, the more official *People’s Daily* [editorialized](#) that the sale was a “dangerous provocation” that “cast another ominous shadow over relations” between the United States and China, and which “lays bare Washington’s ill intent to contain China’s development.” The next day, *People’s Daily* followed up with further [commentary](#) blaming Taiwan’s government for misallocated priorities, claiming that voices in Taiwan “cry out to the Democratic Progressive Party, ‘Taiwan needs vaccines not weapons’” (“臺灣要的是疫苗不是武器”).

This most recent arms sale, like nearly all of Taiwan’s defense acquisition programs, is sure to be controversial—not only in regard to the inevitable harsh reaction from the PRC, but also in terms of the continuing debate over Taiwan’s defense priorities. The purchase of the Paladin howitzers takes place amid other continuing weapons acquisition and development programs—for all of Taiwan’s military services—that demonstrate ongoing, and sometimes conflicting, priorities for Taiwan’s force structure and defense posture.

Taiwan’s Weapons Testing and Acquisitions in Other Areas

Although foreign press coverage of Taiwan defense issues often focuses on weapons purchases from the United States, the MND is also engaged in supporting a range of domestic research and development (R&D) programs. (Of note, an unnamed MND official reportedly stated to the press in mid-August that a [shortage of technical experts](#) was impeding progress in Taiwan’s military R&D programs.) Many of these programs are centered around the production of [indigenously-produced missile systems](#), which are critical platforms for Taiwan’s defense in all three physical warfare domains.

In April, [technicians conducted a series of test launches](#) at Jiupeng Military Base (九鵬基地)—a [major site for weapons testing](#) located near the southern tip of Taiwan—which reportedly included a high-altitude test launch of a *Hsiung Feng-II* (雄風-2) anti-ship missile, as well as the launch of a *Tien Kung-III* (天弓) surface-to-air missile. Press reporting in early August indicated that the National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology (NCIST, 國家中山科學研究院) in Taoyuan, [Taiwan’s primary R&D center for indigenous weapons systems](#), planned to conduct further unspecified [missile testing](#) at Jiupeng. Also in early August, the Taiwan Coast Guard Administration [announced](#) plans for live-fire exercises between September 5-12 on Pratas (東沙) Island, which press reporting indicated would be for tests of the indigenously-developed, shoulder-fired Kestrel anti-armor rocket (紅隼反甲火箭) system.



Image: A still image from news video of an unidentified missile test launch in southern Taiwan on April 23, 2021. (Source: [TITV News](#))

The ROC Navy (ROCN) has also been the recent recipient of indigenously-built systems with the commissioning in April of the 10,600 ton [transport dock Yushan](#) (玉山), a ship reportedly intended for amphibious support of Taiwan’s outlying islands, and potential disaster relief operations in peacetime. In late July, the ROCN [took delivery](#) of *Ta Chiang* (塔江) (PGG-619), the first of six planned improved *Tuo Chiang* (沱江)-class fast missile corvettes—vessels with catamaran hulls and a low radar cross-section (RCS) design for greater stealth, and armed with indigenous *Hsiung Feng II* and III anti-ship missiles—intended to provide the navy with more maneuverable and survivable platforms for naval warfare.

However, the delivery of the new *Tuo Chiang* corvette was quickly followed by the announcement in early

August of the [cancellation](#) of another NTD \$31.6 billion (USD \$1.14 billion) R&D program intended to produce up to 60 smaller missile craft, a program first [initiated in 2018](#).



Image: The ROC Navy ship *Ta Chiang* (塔江) (PGG-619), during a ceremony for the launching of the vessel in December 2020. (Source: [Formosa Television](#))

Continuing Debates Over Force Structure and Defense Strategy: “The Overall Defense Concept” vs. “Multi-Domain Deterrence”

These new weapons acquisitions will inevitably play into ongoing debates about Taiwan’s military force structure, and its connection to overall defense strategy. During the tenure of former ROC Chief of General Staff Admiral Lee Hsi-ming (李喜明) (2017-2019), the “[Overall Defense Concept](#)” (ODC, 整體防禦概念) was advanced as a vision for Taiwan’s defense. The ODC emphasized force preservation; a primary focus on warfare in the littoral area (the sea lane approaches to, and the landing beaches of, Taiwan); and asymmetric capabilities intended to compensate for the ROC military’s ever-increasing resource disadvantages vis-à-vis China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The latter idea called for an increasing focus on smaller, dispersible, and more maneuverable platforms—and implicitly, less emphasis on bigger-ticket systems that would be less survivable in the face of a sustained PLA strike campaign.

