

Managing Trade-offs Between Military Aid for Taiwan and Ukraine

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. must prioritize deterring China, including by sending weapons to Taiwan first if it cannot meet Taiwanese and Ukrainian requirements at the same time.

The U.S. can reduce trade-offs between Taiwan and Ukraine through industrial expansion, foreign military sales reforms, and increased reliance on European allies.

Taiwan must strengthen its own defenses, including by raising defense spending, prioritizing asymmetric defense capabilities, and accelerating defense reforms.

The Trump and Biden Administrations rightly identified China as the greatest threat to American interests.¹ Beijing seeks hegemony in the Indo-Pacific: If it succeeds, it will have dire implications for American security, prosperity, and freedom.² No other country poses a threat of this magnitude to U.S. interests. As a result, the United States should prioritize denying Beijing's hegemonic ambitions, even if this means doing less in other regions.

Arm Taiwan to Deter China

Key to denying Beijing's ambitions is preventing it from being able to use military force to subdue its neighbors. Most urgently, this requires strengthening deterrence against a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, which the Department of Defense has identified as its

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“pacing scenario.”³ Critical to this effort is doing everything in America’s power to arm Taiwan with the weapons it requires to defend itself.

Of particular importance are the asymmetric defense capabilities that Taiwan requires to delay, degrade, and destroy a Chinese invasion force, such as mobile anti-ship missiles, air and missile defenses, anti-armor weapons, and their enablers.⁴ If Taiwan’s defenders can blunt an initial invasion, it will be far harder for China to seize the island. This contributes to deterrence-by-denial by helping to convince Chinese leaders that any attempt to invade Taiwan will fail—and Beijing is therefore better off not trying in the first place.⁵

But the United States has limited time to arm Taiwan. According to CIA Director William Burns, Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping directed China’s military to be ready to take Taiwan by 2027.⁶ U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said similarly that China plans to take Taiwan “on a much faster timeline” than previously thought.⁷ As a result, the United States must accelerate efforts to provide arms to Taiwan if it is to maximize its ability to deter China during the next several years. This means making available to Taiwan the weapons it needs as quickly as possible so Taiwanese forces have sufficient time for training and fielding new equipment. Taiwan must also stockpile weapons so it can keep fighting if a blockade cuts off resupply.

Importantly, China’s military has grown powerful enough that U.S. policymakers should now plan for Chinese forces to make landfall during an invasion.⁸ Taiwan’s ground forces will be required to confront them on the island if they do. They can also use long-range fires like the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) to destroy Chinese troops as they muster in the Chinese mainland, approach Taiwan’s shores, and make landfall. Well-armed Taiwanese ground forces are therefore key to maximize the U.S. and Taiwan’s collective ability to deter or, if necessary, defeat a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

Finally, providing weapons to Taiwan is critical for deterrence, but it is only part of the solution. Taiwan must also redouble efforts to strengthen its own defenses, including by raising defense spending; prioritizing acquisition of the asymmetric defense capabilities required to defeat a Chinese invasion; and accelerating defense reforms, such as modernization of Taiwan’s reserve forces.⁹ If Taiwan does not do these things, it may be very difficult or impossible for the United States to deny a Chinese invasion on its own, and deterrence will suffer as a result.

Taiwan bears first responsibility for its own defense and must act accordingly, not least so it can put weapons sent by the United States to the best possible use.

Navigating Taiwan–Ukraine Trade-offs

A key challenge facing U.S. policymakers is that Taiwan and Ukraine require many of the same weapons to defend themselves. Despite increasing risk of conflict in Asia, Washington has thus far prioritized sending weapons to Ukraine. But this has significantly reduced U.S. stockpiles¹⁰ and delayed the U.S. ability to provide arms to Taiwan.

Such delays undercut deterrence against China by preventing Taiwan from fielding weapons quickly enough to keep pace with China’s military buildup. They also create risks for U.S. forces who may be called to Taiwan’s defense. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs testified, arming Taiwan reduces operational risk to U.S. forces in the region.¹¹ Well-armed Taiwanese defenders can neutralize Chinese forces, for instance, before they fire on American servicemembers.

Trade-offs between Taiwan and Ukraine occur when U.S. weapons inventories are insufficient to meet both parties’ requirements. In these cases, trade-offs will last until U.S. and allied defense industries can produce enough weapons for both parties, while also supplying U.S. forces. Washington should accelerate that process—not least since degrading Russian forces in Ukraine reduces Russia’s ability to threaten NATO—but it will take years to do so in many cases.¹² As a result, trade-offs are expected to persist.

In particular, Taiwan and Ukraine both require the following weapons, among others.¹³ Ukraine has used many of them to good effect at various stages of the ongoing war against Russia. Taiwan can also use them to delay, degrade, and destroy an invasion force, along the lines described below.

