Taiwan’s Crucial Role in the US Pivot to Asia

By Michael Mazza

The Obama administration’s “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia aims to improve security, prosperity, and human rights in the region, with particular focus on security efforts. Taiwan and the United States have a long-standing but often-underemphasized security partnership that could play a significant role in this effort. Because of its proximity to and knowledge of China, Taiwan is uniquely equipped to help US efforts to (1) expand presence and access in the region by ensuring US forces can utilize facilities on the island in the event of a conflict; (2) build partnership capacity by improving its self-defense capabilities; and (3) improve military innovation by sharing experience, technology, and intelligence with the United States. Rather than fearing damaging bilateral ties with China, the United States should take advantage of the benefits this important partnership can offer.

The Republic of China (ROC), on Taiwan, is one of America’s oldest security partners. The formal relationship dates back at least as far as the early days of America’s participation in World War II, when the famed US Flying Tigers began flying combat missions over China against the Japanese. US and Republican Chinese forces fought side by side in Burma during the war and stood together against communism during the Cold War.

Ironically, faced with a reemergent People’s Republic of China on the mainland, which is posing a significant and growing threat to regional security for the first time since the mid-20th century, the United States has not attempted to reinvigorate its relationship with Taiwan. This is all the more peculiar at a time when the United States is supposedly pivoting its foreign, defense, and trade policies to focus on Asia.

The Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia—also called the “rebalance”—is more than 18 months old. In a November 2011 speech to the Australian parliament, President Obama announced that he had “made a deliberate and strategic decision—as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future, by upholding core principles and in close partnership with our allies and friends.”

The president described three pillars of his new Asia policy: ensuring security, promoting prosperity, and supporting human rights. Listing security first was deliberate. Security and peace enable continued prosperity and advancements on questions of human rights.

Key points in this Outlook:

- Although Taiwan’s potential role in the US pivot to Asia has been largely ignored, the island nation is uniquely poised to be an important partner in the security component of that effort.
- The United States should help Taiwan shore up its air and sea defenses so that it can assist in deterring potential Chinese aggression, thus contributing to stability in the region.
- Taiwan is positioned to contribute important cyber knowledge, communications capabilities, and intelligence to US defense efforts in the Asia-Pacific region.

Michael Mazza (michael.mazza@aei.org) is a research fellow at AEI.
In describing how the United States would seek security, the president discussed defense modernization, the five US alliances in Asia (with Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand), outreach to Southeast Asian states, and engagement with regional organizations. Nowhere in his speech did he mention Taiwan—which knows China better than anyone and occupies key geostrategic territory—or the Taiwan Relations Act, which requires the United States to supply arms to Taiwan and to ensure its own capacity to come to Taiwan’s aid in the case of conflict.

This neglect on the part of the Obama administration comes from a desire to avoid the supposed risk of offending China and damaging bilateral ties. But such logic is shortsighted. No, China will not like a cozier US-Taiwan defense relationship. But such a relationship would serve to stabilize the region, better deter China from using coercion or force against the island, and ensure continued peace in the Taiwan Strait. If the military pillar of the Asia pivot is meant to deter Chinese adventurism, there is little question that Taiwan has an important role to play in ensuring that outcome.

The US military rebalance to the Asia-Pacific includes three primary lines of effort:
- Expanding presence and access.
- Building partnership capacity.
- Military innovation.

These three pillars are mutually reinforcing: any one would be ineffective without the others. To date, Washington has largely neglected Taiwan in carrying out this policy. Taiwan, however, may be able to contribute to all three efforts.

Expanding Presence and Access

Two of the US Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) attempts to expand presence in Asia have been quite visible. In November 2011, then Australian prime minister Julia Gillard and President Obama announced that starting in 2012, Australia would “welcome deployments of a company-size rotation of 200 to 250 Marines in the Northern Territory for around six months at a time.” Over several years, that presence would increase to approximately 2,500 Marine personnel, or a full Marine Expeditionary Unit. This rotational presence enables US Marines to more regularly exercise with their Australian counterparts and with partners throughout Southeast Asia. They are also poised to quickly respond to a crisis—whether natural or man-made—in the region.

Gillard and Obama also announced that US military aircraft would have greater access to the Royal Australian Air Force’s bases in the country’s north. Although the relatively small number of Marines and their distance from the most likely regional hotspots for US involvement limits their substantive contribution to regional security, the deployment at least sends a positive message to the region.