However, the 2021 edition of Taiwan’s *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR, 四年期國防總檢討) (English [here](#), Chinese [here](#)) makes no mention of the ODC, a likely sign that it has fallen out of official favor. Instead, the 2021 QDR offers the more traditional (and somewhat vague) concept of “Resolute Defense and

Multi-Domain Deterrence” (防衛固守·重層嚇阻). In the English edition, “resolute defense” is explained as “ensur[ing] the security of our [command and control] nodes, critical assets, and critical information infrastructure, and improv[ing] our force protection and preservation.” The second half of the equation, “multi-domain deterrence,” will employ “joint capabilities to deter the enemy’s aggression [...] If the enemy launched [an] attack to invade Taiwan, our guiding principles [are] to ‘resist the enemy on the opposite shore, attack it at sea, destroy it in the littoral area, and annihilate it on the beachhead’ [...] so as to ultimately defeat its aggression.”

This ambitious formula for “multi-domain deterrence” has [garnered criticism](#) among some US-based commentators on grounds that, in the event of an invasion or other major military campaign directed against Taiwan, it commits the ROC military to a symmetric, force-on-force confrontation with a PLA in possession of vastly greater resources. On these grounds, the announced Paladin deal has been [harshly criticized](#) as “stark proof that far from undertaking long overdue defense reforms with a sense of existential urgency, Taiwan is acting like it is business as usual.”

Speaking before the San Francisco Area Taiwan Chamber of Commerce on July 31, AIT Chairman James Moriarty [stated](#) that:

“Taiwan needs defense in depth. Taiwan needs truly asymmetric capabilities and strong reserve forces. But as arms sales have become regularized and increasing in scope and dollar amounts, Taiwan’s focus and direction seem to be shifting back to conventional, large-scale platforms. [...] Taiwan’s 2021 [QDR] seemingly abandoned the previous, well-received Overall Defense Concept. The QDR instead championed long-range strike, local air superiority, and controlling sea-lanes of communication – all concepts seemingly focused on a traditional, conventional battle rather than an asymmetric defense for a struggle Taiwan cannot afford to lose. Returning to those systems which are mobile, survivable, and lethal [...] is a real and urgent course correction.”

Ironically, the PRC’s nationalist *Global Times* expressed the concerns of some critics regarding recent arms

sales when it [editorialized](#) that “Self-propelled howitzers cannot play their intended role when the armed forces on the island of Taiwan cannot seize air superiority or control the sea, as they will only become live targets of the PLA if they are deployed into the front-line or coastal positions in a potential war.”

Calls for Increasing Long-Range Strike Capabilities

The 2021 QDR was also noteworthy for the apparently increased emphasis placed upon long-range strike (遠程打擊) operations capable of hitting targets at extended ranges—including, potentially, targets on the coastline or even deeper inland in the PRC. As the first of six identified areas for force building, the document [describes long-range strike](#) thusly: “Air-launched missiles with highly extended range and stand-off attack weapon systems are to be developed to inflict precision strike against the enemy, stretch out the depth of strategic defensive operations, and conduct the multi-domain deterrence.”

Taiwan’s [recent missile development and acquisitions programs](#) have indeed indicated a further allocation of resources towards longer-range strike weapons. In October 2020, DSCA announced the intended sale to Taiwan of 135 [AGM-84H Standoff Land Attack Missile Expanded Response \(SLAM-ER\) Missiles](#) (an air-launched missile intended for long-distance strikes against ground and/or surface targets) and related equipment, for an estimated cost of USD \$1.008 billion. Additionally, in April a senior MND official indicated in [testimony](#) to the Legislative Yuan that Taiwan was seeking to purchase an undetermined number of AGM-158 Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSM) from the United States.

In terms of ground-based systems, the October 2020 arms sales included a package of 11 [High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems](#) (HIMARS) systems (a vehicle-mounted system intended for strikes against ground targets), with associated munitions and support equipment, for an estimated cost of USD \$436.1 million. HIMARS is capable of launching the [Army Tactical Missile System \(ATACMS\)](#), a surface-to-surface missile with a range of up to 300 kilometers. Although the M109A6 Paladin howitzers in the most recent announced sale have a [standard range of 30 kilometers](#)—far too short to range the Taiwan Strait, or targets far off-shore—the

ROC Army Command issued a [statement](#) that the purchase “is obviously helpful to improve the effectiveness of ‘long-range and precise’ strikes.”

