

# Indo-Pacific Security Program Memorandum

## DITCHING POLITICAL AMBIGUITY Clarifying the Contradictions of America's Taiwan Policy

By Michael Sobolik and Elizabeth Oakes

### BOTTOM LINE

1. Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party are preparing the People's Republic of China for war to annex Taiwan.
2. Washington is ill-positioned to deter Beijing because of its long-held and internally contradictory Taiwan policy that balances interests in Taiwan's security with interests in economic engagement with the PRC.
3. To deter Beijing from annexing Taipei, policymakers in Washington should clarify the political importance of Taiwan's political future to the United States.

Winston Churchill famously characterized Russia's geopolitical calculations during World War II as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."<sup>1</sup> The same can be said of America's Taiwan policy over the past five decades. The United States has advanced a haphazard, ambiguous, and at times internally incoherent policy for its relationship with the Republic of China (ROC), or Taiwan. While the People's Republic of China (PRC), ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has steadfastly maintained its claim of sovereignty over the island, Washington has often approached Taiwan as a project of strategic triangulation, attempting to balance its economic interests in China with its legal obligations to Taiwan. What has emerged over time is a tenuous balance between preserving Washington's relationship with Beijing and ensuring the peaceful resolution of the cross-strait situation.

To some, this ambiguity is a hallmark of deft statecraft. The late Henry Kissinger, the chief architect of America's China policy, praised ambiguity in 2011 as "the lifeblood of diplomacy" that sustained the U.S.-China relationship. Kissinger, however, added a warning: "But it cannot do so indefinitely. Wise statesmanship on both sides is needed to move the process forward."<sup>2</sup>

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Such wisdom is needed now. The ambiguity that has defined America's China and Taiwan policies for fifty years has run its course. Washington can no longer forestall a day of reckoning with an internally contradictory Taiwan policy. America could perhaps afford such luxuries when China was weak, but those days are long gone. Arguably, they ended a decade-and-a-half ago, when, beginning in 2009, defense analysts began warning policymakers that the U.S. military could no longer take victory for granted in a cross-strait war.<sup>3</sup> Washington instead dithered and hoped for better days.

To quote a Department of Defense (DoD) aphorism, hope is not a strategy. What follows is an effort to account for America's expired Taiwan policy, identify the ambiguities therein, and recommend ways to update U.S. diplomacy and, most importantly, bolster deterrence in East Asia.

### **Time is Running out for Taiwan**

On May 20, 2024, Taiwan inaugurated its eighth president, Lai Ching-te (also known as William Lai). Days later, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the armed forces of the PRC, initiated military drills that surrounded Taiwan by air and sea with 15 naval vessels, 16 coast guard ships, and 42 military aircraft.<sup>4</sup> Notably, the exercises encompassed not only Taiwan's main island, but the smaller islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin. According to PRC state media, the drills, code-named Joint Sword-2024A, focused on "joint sea-air combat-readiness patrol, joint seizure of comprehensive battlefield control, and joint precision strikes on key targets," as well as "closing in on areas around the island of Taiwan and integrated operations inside and outside the island chain to test the joint real combat capabilities of the forces of the command."<sup>5</sup> According to a PLA spokesperson, the exercise had two purposes: to punish "separatist acts," and to deter interference from "external forces."<sup>6</sup>

The drills are the latest evidence of the CCP's longstand-

ing intent to unify Taiwan with the PRC, by force if necessary. They also follow a pattern of increased belligerence from Beijing in the Taiwan Strait over the past four years.<sup>7</sup> Coupled with related policy changes within the PRC, such as Beijing's efforts to mobilize reservists, adjust wartime criminal codes, increase military recruitment, and construct air-raid shelters, a clear picture emerges of the PRC preparing for war.<sup>8</sup>

How policymakers in Washington respond will have a direct bearing on Taiwan's survival. The primary challenge before the Biden administration and Congress is deterring General Secretary Xi Jinping from annexing Taiwan. Doing so will not be easy. In 2023, Japan's Ministry of Defense released its annual white paper and warned that the military balance between Washington and Beijing was "rapidly tilting to China's favor."<sup>9</sup>

