



Will Taiwan Follow Israel's Path to Acquire Nuclear Weapons?

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Abstract

With cross-strait tensions heating up, Taiwan scholars are once again debating the need for a credible self-defence including the nuclear option. Given the lack of a U.S. security guarantee similar to Israel's dilemma and a possible pro-China Biden Administration, there is a risk for Taipei to restart its nuclear weapons programme to deter a Chinese military invasion. In order to mitigate this risk, some have proposed placing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on the island or creating an Asian NATO to dissuade Taiwan from pursuing the nuclear path.

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Analysis

Taiwan is facing cross-strait tensions which defence officials say is comparable to the 1995-6 crisis when Taipei feared an invasion, with dozens of Chinese military aircrafts having entered the island's airspace in the past month.¹

Nearly 40 incursions crossed the median line, the unofficial airspace boundary between Taiwan and China. According to Chieh Chung at the National Policy Foundation in Taipei, this is indicating that Beijing wants to change the status quo and no longer recognizes the tacit agreement on the unofficial boundary.²

With tensions mounting and both Taiwan and U.S. military on edge over China, on October 3rd an unexpected player—a Canadian warship—in a sudden display of gunboat diplomacy sailed into the Taiwan Strait from the South China Sea.³

While the U.S. Navy has been conducting regular passages through the strait, Canada's show of force is relatively new. This is in part due to souring China-Canada relations over the arrest of Huawei's chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou in late 2018, as well as China's arrest and indictment of a former Canadian diplomat and businessman for alleged espionage.⁴

Now with the Trump Administration's strong support of Taiwan and hostility towards China, some Beltway pundits are beginning to worry this may lead to a departure of Washington's longstanding policy of "strategic ambiguity" regarding U.S. assistance if Taiwan were attacked, and warned in *Foreign Affairs* to not rock the boat with China over the island nation.⁵

U.S. security umbrella with a hole over Taiwan

In contrast, others such as Ian Easton from Project 2049 argued that Taiwan not only needs more arms but also nuclear weapons for self-defence, given it shares the same predicament with Israel that lacks a mutual defence treaty with Washington and thus lies outside of U.S. security umbrella.⁶ During the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, Chinese authorities highlighted this predicament by detonating two nuclear devices and mocked Americans that "In the end, you care a lot more about Los Angeles than you do about Taipei."⁷

As such it was precisely this fear of abandonment and lack of U.S. security guarantee that drove Taiwan's covert nuclear weapons programme in the 1970s. In 1975, the CIA reported "Taipei conducts its small nuclear program with a weapon option clearly in mind, and it will be in a position to fabricate a nuclear device after five years of so." The U.S., Israel, Germany, France and Norway had all supplied assistance at this point, with heavy water

¹ Barton Gellman, "U.S. and China Nearly Came to Blows in '96", *The Washington Post*, June 21, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/06/21/us-and-china-nearly-came-to-blows-in-96/926d105f-1fd8-404c-9995-90984f86a613/>

² Lawrence Chung, "Taiwan under psychological attack as Chinese warplanes cross median line, analysts say", *South China Morning Post*, October 3, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3103985/taiwan-under-psychological-attack-chinese-warplanes-cross>

³ "Canadian Warship Sails Near Taiwan at Time of Heightened China Tension", *U.S. News & World Report*, October 3, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-10-03/canadian-warship-sails-near-taiwan-at-time-of-heightened-china-tension>

⁴ Javier C. Fernandez and Catherine Porter, "China Indicts 2 Canadians on Spying Charges, Escalating Dispute", *New York Times*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/world/asia/china-canada-kovrig-spavor.html>

⁵ Bonnie Glaser, Michael J. Mazarr, Michael Glennon, Richard Haas, David Sacks, "Dire Straits: Should American Support for Taiwan Be Ambiguous?", *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/United-States/2020-09-24/dire-straits>

⁶ "Ian Easton on Taiwan: Taiwan's Nuclear Weapons Problem", *Taipei Times*, March 4, 2019, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2019/03/04/2003710796>

⁷ <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2019/03/04/2003710796>



from US and uranium from South Africa.⁸

However, unlike Israel, Taiwan was not allowed to develop the bomb and the CIA put a stop to it in 1987 when Col. Chang Hsien-yi, the deputy director of Taiwan's military-run Institute for Nuclear Energy Research and a longtime CIA asset, defected to the U.S. with proof of the programme. At the time, Taiwan is thought to have been just one or two years away from the bomb.⁹

From Taipei's perspective, a nuclear arsenal would be the ultimate guarantor of national sovereignty especially in the face of seeming U.S. fickleness—in 1979, after enjoying more than two decades (1955-1979) of the Sino-American Defense Treaty, the Carter Administration unilaterally annulled the treaty by switching official recognition of China from Taipei to Beijing.¹⁰

Understandably U.S. priority at that time was to play the China card against the Soviet Union, so Taiwan found itself a delegitimized orphan without any representation in the international community.

But under the current Trump administration, Taiwan has enjoyed growing recognition and support with high-level visits from U.S. government officials, as well as increased arms purchase in Pentagon's "Fortress Taiwan" programme.¹¹ Nonetheless, Taipei fears this support could be reversed by a pro-China Biden administration, underscoring again perceived fickleness of U.S. policy with different administrations.