Last year, Singapore similarly agreed to welcome a rotational deployment of US Navy littoral combat ships (LCSs). The first ship arrived in Singapore in April, and the strategically located Southeast Asian country will eventually host four LCSs at a time. This access arrangement will enhance the Navy’s ability to engage in more regular port calls and combined exercises in Southeast Asia.

These LCSs, depending on the modules with which they are equipped, will be ideally positioned to carry out antipiracy, antisubmarine warfare, and other missions in the South China Sea. As with the new Marine Corps rotations in Australia, the LCS presence in Singapore is more style than substance and unlikely to significantly deter Chinese or North Korean adventurism.

Perhaps less visible, but no less important, has been DoD’s pursuit of expanded access arrangements in the Asia-Pacific region. Here, Washington has seen the greatest progress in its talks with the Philippines. The two countries have recently settled on an agreement that will increase the rotation of US forces through the Philippines and grant US forces more access to former US outposts Subic Bay and Clark Air Base.

Of the military pivot’s three pillars, Taiwan is least able to contribute to US efforts to expand presence and access in Asia. It should be noted that no US-China treaty bans American forces from Taiwan. In the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, a document with no legal standing, the United States affirmed “the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all US forces and military installations from Taiwan.” Although this objective was met for a time, starting in 2005 US defense attachés were once again posted to the American Institute in Taiwan, the unofficial US embassy there.
Still, although there may be good geostrategic reasons for greater numbers of US forces to be present on Taiwan—such as enhanced capacity for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; conventional deterrence; and sea line security—neither Washington nor Taipei has any political appetite for such a change. Both capitals are likely to consider the deployment of US troops to the island as too provocative for Beijing and potentially damaging for US-China and cross-strait relations.

Yet Taiwan can take steps to ensure that US forces would have access to the island’s facilities during a time of crisis, even in the absence of a formal access agreement. Taiwan, for example, could invest in infrastructure that would enable the island to serve as a logistics hub for US forces in the event of a conflict to the island’s north or in the South China Sea. Along similar lines, Taiwan might stockpile supplies that would be of use to American forces operating in the region. Doing so would complicate China’s war planning, improve deterrence, and enhance America’s ability to come to the aid of Taiwan and other allies during an emergency, all without provoking Beijing in the way that formal access arrangements or actual US presence would.

Building Partnership Capacity

The Obama administration has recognized that one of the most effective ways of avoiding conflict in Asia is to ensure that American allies and partners have the capacity to defend themselves. The president’s 2012 strategic guidance to the Department of Defense promised to “expand our networks of cooperation with emerging partners throughout the Asia-Pacific to ensure collective capability and capacity for securing common interests.” Speaking at the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue several months later, then-secretary of defense Leon Panetta put a finer point on it: “We will play an essential role in promoting strong partnerships that strengthen the capabilities of the Pacific nations to defend and secure themselves.”

In large part, this effort will rely on continuing large annual and biennial multinational military exercises throughout the region. DoD will also, ideally, expand the number of maneuvers it leads and the number of countries with which it exercises. For example, Burma was invited for the first time to observe this year’s Cobra Gold, an annual exercise that the United States and Thailand colead. Other regular participants have included Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. The US Navy has likewise conducted drills with its Vietnamese counterpart, with exercises focusing on noncombat scenarios like search-and-rescue missions and maritime navigation.

In additional to expanding exercises, the United States has also transferred military items to partner nations. The flagship of the Philippine navy, for example, is a retired US Coast Guard cutter; Manila has thus far purchased two of these vessels from the United States. Although not modern warships, they do enhance the Philippines’ ability to patrol and defend its own waters. Japan, Australia, and Singapore will purchase F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, and South Korea will likely follow suit. Further afield, India has also bought a number of high-end defense articles from the United States in recent years, including C-130J, C-17, and P-8I aircraft, as well as Apache helicopters and munitions.

The Obama administration has permitted some arms sales to Taiwan, but it has not been proactive on this front. In 2010, the administration released several items for sale that had earlier been approved by the Bush administration, including PAC-3 missile defense interceptors, Black Hawk helicopters, and refurbished Osprey-class mine hunting ships. In 2011, the administration approved the sale of upgrades for Taiwan’s F-16A/B fighters. Troublingly, the White House has not approved those items that Taiwan needs most: new F-16C/D fighter jets and submarines.

Taiwan does not have the opportunity—as Japan does—to assist weaker partners in developing their defense capabilities. As a US partner, however, it can and should focus on advancing its own capacity for self-defense.