Some senior military officials downplay these concerns. In March 2024, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley warned about "overheated" concerns in Washington: "I think there's a lot of rhetoric in China, and a lot of rhetoric elsewhere, to include the United States, that could create the perception that war is right around the corner or we're on the brink of war with China."<sup>10</sup> Others see an increasingly dangerous possibility of conflict with the PRC over Taiwan. In his final days as U.S. Indo-Pacific commander, Admiral John Aquilino

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warned of Beijing's "boiling frog" gambit with Taipei: "This is the pressure campaign in action. I've watched it increase in scope and scale, it is not slowing down. It is only getting more aggressive."<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, the broader concerns about the PRC's designs for Taiwan are not new. Xi and his predecessors have telegraphed such territorial ambitions for decades. What is new, however, is the deteriorating state of glob-



al stability in Europe, where Russia's war on Ukraine continues apace with no end in sight, and the Middle East, where the Israel-Hamas conflict is cascading into a regional crisis. Even more concerning are the concrete steps the CCP has taken in recent years to steel China for conflict. When Beijing increased its defense budget by 7.2% in March 2023, and then-Premier Li Keqiang notably called for "preparations for war."<sup>12</sup> Most authoritatively, Xi Jinping himself stated that same month that "the unification of the motherland" is the "essence" of his campaign to bring about China's rejuvenation.<sup>13</sup>

Based on these indicators, a troubling possibility emerges: the United States may be running out of time to deter Beijing from subsuming Taiwan. The sooner U.S. policymakers recognize this danger, the better chance America has of forestalling Beijing's aggression. Unfortunately, Washington is missing the warning signs. Even worse, policymakers and pundits seem to be more concerned with appeasing Beijing than protecting Taipei.

**The Biden Administration's Mixed Taiwan Policy**  
During the meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping in November 2023, Xi allegedly warned Biden that he intends to "reunify" Taiwan with the PRC. Xi reportedly clarified that he hasn't settled on a timeline, and that he prefers a peaceful resolution.<sup>14</sup> His bottom line, however, was unmistakable: Xi and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) won't wait indefinitely.

How did the Biden administration respond to these actions? By, apparently, tailoring its Taiwan talking points to Beijing's liking. After his meeting with Xi, Biden reiterated America's commitment to its "one China" policy, which acknowledges Beijing's position that the PRC and Taiwan are both part of China.<sup>15</sup> What Biden didn't say was more telling: he was silent about the Taiwan Relations Act, which details America's Taiwan policy and the nature of its relationship with Taipei. Nor did he mention the "Six Assurances," a series of promises Washington made to Taipei in 1982 about America's commitment to arm Taiwan irrespective of Beijing's desires (see Box 1).

## BOX 1: THE BASICS OF AMERICA'S TAIWAN POLICY

Since Richard Nixon, every U.S. president has upheld some version of the following statement: "The United States has a longstanding one China policy, which is guided by the three U.S.-China Joint Communiqués, the *Taiwan Relations Act*, and the Six Assurances."

Understanding the timeline of these agreements and how they built upon – or contradicted – each other is crucial to understanding the state of America's Taiwan policy today.

**1972: Shanghai Communiqué.** President Nixon and Henry Kissinger articulated the "one China policy" in this document. Publicly, Washington *acknowledged* the PRC's position that Taiwan was a part of China. Privately, the U.S. recognized this position.

**1978: Normalization Communiqué.** President Jimmy Carter switched America's diplomatic recognition away from Taiwan and to the PRC. The terms and nature of this switch led Congress to step in and underscore America's ongoing interests in Taiwan's political security.

**1979: Taiwan Relations Act.** This bipartisan act of Congress conditioned the U.S.-PRC relationship on Beijing's treatment of Taipei by, among other things, approximating a defense treaty with Taiwan.

**1982: Arms Sales Communiqué.** In contradiction of the TRA, President Reagan agreed to limit the quality and quantity of America's arms sales to Taiwan.

**1982: The Six Assurances.** In contradiction of his own communiqué with the PRC, Reagan assured Taipei that arms sales to Taiwan would continue in adherence to the terms of the TRA.