Under a China-friendly Biden administration, support for Taiwan and "Fortress Taiwan" arms sales programme will likely stop, and may become a tipping point for Taipei to again take the nuclear option. According to Taiwan specialists Vincent Wei-Cheng Wang from the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Taiwan would take the nuclear option if there is "a serious problem in the credibility of America's tacit extended deterrence commitment; the U.S. is perceived as ready to abandon Taiwan in the face of Chinese assertiveness; the China-Taiwan balance has become so lopsided in China's favor that only nuclear weapons could restore it to some sort of balance."¹²

However, a nuclear Taiwan would spur Japan, South Korea and others to also take the nuclear path and degrade the international nuclear nonproliferation (NPT) regime, which is undesirable for the U.S. Both Japan and South Korea can build a nuclear bomb within six months, and Tokyo also happens to own 100,000 pounds of primo, weapons-grade plutonium which is enough to create at least 6,000 nuclear bombs.¹³

As such some scholars have proposed a compromise to these regional countries that fear China's growing power projection capabilities and argued instead for placing tactical nuclear weapons on Taiwan--America's unsinkable aircraft carrier.¹⁴

⁸ Kyle Mizokami, "China's Greatest Nightmare: Taiwan Armed with Nuclear Weapons", *The National Interest*, September 12, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-greatest-nightmare-taiwan-armed-nuclear-weapons-80041>

⁹ <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-greatest-nightmare-taiwan-armed-nuclear-weapons-80041>

¹⁰ Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sino-American_Mutual_Defense_Treaty

¹¹ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/how-trump-is-getting-so-many-countries-to-recognize-israel/ar-BB19vvpj>; Guy Taylor, "Donald Trump to increase weapons sales to 'Fortress Taiwan', report says", *Washington Times*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/sep/16/donald-trump-increase-weapons-sales-fortress-taiwa/>

¹² Vincent Wei Cheng Wang, "Taiwan's Nuclear Option? Security Imperatives and Normative Transformation", Stanford University presentation, October 13, 2008, <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/taiwan/multimedia/taiwans-nuclear-option-security-imperatives-and-normative-transformation>

¹³ Robert Windrem, "Japan has Nuclear 'Bomb in the Basement', and China isn't Happy", *NBC News*, March 11, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/fukushima-anniversary/japan-has-nuclear-bomb-basement-china-isn-t-happy-n48976>;

Zachary Keck, Leon Whyte, "Can South Korea Build a Nuclear Bomb in 6 Months?", *The National Interest*, September 22, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/can-south-korea-build-nuclear-bomb-6-months-22437>; Patrick Winn, "Japan has plutonium, rockets and rivals. Will it ever build a nuke?", *Interactive Public Radio International*, March 14, 2019, <https://interactive.pri.org/2019/03/japan-nuclear/index.html>

¹⁴ "The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier", *Taiwan Today*, May 1, 2005, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=4,29,31,45&post=4186>



Tactical nuclear weapons or Asian NATO?

Michael Rubin from the American Enterprise Institute proposed to put tactical nuclear weapons in Taiwan, which is similar to what U.S. did in South Korea from 1958-1991, as well as in other allied countries such as Germany and Turkey.¹⁵ This would then satisfy both Taiwan's security dilemma as well as prevent the demise of the global NPT regime should Taiwan develop its own nuclear weapons.

Another option currently being mulled by EU and U.S. officials is to develop an Asian NATO, based on the Quadrilateral alliance of U.S., Australia, India and Japan serving as the hub to connect with additional spokes such as Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam and other countries to maintain regional security in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶

Currently India is especially interested in upgrading ties with Taiwan in the face of deteriorating relations with China over border disputes.¹⁷ Nonetheless, even if an Asian NATO is formed, it remains to be seen whether U.S. and India's nuclear umbrella would cover Taiwan and offer an attractive alternative to Taipei's nuclear path.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article first appeared in *The Times of Israel* on October 4, 2020.

About the Author of this Issue

Dr. Christina Lin is a California-based foreign policy analyst. She has extensive US government experience working on national security policy planning, including at DoD, State, and NSC, and was a research consultant at Jane's Information Group's Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear Assessments Intelligence Centre.



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¹⁵ Michael Rubin, "Why Taiwan Needs Nuclear Weapons", *The National Interest*, May 31, 2020,

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-taiwan-needs-nuclear-weapons-159261>; Hans Kristensen, Robert Norris, "A history of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 2, 2017, <https://thebulletin.org/2017/11/a-history-of-us-nuclear-weapons-in-south-korea/>

¹⁶ "U.S., European officials mulling to create 'Asian NATO' to contain China's expansionist ambitions", *Times of India*, October 1, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-european-officials-mulling-to-create-asian-nato-to-contain-chinas-expansionist-ambitions/articleshow/78429090.cms>

¹⁷ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Calls for India to Play the Taiwan Card Grow Louder", *The Diplomat*, July 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/calls-for-india-to-play-the-taiwan-card-grow-louder/>; "India accuses China of fresh 'military provocation' on Himalayan border", *Deutsche Welle*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-china/a-54770641>