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PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



What We Share with Taiwan

WHAT DO WE SHARE WITH TAIWAN? THE MOST COMMON RESPONSE might be that it is a democracy, but that is irrelevant, for we defended it without “strategic ambiguity” when it was Chiang Kai-shek’s autocracy. It was even less in our interest to do so then than it is now, when the object is to frustrate China’s territorial incursions—as in the South China Sea, Tibet, India, the East China Sea—and block a massive breakout into, and eventual control of, the Pacific.

A salient characteristic we have in common can be illustrated first by contrasting Taiwan with Israel. Taiwan’s population is 24 million as opposed to Israel’s less than 10 million. Its GDP is \$786 billion, Israel’s \$468 billion, although per capita—which is decisive in regard to what may be diverted to defense—this is \$33,000 versus Israel’s \$50,000. Whereas Taiwan, shielded by 100 miles of sea and never attacked, has had the luxury of attending undisturbed to its defense; in a continual state of hostility on its frontiers and from within, Israel has survived four major and half a dozen lesser wars.

Given Taiwan’s greater population and GDP, one might expect that in light of its gigantic, relentless opponent it would be a garrison state like Israel. But its air force and navy that defend the 100-mile sea barrier are antiquated. The air arm consists of third- and early-fourth-generation aircraft, compared to Israel’s fourth-generation, and swelling inventory of fifth-generation, Israeli-augmented F-35s. Taiwan’s navy counts mainly American cast-offs (no pun intended), as opposed to Israel’s purpose-designed fleet, including more submarines than Taiwan possesses, even though Taiwan must secure the strait.

Whereas Taiwan has had 75 years in which to develop a nuclear deterrent, it has not, and it is too late now, as China would strike preemptively no matter how prematurely. Yet Israel, while it fought and though it was poor, entered the nuclear club more than half a century ago.

Despite a GDP almost twice that of Israel’s, Taiwan’s deficient military budget is \$16.26 billion, as opposed to Israel’s \$20.3 billion, representing per-capita expenditure of \$688 versus Israel’s \$2,310, or 2.06% of GDP (lower than Denmark’s) versus Israel’s 5.05%.

In sum, despite knowing for decades that in view of America’s policy of strategic ambiguity (read: when push comes to shove, you’re on your own) it must be self-sufficient, Taiwan has failed to defend adequately against an obvious and overwhelming threat. In choosing not to harden itself and not sufficiently to deter, it has been unforgivingly remiss, irresponsible, and self-destructive.

That is exactly what it has in common with the United States, which despite the rise of China, the nuclear militancy of Russia, and the existence and immanence of the nuclear crazy states North Korea and Iran, has steadily disarmed itself since the end of the Cold War. A description of the self-immolation would be book-length, but one example is particularly illuminating, and demonstrates the failure of America’s China strategy. The Biden navy is not even half the size of Reagan’s; the industrial base is kneecapped so that the Pentagon requires six

years to replenish even the relatively minor stocks going to Ukraine; and now fewer, unhardened, U.S. Pacific bases are under the shadow of 4,000 Chinese missiles.

BUT EVEN MORE CONSEQUENTIALLY, OUR NUCLEAR DETERRENT has atrophied. Economizing, arms control, and inertia have morphed the 1,000 modern ICBMs, 35 modern ballistic missile submarines, and 484 modern nuclear-capable bombers we had in 1989 into 400 aged ICBMs, 14 aged ballistic missile submarines, and 66 aged bombers of which only 16 are capable of penetrating China’s air defenses, and given distance and basing would average less than one sortie per day. On a graph, China’s burgeoning military development, including its crash nuclear build-up, will meet our self-imposed diminution as if crossed swords, ours pointing down.

In the potential conflict over Taiwan, nuclear forces are the controlling mechanism. America’s belated, under-resourced strategy for the defense of our Pacific allies is premised upon the freedom to strike China’s forces in their sanctuaries and on their bases. Really? What would our reaction be were China to bomb Pearl Harbor, Guam, and the American mainland up and down the Pacific Coast? Such an attack upon the United States would beg nuclear escalation, and what is good for the goose is good for the gander. What this means is that Chinese nuclear parity or superiority will preclude strikes against its bases, nullifying our strategy and confining our reaction to purely defensive air and naval duels in the locations of China’s choosing, and timed and refreshed according to its pleasure.

Further, the growing imbalance of forces will open courses of action for China that it otherwise might not pursue were it more vigorously deterred, as, not that long ago, it was, by our far greater naval and air forces and more Pacific bases protected by our previously overwhelming nuclear umbrella. We have none of these things now as we find ourselves traveling the road followed by Britain, once the indisputably most powerful nation, then one of the great powers, then a secondary, and soon a tertiary, power: the Royal Navy has become much smaller than that of South Korea.

Why not content ourselves with the remains of the day? Why not accept a dark but gentle decline, like Britain’s, as something that can be borne as other nations rise to dominate? Especially given the nature of these nations’ totalitarian and often barbaric political systems and behaviors, a crucial difference, perhaps not sufficiently noted, is that throughout its travails and decline Britain had the U.S. to shield it—from Germany, Germany once again, and the Soviet Union.

We have no such protector, and should we continue on our neglectful course, as hard as it may be to imagine in this “weak piping time of peace,” our denouement will be violent and tragic. It has already begun, as we collapse internally, partially in response to external forces that we have the wit neither to credit nor even to comprehend.

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