Given its location, the island of Taiwan is of great geostrategic importance. In a sense, it is the cork that keeps Chinese maritime and air forces bottled up within what China calls the “first island chain”—a string of islands running from Japan in the north, through Japan’s Ryukyu chain to the Philippine island of Luzon, and then skirting the southern and western perimeters of the South China Sea. Even though no US troops are stationed on Taiwan, the island’s continued de facto independence is crucial for America’s forward defense perimeter, which since World War II has sought to keep would-be aggressors from approaching the United States via the Pacific Ocean. If Taiwan fell into unfriendly hands, moreover, America would find it increasingly difficult to defend its Asian treaty allies, notably Japan and the Philippines.

Taiwan, then, can best contribute to the Pentagon’s rebalance by ensuring that it can adequately defend itself against Chinese aggression. Recent trends in Taiwan’s defense spending, however, suggest that the island is not dedicating sufficient resources to that task.
According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, since 2001, Taiwan’s annual defense budget growth has averaged only 0.5 percent, and this is at a time when Taiwan’s military is shifting to what should be a much more expensive, all-volunteer force. By comparison, China’s defense budget has grown an average of 12.2 percent yearly over the same period and 213.9 percent overall from 2001 to 2011 as compared to Taiwan’s 3.5 percent.\(^5\)

Over the past decade, Taiwan’s defense spending has accounted for between 1.9 and 2.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). By comparison, Georgia—which like Taiwan faces a considerable military threat from a giant neighbor but which has per capita GDP only one-sixth that of Taiwan—has dedicated over 5 percent of GDP to defense spending since 2006, hitting 9.2 percent in 2007 (before, not in reaction to, the Russian invasion in 2008).

Although Taiwan has experienced slower economic growth of late, it is, by any measure, a prosperous country. Taipei should at the very least meet its own goal of spending 3 percent of GDP on defense. Failure to do so will not only limit the effectiveness of Taiwan’s armed forces, but also risk empowering those in the United States who argue that since Taiwan does not defend itself, neither should America.

Of course, Taiwan’s defense capability is a question not of simply how many dollars are spent but of how they are spent. The military should be able to respond to the full range of potential Chinese actions, from a relatively low-intensity scenario (such as a partial naval blockade) to the highest-intensity option (a full-scale invasion). Such preparedness requires a wide range of defense capabilities.

A combination of advanced air defenses and modern tactical fighter aircraft are necessary, first so that Taiwan can control its own airspace and, second, so that the ROC Air Force can carry out limited retaliatory strikes on the mainland if need be. To that end, Taipei should continue lobbying both the Obama administration and Capitol Hill to approve the export to Taiwan of new F-16C/Ds. Although the Ministry of National Defense’s (MND’s) requirement for “next-generation fighters,” as articulated in its recent Quadrennial Defense Review, is sensible over the long term, the realities of America’s recent arms sales track record and of the F-35’s development challenges make this an unrealistic option during the next decade if not longer.\(^6\) New F-16s remain MND’s only viable option if Taiwan is to maintain an effective air force in the coming years.

At sea, Taiwan needs a mix of traditional and asymmetric systems. To maintain a capability to keep open safe transit corridors during a blockade, submarines are crucial. Quiet, diesel-powered submarines would also enhance Taiwan’s ability to interdict surface vessels entering the northern or southern approaches of the Taiwan Strait. Fast-attack missile boats, meanwhile, would grant Taiwan a much-needed sea denial capability. MND’s decision to develop a new 500-ton stealth corvette is a positive development.\(^7\)

The US Naval War College’s Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes have made the case that the ROC Navy should rely more heavily on such vessels than on traditional large surface combatants.\(^8\) Writing for the Diplomat, Holmes argued that Taiwan could “disperse large numbers of small combatants to hardened sites . . . around the island’s rough coast. Such vessels could sortie to conduct independent operations against enemy shipping. Or, they could mass their firepower in concerted ‘wolf pack’ attacks on major PLAN formations.”\(^9\) Taiwan does not have the resources to match China’s investments in destroyers and frigates, but if the ROC Navy fields innovative capabilities and develops innovative ways of operating, it could make life miserable for the People’s Liberation Army Navy in and around the Taiwan Strait.