Conclusion

Some observable recent trends in Taiwan’s weapons acquisitions—notably, the Paladin howitzer purchase, and the cancellation of the small missile boat R&D program—would seem to indicate that the asymmetrical approach advocated by the ODC has indeed fallen out of favor, with an attendant return towards a focus on more traditional conventional weapons platforms. Other programs seem to split the difference—such as the *Tuo Chiang* missile catamaran, which offers a smaller-to-mid size naval vessel with greater mobility and a lower radar signature than larger surface combatants. Finally, trends in missile development and acquisition signal that planners at the MND are forging ahead in seeking longer-range strike capabilities, in the expectation that this would complicate PLA force protection concerns and enhance “multi-domain deterrence” in the event of a conflict.

This is likely to lead to continuing debates both within Taiwan defense circles, as well as among commentators and Taiwan’s defense interlocutors in the United States. US defense analysts generally responded positively to the Overall Defense Concept and its focus on asymmetrical capabilities, while remaining [skeptical of the value of larger weapons platforms](#) (even as defense contractors and Congressional districts have benefited from big-ticket sales, leading to potential charges of US hypocrisy on the issue). Political factors may also play a significant role in Taiwan, with domestic public opinion and [bureaucratic politics among the military services](#) playing a significant role in arms acquisition. Military force structure planning should be connected to a coherent vision of defense strategy; as revealed by recent weapons acquisition decisions, Taiwan’s MND appears to be leaning away from asymmetry, and towards a more conservative and traditional direction.

The main point: Recent trends in Taiwan’s weapons acquisitions suggest that the Overall Defense Concept has fallen out of official favor, and that the MND is leaning towards more traditional conventional weapons platforms.

Party-to-Party Dialogue between Taiwan and Japan Points the Way to Closer Security Ties

By: Michael Mazza

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Back in February, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) [announced](#) the formation of a "Taiwan project team" to explore how Japan could more deeply engage in contributing to security in the Taiwan Strait. Now, that team is transitioning from brainstorming to the action phase of this project. Last week, the *Japan Times* [reported](#) that the LDP and Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) will hold security talks in the coming weeks. Sources told the *Japan Times* that those consultations "are being regarded as the ruling party version of 'two-plus-two' security dialogue between governments." The news of these forthcoming talks follows closely on the heels of Japan's annual defense white paper—which for the first time explicitly raised concerns about security developments surrounding Taiwan—and of the first US-Japan-Taiwan trilateral strategy forum, which was held amongst legislators in July. [Internationalization](#) of security in the Taiwan Strait, it seems, is proceeding apace.

Upgrading party-to-party talks in this way is a creative means to deepen bilateral engagement without running afoul of [Tokyo's "One-China Policy"](#)—which is broadly similar to Washington's own, but which has generally led to a Japanese approach that is more cautious than that of the United States. What is more, party talks have the potential to be particularly effective due to the nature of the parliamentary and pseudo-parliamentary systems in Japan and Taiwan, respectively. Party officials tasked with foreign and defense affairs in Japan and Taiwan are more likely to have experience working in relevant government ministries than is the case for party counterparts in the United States.

This intraparty dialogue will be important for three reasons: 1) practical outcomes, 2) providing a model for others, and 3) opening a path for future engagement.

Practical Outcomes

There is much room for growth in Japan-Taiwan security relations, but the ruling parties need not shoot for the stars in this inaugural dialogue. Indeed, immediate outcomes may be limited by the lack of government participation. Assuming, however, that both parties have been offered guidance by their respective governments, there is some low-hanging fruit that they might seek to pick.

First, the delegations should agree to look into opening each country's military academy to applicants or exchange students. This should be relatively non-controversial. Future Taiwanese officers have attended US service academies for the last two decades, without significant blowback from Beijing for either Taipei or Washington. Such exchanges may not have a near-term effect on security, but there are benefits over the long-term. Parochially, the Japanese and Taiwanese militaries benefit when officers have had diverse educational and training experiences. Such officers may turn out to be more effective leaders and better problem solvers, more readily able to handle a diverse array of challenges.

More pertinent to the question of Japan-Taiwan security cooperation, however, is the potential effect that mutual education exchanges could have on their respective militaries' capacity to cooperate one day in the future. Exchange students will develop both personal relationships and an understanding of how their counterparts think and operate. Exchanges may also create constituencies within each military—and within security establishments more broadly, as some officers retire and take on civilian roles—for closer bilateral cooperation.

