

STRATEGIC ASYMMETRY IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT IN THE CONTEXT OF A TRANSACTIONAL APPROACH TO US FOREIGN POLICY

Ana Gabriela Pantea* 

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Abstract.

This article examines how a transactional approach to United States foreign policy reshapes strategic asymmetry and deterrence dynamics in the Taiwan Strait. While existing scholarship focuses primarily on military balances and operational feasibility, this study argues that the most consequential asymmetry is political rather than material. It provides a comprehensive examination of contemporary cross-strait security dynamics, focusing on the accelerated military modernization of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the evolving asymmetric defense strategy of the Republic of China (ROC), in the context of declining confidence in U.S. strategic ambiguity. By doing so, the study highlights the deepening strategic asymmetry that characterizes the current security environment. It further argues that this asymmetry has far-reaching consequences for regional stability and the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The erosion of confidence in long-standing U.S. strategic ambiguity raises concerns that Taiwan could be used as leverage in U.S.–China negotiations. Economically and

*Ana Gabriela Pantea is an associate professor in International Relations at the Faculty of European Studies, within Babeş-Bolyai University. Her academic interests include security in East Asia, competition between great powers, and comparing regional geopolitics. She has experience conducting research in qualitative policy analysis and strategic studies. In conflict zones, she is especially interested in how military power, diplomacy, and identity politics interact.

Email: ana.pantea@ubbcluj.ro.

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politically, the United States' increasingly trade-focused policy agenda significantly affects Taiwan. The weakening of Taiwan's so-called "silicon shield" demonstrates that transactionalism fundamentally reshapes the meaning of asymmetry in the Taiwan Strait by shifting deterrence from a credibility-based model toward a conditional and negotiable one.

Keywords: China; Taiwan; deterrence; military strategy; US transactionalism.

INTRODUCTION

The Taiwan Strait has emerged as one of the most challenging geopolitical flashpoints of the twenty-first century, shaped by China's expanding military power, Taiwan's resistance through asymmetric defence, and the ambiguous commitments of the United States. The changing nature of cross-strait relations reflects the consequences of overlapping and divergent interpretations of history, strategy, and ideology. China's goal of national rejuvenation frames Taiwan as an integral part of its sovereign territory that cannot be negotiated. This is backed up by extensive military modernisation in air, naval, missile, cyber, and space domains. The evolving dynamics of cross-strait relations reflect a complex intersection of historical legacies, strategic calculations, and competing political identities. China's pursuit of national rejuvenation positions Taiwan as a non-negotiable component of its sovereign territory, reinforced by extensive military modernization across air, naval, missile, cyber, and space domains¹. By contrast, Taiwan's asymmetric defense strategy, emphasizing mobility and survivability, seeks to deny China a rapid military victory. U.S. strategic ambiguity remains central to the deterrence balance, yet its credibility is increasingly contested in a changing international system.

China's military pressure on Taiwan has escalated dramatically in recent years, with large-scale air and naval drills and regular intrusions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ). These manoeuvres demonstrate Beijing's determination to deter Taiwanese independence and assert control over the Taiwan Strait.² These manoeuvres, which notably coincided with the inauguration of Taiwan's new president, Lai Ching-te, underscore Beijing's

¹ See Richard Bush, *At Cross Purposes: U.S.-Taiwan Relations Since 1942*, Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2004, p. 57.

² M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 214.

enduring objective of reunification with Taiwan. They function simultaneously as instruments of military deterrence and political coercion. Such developments contribute to a progressively unstable security climate in East Asia, challenging established international norms and eliciting heightened concern from both regional stakeholders and the broader international community.

Taiwan's defence policy emphasises the necessity of resilience and the capacity to impose enormous costs on any invading force, so deterring future aggression. The island's military modernisation initiatives are bolstered by strategic ties and defence cooperation with other countries, notably the US.³

As such, Taiwan's defense strategy has increasingly centered on asymmetric warfare, leveraging its geography to impose high operational costs on any invading force. The Overall Defense Concept (ODC) prioritizes survivability, rapid dispersal, and the deployment of mobile, concealed missile systems. While Taiwan cannot match China's military scale, it seeks to delay or deny a successful invasion through technology, layered defenses, and broader civilian mobilization. However, implementation of these reforms has been hindered by institutional resistance, entrenched service-branch preferences, and budgetary constraints, raising doubts about the overall credibility of Taiwan's deterrent posture. Some analysts argue that although Taiwan's capabilities are improving, their current scale may still be insufficient to deter a determined adversary—particularly one willing to absorb substantial costs for political or ideological objectives.⁴