On land, ROC forces should be able to prevent, or at least delay, PLA forces from establishing a beachhead. A fight for control of the island would be the most stressful scenario for both Taiwan’s military and society. As several colleagues and I argued in 2009:

> Ground forces should be ready both to fight the PLA and to provide for the population’s safety and well-being. . . . Military units should maintain a high level of mobility and be able to move quickly around the island. Troops will also need to maintain rear area security in times of crisis and have the capability to counter PLA special forces operations. . . . As part of a comprehensive strategy, the ROC should be prepared to mount a sustained ground resistance, even in the event that Taipei is occupied. Strategic endurance involving an effective, long-term, organized resistance could enhance
deterrence by raising the costs of an amphibious invasion and forcible occupation of the island.\textsuperscript{10}

If Taiwan fields a force such as that described in the preceding paragraphs, it will contribute to Washington’s stated effort to shore up its own defense posture in Asia. If Taiwan and other individual states in Asia can deter aggression, that will alleviate pressure on US forces to be everywhere at all times and will undermine the arguments of those who believe that the United States should not defend countries that do not defend themselves. Countering that charge is especially important in the case of Taiwan, which does not have a formal defense treaty with the United States and is still viewed by some as an obstacle to better Sino-American relations.\textsuperscript{11}

By enhancing its own defense capabilities, Taiwan can complement US efforts to build partnership capacity across Asia. Improved defenses among all of America’s Asian partners will contribute to stability in the region, a central goal of the US rebalance to Asia.

\section*{Military Innovation}

DoD’s pivot to Asia cannot be limited to simply deploying more assets to the region and aiding others in bulking up their militaries. Forces in the region must be capable of operating safely and defeating possible adversaries. Given the nature of China’s military modernization, those are becoming more difficult tasks.

Indeed, China is posing a new kind of challenge for US air and maritime forces in particular: namely, the fielding of effective, high-tech, anti-access/area denial capabilities (A2/AD). Last year’s Defense Strategic Guidelines described the challenge in general terms:

\begin{quote}
Accordingly, the U.S. military will invest as required to ensure its ability to operate effectively in anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) environments. \textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

In other words, Beijing is developing capabilities designed to hold US forces distant from Chinese shores so as to prevent or complicate American intervention in a conflict in China’s so-called “near seas.” To address this challenge, DoD has developed a new operational concept: Air-Sea Battle. General Norton A. Schwartz (US Air Force) and Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert (US Navy) described the concept in an article for the American Interest last year:

\begin{quote}
With Air-Sea Battle, we are reinvigorating the historic partnership between our two departments to protect the freedom of the commons and ensure operational access for the Joint Force. Air-Sea Battle provides the concepts, capabilities and investments needed to overcome the challenges posed by emerging threats to access like ballistic and cruise missiles, advanced submarines and fighters, electronic warfare and mines. . . . Air-Sea Battle relies on highly integrated and tightly coordinated operations across warfighting domains—for example, using cyber methodologies to defeat threats to aircraft, or using aircraft to defeat threats on and under the sea. \textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

According to Schwartz and Greenert, Air-Sea Battle will require “resilient communications networks,” “new models for command and control” to better integrate air and naval forces, and a capability to “attack adversary systems wherever needed to gain access to contested areas.”\textsuperscript{14}

Taiwan is situated well within the reach of China’s A2/AD capabilities. Whenever ROC forces operate—whether they are exercising or carrying out routine patrols—they are operating in an A2/AD environment. They thus face similar challenges to their American counterparts and may develop some similar solutions.

Taiwan can assist the US military’s Air-Sea Battle efforts in two primary ways: first, by sharing experience and technology and, second, by sharing intelligence.

\section*{Cyber}

No country has more experience than Taiwan in dealing with cyberintrusions emanating from the People’s Republic of China. The United States may be the biggest, juiciest target for Chinese hackers, but Taiwan is their primary concern. Taiwan, in effect, on the front
line of the growing confrontation in cyberspace between China and the United States and its allies. According to Chuang Ming-hsiung, chief of the Taiwan Criminal Investigation Bureau’s High-Technology Crime Prevention Center, “Before China releases a virus to the United States, it will test it on Taiwan. That’s why Taiwan has a faster response rate than the United States. This is Taiwan’s soft power.”

Media reports have focused on cybertheft of information from companies in Taiwan or on attempted intrusions of the National Security Bureau, but People’s Liberation Army (PLA) hackers are surely also targeting Taiwan’s armed forces, particularly their command-and-control networks. Chinese cyberunits may be more aggressive in going after these networks than those of American forces, as they may have determined that doing so is not as risky.