- **High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS).** Taiwan can use HIMARS launchers to fire ATACMS, Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) rockets, and potentially other weapons at Chinese ground and naval forces.
- **Army Tactical Missile System.** Taiwan can use ATACMS against stationary targets on land or at sea, such as Chinese vessels in port or offshore.
- **Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System.** Taiwan can use GMLRS rockets against stationary targets on land or at sea, such as Chinese forces on a beachhead or Chinese ships staged offshore.
- **National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS).** Taiwan can use NASAMS to destroy Chinese air force aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, and cruise missiles.

- **Patriot Air Defense System.** Taiwan can use Patriots to destroy Chinese air forces and incoming missiles.
- **Harpoon.** Taiwan can use ground-launched Harpoon anti-ship missiles against Chinese amphibious vessels and other warships.
- **Stinger.** Taiwan can use Stinger man-portable air defense systems to destroy Chinese air forces and disrupt Chinese air forces' ability to provide close air support, assault support, and other air operations in support of an invasion.
- **Javelin.** Taiwan can use Javelin anti-armor systems against Chinese ground forces. They may also be able to use Javelins against Chinese landing vessels and low- and slow-flying helicopters.
- **Tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).** Taiwan can use tactical UAVs to locate and destroy Chinese ground forces on Taiwan. They can also use tactical UAVs to target Chinese naval forces.

Recommendations

Washington should prioritize delivering weapons to Taiwan in cases in which the United States lacks sufficient weapons to meet Taiwanese and Ukrainian defense requirements at the same time. Doing so is necessary to maximize the U.S. ability to deter China during the next several years.

Washington can prioritize arming Taiwan by taking the following steps:

- **Use presidential drawdown authority to send weapons to Taiwan from U.S. stockpiles,** prioritizing Taiwan over Ukraine for weapons both parties require until Taiwan's requirements are met.
- **Move Taiwan to the front of the line for foreign military sales (FMS),** prioritizing Taiwan over Ukraine and other nations for weapons Taiwan requires until its requirements are met.¹⁴

At the same time, Washington can do the following to reduce trade-offs between Taiwan and Ukraine:

- **Increase U.S. weapons production to support U.S., allied, and partner requirements,** especially for a Taiwan contingency.

- **Support efforts to strengthen allied defense industries**, consistent with U.S. efforts to boost weapons production and incentivize greater burden sharing in Europe and the Indo–Pacific.
- **Raise pressure on NATO allies to increase military aid to Ukraine**, especially by prioritizing Taiwan for weapons both Ukraine and Taiwan require, thereby strengthening incentives for NATO allies to do more to ensure Ukraine has what it needs to fight.
- **Reform the FMS process**, to include speeding up delivery of weapons and ensuring such deliveries are aligned to America’s national defense objectives.

Finally, Washington must work closely with Taipei to ensure it is doing everything possible to strengthen its defenses, including raising defense spending to a level commensurate to the existential threat it faces, prioritizing acquisition of asymmetric defense capabilities, and accelerating necessary defense reforms.

Conclusion

The United States has a vested interest in preventing China from seizing control of Taiwan. The best way to do so is by deterring Beijing from invading in the first place. One of the most effective ways to strengthen deterrence in the near term is by doing everything in America’s power to arm Taiwan with the weapons it requires to defend itself. Unfortunately, many of those weapons are also needed in Ukraine.

When the United States is unable to meet Taiwanese and Ukrainian requirements at the same time, it must prioritize delivering weapons to Taiwan if it is to maximize the U.S. ability to deter China during the next several years. At the same time, the United States should take steps to reduce trade-offs as much as possible through a combination of industrial expansion, FMS reforms, and increased reliance on allies to support Ukraine’s defense. Finally, even as Washington sends weapons to Taiwan, it must ensure that Taipei takes other necessary steps to strengthen Taiwan’s defenses.

This approach is not without risks. Sending weapons to Taiwan that Ukraine also needs means accepting risk in the European theater until the United States and its allies can produce replacement armaments. During this time, Ukraine may find itself less able to sustain offensive operations

or prevent Russian forces from making gains. But prioritizing Ukraine at the expense of America's ability to arm Taiwan as quickly as possible also involves risk. Doing so not only means a higher risk of deterrence failure against China in the Indo-Pacific, it also means greater risk to American servicemembers who may be called to Taiwan's defense.

Given limited inventories and production capacity, the United States does not have the luxury of eliminating risks on both fronts. Instead, the United States must choose where to accept risk, consistent with American interests. Today, that means prioritizing delivery of weapons to Taiwan, while taking steps to prevent these kinds of trade-offs in the future, including greater reliance on NATO allies to defend Europe.

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Endnotes

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