The article asks how a transactional US foreign policy alters strategic asymmetry and deterrence stability in the Taiwan Strait. It argues that transactionalism transforms deterrence from a credibility-based commitment into a conditional and negotiable arrangement, privileging actors with greater cost tolerance and longer time horizons. In the Taiwan Strait, this structural shift advantages China, imposes disproportionate risk on Taiwan, and converts strategic ambiguity from a stabilizing device into a source of instability. The result is a deterrence environment increasingly vulnerable to coercion, misperception, and escalation.

³ Oriana Skylar Mastro, *The Taiwan Temptation*, *Foreign Affairs*, no. 4, 2021, pp. 38–40.

⁴ Heo Jaichul, *Twenty Years of One Country Two Systems in China: Evaluation and Future Prospects*, *Korea Institute for International Economic Policy*, 2021.

MILITARY ASYMMETRY BETWEEN CHINA AND TAIWAN

The military balance across the Taiwan Strait is defined by a pronounced disparity in size, resources, and capabilities between PRC and ROC. China's armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), have undergone extensive modernisation over the past two decades, transforming into one of the world's most formidable military forces. These reforms include the development of a blue-water navy, advanced missile systems, fifth-generation aircraft such as the J-20 stealth fighter, and enhanced space and cyber warfare capacities. The PLA Rocket Force has strengthened China's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) posture by targeting key U.S. and allied facilities across the Western Pacific.⁵

Taiwan's military, though professional and technologically capable, remains significantly smaller and more limited in scope. In response, Taiwan has adopted an asymmetric defence strategy that prioritises mobility, survivability, and precision over matching the PLA conventionally. This approach emphasises the acquisition of anti-ship cruise missiles (including the Hsiung Feng series), mobile coastal-defence platforms, smaller and more agile naval vessels, and an integrated air-defence network.⁶ Taiwan's Overall Defence Concept (ODC), developed in recent years, seeks to exploit Taiwan's geography and the operational challenges inherent in amphibious warfare to make any invasion prohibitively costly for Beijing.⁷

Strategically, both sides interpret military strength not solely in terms of deterrence but within broader national objectives. Military pressure on Taiwan is integral to Beijing's reunification strategy, which incorporates coercive signalling, psychological operations, and diplomatic marginalisation. Chinese defence white papers repeatedly stress that resolving the "Taiwan question" is essential to national rejuvenation, reflecting both ideological priorities and strategic imperatives.⁸

⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2023*. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2023/>

⁶ R.C. Bush, *op. cit.*

⁷ See Ministry of National Defense of ROC, Ministry of National Defense of ROC, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw>

⁸ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, White paper of Information Office of the State Council of the PRC. http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/node_7247532.html

Taiwan, in contrast, frames military preparedness as essential to defending its democratic identity and sovereignty. Its government has increased domestic arms production, strengthened civil-military resilience, and deepened security cooperation with partners such as the United States and Japan. Taiwan's emphasis on deterrence-by-denial—rather than deterrence-by-punishment—reflects both its geopolitical constraints and the need to maintain credibility without provoking escalation.⁹

This asymmetry in power has created a fragile equilibrium in which miscalculation could quickly spark conflict. Existing literature on cross-Strait deterrence highlights the volatility of this balance, driven by China's accelerating military modernisation, Taiwan's attempts at strategic hedging, and uncertainty regarding the reliability of external intervention.¹⁰

Since 1979, when the United States and the PRC normalized bilateral relations, cross-Strait stability has been maintained by a set of implicit understandings rooted in the “one China” framework.¹¹ Deterring Beijing requires convincing Chinese leaders that the costs of conquering Taiwan outweigh the benefits.¹² Deterrence depends on severity and credibility.¹³

During the Cold War, U.S. deterrence relied on overwhelming conventional superiority and treaty obligations to Taiwan.¹⁴ Today, China holds local military advantages, and questions remain over U.S. willingness to escalate, especially given China's nuclear second-strike capability.¹⁵

China's growing military capabilities do not merely alter the operational balance across the Strait; they function as instruments of political leverage by inflating the anticipated costs of third-party intervention. Under conditions of transactional deterrence, such cost inflation carries disproportionate strategic weight. When commitments are framed as conditional, rising intervention costs

⁹ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ Koga Kei, A New Strategic Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, *Asia Policy*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2022, pp. 27–34. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27254590>.