Taiwan should be developing means to defend its military networks against cyberattacks and to neutralize attackers. Primary efforts to do so will likely remain in the cyber realm, but Taiwan’s military intelligence services should also work to identify and locate cyberunits on the mainland. In the event of a conflict, Taiwan and partner militaries should have the option to respond to cyberoffensives with kinetic means (with precision-guided munitions launched from sea, air, or land).

As Taiwan’s cyberwarriors learn to anticipate or rapidly identify and counter Chinese attacks, they should offer to share knowledge and technology with their American counterparts. Indeed, Taipei should consider inviting American military cyberexperts to regularly observe Taiwan’s cyberoperations. Taiwan’s expertise in this area can help ensure that American forces do not remain vulnerable to Chinese cyberattacks, mitigating one aspect of China’s A2/AD threat.

**Command and Control.** A primary target of China’s A2/AD capabilities is American command and control, which is enabled by a constellation of military communications satellites. These satellites are vulnerable, and the PLA has accordingly been developing antisatellite weapons to neutralize them. Kinetic kill vehicles, directed-energy weapons, and advanced jammers will allow the PLA to temporarily disable, if not destroy, US military communications satellites as well as imaging and intelligence satellites. In short, China is developing a capacity to blind, deafen, and silence US forces, eliminating a key advantage American forces have over their adversaries.

The US Navy’s Broad Area Maritime Surveillance program will employ high-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to complement space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems. UAVs are much less costly than satellites and much easier to replace. Could US forces adopt a similar approach for command, control, and communications, at least at the theater level?

Taiwan’s military should experiment with just such a system for its own communications needs. Airborne, joint communications relays would enable dispersal of land, maritime, and air forces across, above, and out to sea from the mountainous island. An inner-atmosphere UAV “constellation” would consist of numerous aircraft aloft at once to allow for nearly uninterrupted communications should any units be destroyed; decoys could likewise be employed to confuse enemy munitions. Caches of communications UAVs would need to be maintained for rapid replacement of downed aircraft. The system would complement, rather than replace, Taiwan’s current hard-line and wireless communications.

If Taiwan can make such a system work in a hostile environment, it could provide invaluable assistance to Pentagon planners looking for ways to overcome China’s threats to America’s space-based systems. With early American participation in designing the system, it could even be designed for interoperability with US forces; in the event of a conflict in which US command-and-control networks are damaged, American forces could piggyback on Taiwan’s UAV constellation, easing operations in a contested environment.

**Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance.** Taiwan can most directly support the US defense posture in Asia by sharing intelligence. Via UAVs as well as ground-based and undersea sensors, Taiwan can develop a level of sustained, comprehensive, localized maritime domain awareness that the United States cannot give its more varied responsibilities and geographically diverse concerns. If Taiwan’s armed forces can maintain a comprehensive picture of what is happening on, above, and under the waters in the Taiwan Strait and around the
island, it will serve to deter China (by making strategic, operational, and tactical surprise much more difficult) and enhance the ability of the US Navy and Air Force to confidently operate off China's southeastern seaboard.

If Taiwan can establish comprehensive maritime domain awareness, it will likewise contribute to Japan's security and to security in the South China Sea. Knowledge of Chinese naval and air movements will allow the United States and its allies to forecast possible confrontations at sea and, again, deter China from engaging in provocative deployments. During a conflict, Taiwan's ISR could complement and in an emergency supplement America's own ISR networks. Most importantly, US awareness of China's maritime assets near Taiwan will help the United States blunt or overcome the PLA's A2/AD capabilities.

Conclusion

As keeping the peace in Asia has become a more challenging task, the Obama administration has wisely emphasized the defense aspects of its policy for the region. Yet even as it has done so and as it has considered how close allies like Japan and South Korea can enhance regional stability, Taiwan's potential to play a crucial role in the pivot has been overlooked. Taiwan's track record as a US partner, its military and technological capabilities, and its geostrategic importance all merit the island greater consideration from American defense planners—not only as a potential hotspot for conflict but also as a democratic society that can contribute to broader Asian security.

Taiwan, of course, can take steps to make such consideration more likely. By adequately investing in its own military and by experimenting with innovative approaches to the Chinese military challenge, Taiwan can make itself into a more dependable and more valuable security partner for the United States. That could have positive implications for all aspects of the US-Taiwan relationship.

Notes

14. Ibid.