Second, the LDP and DPP should discuss cooperation on countering malign influence. Indeed, they might consider launching a new intra-party initiative, absent direct government involvement, that could nonetheless have broader positive effects within each society. As GTI Executive Director Russell Hsiao has [noted](#), the US Defense Intelligence Agency's 2019 report on Chinese military power noted China's use of "political warfare" against Taiwan *and* Japan. In his survey of CCP influence operations in Japan, Hsiao identified a number of united front-related organizations operating in the

country and highlighted political factions susceptible to “elite capture” both within and outside the LDP coalition. Taiwan, for its part, has ample experience with CCP influence operations, including during [recent election cycles](#). Ongoing party-to-party exchanges regarding their experiences with influence operations—with a focus on sharing observed methods and effective counters—could better equip both the LDP and DPP as they face down political warfare going forward.

Third, and perhaps more controversially, the LDP and DPP should commit to urging their respective governments to pursue intelligence sharing—in particular with regard to monitoring the waters of, and skies above, the East China Sea and areas surrounding Taiwan. This may ultimately be tricky to accomplish, given Japan’s “One-China Policy” and concerns in both capitals over Chinese reprisals. The [practice](#) of Japanese-South Korean information sharing that preceded the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), however, may provide a useful model. Before the GSOMIA was agreed, Seoul and Tokyo shared intelligence with each other using the United States as a middleman. A similar arrangement should be within the realm of the possible for Tokyo and Taipei as well. The forthcoming party dialogue offers an opportunity to begin that discussion.

A Model for Others

These talks should provide a paradigm for other countries seeking to invest more deeply in ties with Taiwan. If there are positive outcomes, if the United States openly supports the effort, and if PRC backlash is manageable, there is little reason others cannot follow suit. Australia and India, which both have parliamentary systems, should find this model of engagement attractive, as should a number of European countries looking to contribute to security in the Taiwan Strait.

Exchanges on countering political warfare may be good places to start, as they can proceed even without eventual government involvement. Moreover, because malign CCP influence is increasingly seen as something approaching a universal problem, there may be an opportunity to grow bilateral party-to-party dialogues into multilateral efforts. Thinking creatively over the long-term, the DPP, the KMT, and international parties engaged in dialogue with them might consider wheth-

er the creation of a non-governmental, party-funded political warfare intelligence “fusion center” is a feasible goal. Participating parties could share observed CCP tactics (details on politically sensitive cases could be omitted) and effective defensive approaches with such a center, creating a database for all to draw on and learn from.

The LDP-DPP talks are a creative way to build a foundation for better, more developed security ties. The dialogue will, with any luck, serve as a model for others and open the door to other creative solutions to lessen Taiwan’s diplomatic isolation.

Future Bilateral Engagement

Although party-to-party dialogues cannot replace government-to-government talks, they can be a valuable complement. Hopefully, Japanese and Taiwanese government and party officials view the upcoming meeting as something on which to build more robust bilateral engagement. Indeed, if the dialogue goes well and both sides view it as a sustainable model going forward, it should pave the way for official engagements that still maintain an unofficial veneer.

Beijing itself, of course, set a precedent for such contacts. In November 2015, Xi Jinping and Taiwan’s then-President Ma Ying-jeou [met](#) in Singapore, the first time that the political leaders of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China had met. They did not, however, meet as government leaders. Referring to each other as “mister,” neither recognized the other’s role as a head of state. It was Xi, then, who opened the door to all manner of possible foreign engagement for Taiwan. Taiwan’s foreign partners have yet to walk through that door, but perhaps they one day will. If Xi could meet with Ma without recognizing Taiwan’s statehood and if members of the LDP and DPP can meet to discuss security matters, there’s little reason that senior party leaders—say, Yoshihida Suga and Tsai Ing-wen—cannot engage directly with one another.

Even if that remains a bridge too far for now, there are other approaches Japan and Taiwan might consider. For example, once President Tsai again begins traveling for meetings with diplomatic allies, perhaps she could transit Japan as she makes her roundabout way to the South Pacific or to the Americas. Transits through the United States have long been a staple of overseas trav-

el for Taiwanese presidents, providing opportunities for them to meet with legislators and administration officials, to advance economic relations, and to gather with overseas Taiwanese communities. Similar opportunities abound in Japan, if only Tokyo and Taipei can seize them.

The main point: The forthcoming LDP-DPP intraparty security dialogue will be important for three reasons: 1) practical outcomes, 2) providing a model for others, and 3) opening a path for future engagement.