¹¹ Crisis Group, *Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait*, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org>

¹² Mike Sweeney, *Why a Taiwan Conflict Could Go Nuclear*, Defense Priorities, 2024, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/>

¹³ Jared M. McKinney & Peter Harris, Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan, *Parameters*, vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 23–36, 2021, U.S. Army War College Press.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

undermine credibility more rapidly than under alliance-based deterrence. Military asymmetry thus translates directly into political asymmetry by reshaping expectations of external involvement.

The United States faces structural challenges in extended deterrence, especially against a nuclear-armed peer competitor.¹⁶ Although the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) provides a framework, it does not guarantee U.S. military intervention.¹⁷ Some argue for strategic clarity, though such a shift is contested.¹⁸ Because the U.S. does not recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state, it cannot enter a mutual defence treaty or deploy permanent forces on the island without provoking China.

Deterrence-by-denial is also strained. China's Joint Sword-2024A¹⁹ drills demonstrated its ability to encircle and pressure Taiwan militarily.²⁰ Some analysts argue the U.S. may need to shift toward punishment-based deterrence.²¹ China is no longer deterred as in earlier decades due to its modernised military.

The effectiveness of denial is hard to measure because deterrence success depends on adversary perception. Cost-imposition methods may also fail if Beijing is willing to pay the price. Will-based deterrence seeks instead to reduce Beijing's motivation to use force.

Taiwan's global importance in semiconductor supply chains means an invasion would trigger strong international economic retaliation. Understanding the shifting status quo is crucial. Beijing has increasingly challenged existing norms, while Taiwan's political posture evolves under President Lai Ching-te.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *National Infrastructure Protection Plan: Partnering for Critical Infrastructure Security and Resilience*, 2013.

¹⁷ U.S. Congressional Research Service, *Extended Deterrence and Taiwan*, CRS, IF12481, 2024. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12481>.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Global Taiwan Institute, "The PLA's Inauguration Gift to President Lai: The Joint Sword-2024A Exercise", *Global Taiwan Institute*, June 2024.

<https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/06/the-plas-inauguration-gift-to-president-lai-the-joint-sword-2024a-exercise/>

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Chee-Hann Wu, "Without Punishment, China Cannot Be Deterred", *Global Taiwan Institute*, 2024. available at: <https://globaltaiwan.org>

TRANSACTIONALISM IN THE CASE OF ASYMMETRY BETWEEN CHINA AND TAIWAN

China's military modernisation represents one of the most comprehensive force transformations in modern history. Facing overwhelming conventional asymmetry, Taiwan has adopted a deterrence-by-denial strategy based on survivability and societal resilience. China enjoys overwhelming advantages in population, industrial capacity, and military resources. The modernization of the People's Liberation Army has focused on missile forces, airpower, and naval capabilities designed to overwhelm Taiwan and deter U.S. intervention. Taiwan faces structural constraints in manpower, strategic depth, and sustainment. This material asymmetry is likely to widen over time, reinforcing China's confidence in its long-term position. Taiwan's island geography provides defensive advantages that can be exploited through denial strategies.

The most consequential asymmetry may be political rather than material. For China, Taiwan is framed as a core sovereignty issue tied to regime legitimacy.²² For the United States, Taiwan is strategically important but not existential.²³ Transactionalism views alliances as conditional bargains rather than enduring commitments.²⁴ While realism recognizes the logic of avoiding overextension, extended deterrence depends on adversaries believing commitments are durable and costly to abandon. Fearon argues that costly signals enhance credibility.²⁵ Transactional approaches reduce perceived sunk costs by framing support as negotiable, thereby weakening deterrence. In the Taiwan Strait, this creates ambiguity not about U.S. capabilities but about willingness.

For Beijing, transactionalism may encourage gray-zone coercion and limited escalation. For Taiwan, it may encourage greater self-reliance but also incentivize symbolic arms purchases to secure political reassurance, potentially undermining true asymmetry. As such, deterrence failure often results from misperception rather than irrationality. Transactionalism

²² Jarrod Hayes, Fit for Purpose? 'One China' Policy and Security in Sino-American Relations, *European Journal of International Security* 9, no. 1, 2024, 1–23.

