

Mini Simulation

A Threat to Taiwan

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Overview

China is taking increasingly aggressive actions toward Taiwan. The independently governed island has long been a target of China, who vows to unify Taiwan with the mainland. Chinese leaders have even threatened to use force if necessary. If China decides to attack Taiwan, how should the United States respond?

Students will learn that tensions between China and Taiwan are entering a new and potentially consequential phase.

Students will learn that Taiwan maintains a unique status and that it holds importance for U.S. interests.

The Situation

Taiwan, formally known as the Republic of China, has been governed independently since 1949. In that year the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to the island after losing the Chinese [civil war](#) to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP, which established the People's Republic of China (PRC) that same year, views Taiwan as a renegade province. Today, Taiwan's status is a reminder to the CCP that its civil war remains unfinished. The PRC vows to bring Taiwan under its control, by force if necessary. The United States had supported the KMT during the civil war, but determined that it should cut its losses and was prepared to stand aside if the PRC attacked. That all changed with the Korean War, when the United States and China found themselves on opposing sides of the conflict. During the Korean War, the United States positioned aircraft carriers between Taiwan and the mainland. The United States went on to sign a defense treaty with Taiwan and send economic aid, effectively freezing the conflict and treating the KMT as a government in exile.

In the 1970s, as it became increasingly clear that the KMT would be unable to retake the mainland, international recognition turned in favor of Beijing. In 1971, the United Nations gave China's permanent seat on the Security Council to the PRC. The United States, seeking to capitalize on the ongoing split between China and the [Soviet Union](#), began to pursue diplomatic normalization with the PRC. In 1979, the United States granted China full diplomatic recognition, cutting official ties with Taiwan and repealing the defense treaty.

When the United States decided to break ties with Taiwan, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). This piece of legislation obligated the United States to provide Taiwan with defensive arms and to maintain the capacity to protect Taiwan. The TRA also requires Washington to consider any unpeaceful effort to determine Taiwan's future "of grave concern to the United States." The TRA, however, remained ambiguous about whether the United States would actually come to Taiwan's defense.

When the United States broke relations with Taiwan, the KMT ruled Taiwan with an iron fist. In the years since, however, Taiwan has peacefully transitioned into one of Asia's most vibrant democracies. It has become the ninth-largest U.S. trading partner and works with the United States on global issues such as public health, [supply chain](#) security, and women's rights. It also manufactures nearly all of the most advanced computer chips in the world. Moreover, Taiwan's geographic location helps keep China's military bottled up. Taiwan's physical location prevents China from posing an even more severe threat to U.S. allies such as Japan and the Philippines.

For four decades, the United States has maintained a policy of "strategic ambiguity." This policy entails the United

States' refusal to definitively state whether it would defend Taiwan against China. This policy both deters China and prevents Taiwan from recklessly pursuing independence. Ultimately, destabilizing behavior is constrained; neither side can be sure whether the United States will come to Taiwan's aid.

Today, however, the geopolitical dynamics are shifting. China now has the ability to fight a war with the United States over Taiwan. Signals from China point toward a more bellicose posture toward the island. Its tactics include increasingly aggressive military fly-bys, economic coercion, and diplomatic pressure. Some experts are concerned that a misstep—such as a collision between Chinese and Taiwanese jets—could spiral out of control. Moreover, Chinese President Xi Jinping has stated the question of Taiwan cannot continue to be passed down from generation to generation. This statement has demonstrated a sense of Chinese urgency to make progress on the issue.

Decision Point

The United States has been carefully monitoring the tense situation in the Taiwan Strait. Recent U.S. intelligence suggests that China is preparing for an invasion. Officials argue that the threat is so clear that the United States must either act now or risk not being able to prevent a forced Chinese takeover of Taiwan. The president has convened members of the National Security Council (NSC) for advice on whether and how to intervene.

NSC members should consider one of the following options:

- *Do nothing, signaling to China that the United States will not intervene.* Given the strength of the Chinese military, this option would likely result in China taking control of Taiwan. The United States could lose an important partner in the region. Moreover, U.S. allies could come to question America's reliability and become strategically autonomous. As a result, China's military reach and economic might could expand significantly. Chinese occupation of Taiwan would also see the collapse of a vibrant democracy. A successful invasion would force 24 million to live under the CCP's rule. By opting not to intervene, however, the United States would avoid involvement in what could be a deadly and expensive military conflict.
- *Impose economic and diplomatic sanctions on China.* This option would isolate China on the world stage and stifle its economy. However, it is important for policymakers to note that such actions would have economic repercussions for the United States and China's other trading partners as well. Such pressure could dissuade China from invading Taiwan and so avoid entangling U.S. forces in a conflict. China, however, could determine that any economic and diplomatic pain is worth it and invade Taiwan anyway.
- *Position the U.S. military to defend Taiwan.* This option would make it clear that the United States will defend Taiwan if China invades. The guarantee of U.S. involvement could dissuade China from attacking Taiwan. However, if China still goes forward with an invasion, the United States would find itself in a war with China.

[American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous](#) Foreign Affairs

[Taiwan's Status Is a Geopolitical Absurdity](#) Atlantic

[Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense](#) Council on Foreign Relations