Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

CONFRONTATION IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT

As bodies of water go, the Taiwan Strait is not the most impressive. Barely 100 miles wide at its narrowest point, no oil or mineral wealth lies below it, no fairy-tale castles of coral attract tourists to swim among a flashing rainbow of colorful tropical fish. This is a workaday stretch of the Pacific, where fishermen reel out their nets and commercial shipping goes on its prosaic way.

Yet as the new century dawns, the Taiwan Strait is the locus of one of the world’s most dangerous flashpoints. Two entities share the name of “China”: one, the most populous country in the world, is a gargantuan and unique hybrid of Communist ideology and capitalist appetite, while the other is a tiny island republic of great wealth and uncertain international status. And across the narrow barrier of the Taiwan Strait, these two powers—the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC)—stare at each other.¹

For the leadership in Beijing, Taiwan is a rebellious province whose ultimate destiny must be political and economic unification with the mainland. In Taipei, meanwhile, the ROC government neither races toward reunion nor utterly forswears it but embraces instead an uneasy status quo. Both sides manage a delicate balancing act, jug-

¹This may be a good moment to dispose of an issue that might otherwise plague this discussion. For purposes of this paper, the name “China” by itself refers to the PRC; the parallel term for the ROC will be “Taiwan.” This is simply a matter of terminological convenience.
gling concession and confrontation, striving to advance their respective positions in the face of their mutual distrust. Neither side seems anxious to resort to arms to resolve the question of Taiwan’s status once and for all, but both are aware that such a confrontation could come to pass. Indeed, Beijing has a disquieting tendency to rattle its saber on those occasions when the Taipei government behaves in ways the Communist leadership finds offensive.

THE U.S. ROLE

The United States plays an interesting role in this pas de deux, part observer and part participant. For 30 years after 1949, it was Taiwan’s principal patron, maintaining a mutual defense treaty with the ROC. When the late 1970s brought a “normalization” of relations between Washington and Beijing, this era of close cooperation ended. Since 1979, the U.S. government has maintained a calculated ambiguity in its policy toward the deadlock over Taiwan’s status. While recognizing Beijing as “China” and forswearing formal diplomatic ties with the ROC, the Taiwan Relations Act enjoins Washington to “enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.”² Each successive administration, whether Democratic or Republican, has stated repeatedly that it opposed any attempt by the mainland to effect unification by force but would support any peaceful resolution to the standoff that was mutually agreeable to the two principals.

For more than 15 years, this policy worked well. The tensions between China and Taiwan sat in the background of U.S. foreign policy concerns, overshadowed by the final struggles of the Cold War and the birth pangs of the era that emerged from the ashes of that long confrontation. In the waning years of the East-West confrontation, China was seen as a potential strategic partner against Soviet expansionism in Asia. After the USSR’s collapse, China was viewed by many as either an emerging economic powerhouse or an authoritarian human-rights abuser. To the extent that Taiwan entered U.S. calculations at all, it was as a dynamic “Asian tiger” or a “newly

²U.S. Congress, 96th Congress, 1st Session, Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96-8, section 3(a). The full text of the TRA can be found at several locations on the Web, including: http://ait.org.tw/ait/tra.html.
industrialized country,” albeit one without a recognized state to represent it on the international scene.

This relative calm was disturbed in the early 1990s when Beijing grew agitated over the rise of pro-independence political sentiments on Taiwan and the U.S. agreement to sell 150 F-16 fighters to Taipei. These simmering tensions erupted dramatically in March 1996, when, in an attempt to influence Taiwan’s forthcoming presidential elections, China launched four short-range DF-15 ballistic missiles—nuclear-capable delivery vehicles—into open-ocean target areas near the island nation’s two largest ports, Keelung and Kaohsiung.3 The United States responded by deploying first one then two carrier battle groups (CVBGs) into the waters around Taiwan, though not into the strait itself. According to one commentator, “This was the largest U.S. show of force directed at China since the Straits crises of the 1950s.” (Fisher, 1997, p. 178.)

While U.S. declaratory policy has not changed since these events, many observers believe that the “missile crisis” proved a turning point of sorts in Washington’s perceptions of and commitment to Taiwan. The clumsiness of China’s attempted coercion, contrasted with the peaceful democratic process playing out in Taiwan, undoubtedly elevated the latter’s status in the eyes of many Americans and may have measurably increased the likelihood of U.S. intervention in the event of an armed clash between Beijing and Taipei. Taiwan’s security situation has certainly gained new visibility in Washington, where, particularly on Capitol Hill, concerns have been raised about whether the United States is doing enough to ensure the island’s self-defense capabilities.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. military planning has centered around two near-simultaneous major theater wars (MTWs), usually scenarios in the Persian Gulf and on the Korean peninsula. This focus, combined with the lack of any defense arrangements with or

3China has also conducted missile tests the previous July in apparent reaction to then-Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui’s “private” visit to his U.S. alma mater, Cornell University.
pertaining to Taiwan, means that little if any formal planning has been done on how the United States might support the ROC in the event of war with the mainland. What might such a conflict look like? What are the keys to a successful defense of Taiwan? What might the United States do both before and during such a crisis to help promote Taiwan’s security?4

This report documents a project that examined the military dimensions of the confrontation between China and Taiwan. Using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative analysis, we have done two things:

- Identified a handful of issues that appear crucial in helping Taiwan maintain an adequate defensive posture vis à vis the PRC, and
- Developed a set of recommendations for steps the United States might take to assist Taipei in dealing with those issues.

We do not claim our list is exhaustive; neither do we claim to have performed the definitive analysis of the China-Taiwan strategic equation.5 However, we do believe that our analysis has pointed toward several very strong conclusions that should be accounted for in future U.S.-Taiwan security discussions.

**STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT**

In the next chapter, we describe the scenario we used as a focusing mechanism for our analysis, our general approach, and our overall findings. Chapter Three is organized around seven issues that we assess as critical to Taiwan’s near-term defense capabilities. We pre-

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4The analysis in this paper is limited to conventional warfare and does not assess the possible impacts of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons in a China-Taiwan clash.
5That this report focuses on military issues should not be interpreted as suggesting that the crux of the China-Taiwan issue is military; neither do the authors believe that military means are the only or even the most likely way of resolving the dispute. Our given task has been to examine the balance of power across the strait, not to document, explicate, or predict the complex political dynamics at the heart of the differences between Taipei and Beijing. We recognize that a strongly deterrent Taiwanese posture is only one part—albeit a vital one—of the equation for maintaining peace and stability on the strait and in East Asia.
sent our recommendations for U.S. policy in Chapter Four along with some brief concluding remarks.

This report includes two appendices. The first contains some thoughts regarding the Chinese missile threat to Taiwan, and the second details the methods and assumptions used in our analytic modeling. A list of references is also attached.