²³ David C. Kang, What Does China Want?, *International Security* 50, no. 1, 2025, 46–82.

²⁴ Glenn H. Snyder, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1960, 35–91.

increases uncertainty during crises, compressing decision timelines and increasing the risk of rapid escalation. For the United States, credibility requires consistency and institutionalized burden-sharing. For Taiwan, asymmetric denial capabilities should be prioritized over prestige systems. For regional allies, coordination is essential to reinforce deterrence predictability.

Transactionalist approaches conceptualize commitments as conditional bargains rather than durable political obligations, such signaling weakens deterrence not necessarily through policy change, but through perception. When support is framed as conditional, adversaries discount credibility even if material capabilities remain unchanged. China exploits this uncertainty by raising the costs of intervention through missile forces, gray-zone coercion, and escalation management strategies. Taiwan, anticipating possible abandonment, must plan for worst-case scenarios, which can increase risk-taking behavior and crisis instability.²⁶ Fearon's framework underscores that credibility is enhanced through costly signals and sunk costs that "tie hands," rendering commitments politically expensive to abandon.²⁷

In other words, transactionalism alters deterrence not by reducing American capabilities, but by reshaping adversary perceptions of willingness. Fearon's²⁸ distinction between sunk costs and tying-hands mechanisms highlights how credibility depends on political costs that constrain future choices. Transactional signaling weakens both mechanisms by presenting security commitments as revisable bargains rather than durable obligations. In the Taiwan Strait, this creates ambiguity not about U.S. power, but about the political price Washington is prepared to pay.

Taiwan's so-called "silicon shield" is often presented as a substitute source of deterrence, premised on the economic disruption that conflict would impose on major powers. Yet economic centrality alone does not generate credible security guarantees. Under transactional logic, economic value becomes a tradable asset rather than a binding strategic constraint. Rather than reinforcing deterrence, Taiwan's semiconductor dominance may invite strategic testing of whether market disruption can substitute for political resolve. In this context, the silicon shield amplifies uncertainty

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ James D. Fearon, Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41, no. 1, 1997, 68–90.

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

rather than credibility.²⁹ Economic centrality does not automatically translate into credible security guarantees; rather, it amplifies deterrence only insofar as it reinforces expectations of sustained external commitment.³⁰

Transactionalist signaling weakens this mechanism. By framing support for Taiwan as negotiable and contingent, transactional rhetoric reduces perceived sunk costs and casts doubt on whether the economic value of Taiwan's semiconductor industry would in fact compel U.S. intervention. In this context, the silicon shield may paradoxically heighten strategic uncertainty: instead of clarifying resolve, it invites adversaries to test whether economic interdependence alone can substitute for political willingness. In the Taiwan Strait, the resulting ambiguity concerns not American capabilities—which remain formidable—but the durability of U.S. commitment under conditions of escalating cost.³¹

Conclusion

Taiwan remains unbalanced in military power yet unbroken in political will and defensive resilience. In addition, strategic asymmetry in the Taiwan Strait is a durable condition. A transactional approach to U.S. foreign policy alters this asymmetry by weakening the credibility of extended deterrence. As argued in the paper, deterrence stability depends on commitments that appear costly, durable, and non-negotiable. US transactionalism risks undermining these qualities, increasing the likelihood of miscalculation and conflict in the most consequential strategic rivalry of the twenty-first century. The three actors exhibit sharply divergent time preferences. China benefits from long-term patience; the United States faces short political cycles; Taiwan confronts immediate vulnerability. Transactional signaling exacerbates these differences, increasing the risk of miscalculation as signals intended as bargaining positions are interpreted as strategic retreat. The Taiwan Strait thus illustrates a broader theoretical insight: when deterrence is priced rather than promised, the balance of resolve becomes more decisive than the balance of power. In such environments, ambiguity no longer stabilizes competition, it invites coercion.

²⁹ Ian Bremmer and Mustafa Al-Rashid, The Silicon Shield, *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 2, 2020, 144–157.

³⁰ Daniel W. Drezner, The Silicon Shield Is Overrated, *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 5, 2022.

³¹ Thomas J. Christensen, The Taiwan Problem: Deterrence, Credibility, and Strategic Ambiguity, *International Security* 44, no. 4, 2020.

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