Most notable, however, was Biden's silence about America's willingness to defend Taiwan. On four occasions as president, Biden has telegraphed a policy of strategic clarity, that the United States would enter a war of PRC aggression against Taiwan and defend the island-democracy.<sup>16</sup> He has made such statements in the U.S. and Japan, notably while standing side-by-side with the Japanese prime minister.<sup>17</sup> In November 2023, however, the American president ignored the question altogether.<sup>18</sup> Six months later in an interview with *Time*, Biden seemed to reaffirm his commitment, albeit in a confusing way. When asked about the subject, the president said, "I've made clear to Xi Jinping that we agree with—we signed on to previous presidents going way back—to the policy of, that, it is we are not seeking independence for Taiwan nor will we, in fact, not defend Taiwan if they if, if China unilaterally tries to change the status [sic]."<sup>19</sup>

Biden's policy missteps with respect to Taiwan have also extended into the diplomatic arena. His administration censored Taiwanese diplomats during a virtual Summit of Democracies when they posted a map that labeled the PRC and Taiwan in different colors. The map in question displayed varying degrees of press freedom in Asia.<sup>20</sup> The State Department also reportedly dissuaded Lithuania from upgrading its Taiwan office.<sup>21</sup>

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To be sure, President Biden has competing priorities in the broader scope of America's relationship with the PRC.<sup>22</sup> That, unfortunately, is the root of the problem. The president's conciliatory approach to cross-strait relations is part of a broader pattern of ambiguity.

#### **America's Political Ambiguity Toward Taiwan**

"Ambiguity" is a loaded term in the lexicon of America's Taiwan policy. Historically, *strategic ambiguity* has referenced America's willingness, or lack thereof, to defend

Taiwan in response to an act of aggression from Beijing. That act could be a military strike, blockade, boycott, embargo, or some other form of coercion meant to compel Taiwan's unification with the PRC. The *Taiwan Relations Act* (or TRA, P.L. 98-6) of 1979 described the political fate of Taiwan as "a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and" — importantly — "of grave concern to the United States."<sup>23</sup> That wording clearly communicated the importance the United States placed on the peaceful resolution of cross-strait tension in 1979, but it also signaled Washington's hesitancy to entrap itself strategically.

Today, American leaders rightly observe that the balance of power between the U.S. military and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Indo-Pacific is trending in Beijing's favor.<sup>24</sup> Some, like former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, go so far as to advocate for Washington to reject strategic ambiguity and adopt "strategic clarity," wherein the U.S. would explicitly commit to defend Taiwan in a crisis.<sup>25</sup> Others, like former President Donald Trump, cast doubt on the wisdom of American intervention.<sup>26</sup>

This debate is far from parlor talk. It is perhaps the most crucial American foreign policy question of the decade.

Its importance is underscored in light of the Biden administration's recent foreign policy missteps, from the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 to its subsequent failure to deter Vladimir Putin from invading Ukraine the following year.

Ultimately, the focus on strategic ambiguity is important, but of secondary importance. Washington has been slow to adjust its policy as the People's Liberation Army has grown stronger because it remains committed to political ambiguity. Without clarifying its political stance toward Taipei, Washington cannot hope to credibly protect it against Beijing's predations over the coming years.





### America as “Traffic Cop” in the Taiwan Strait

In recent months, a number of leading U.S. China experts have taken to characterizing America as a neutral arbiter between Beijing and Taipei. This perspective emphasizes process over outcome. According to this approach, America does not support or oppose unification and seeks only a peaceful resolution. These experts accept this version of reality as sacrosanct truth.

The month before the Biden-Xi meeting, Oriana Skylar Mastro of Stanford University insisted that “it isn’t Washington’s place to prevent the unification of the two sides — only to ensure that doesn’t happen through military force or coercion.”<sup>27</sup> The following month, Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Tom Christensen warned sounded the same note: “If Beijing believes that Washington does not truly want cross-strait tensions to be resolved, it will be much harder for the United States to deter an attack on Taiwan.”<sup>28</sup> Organizations such as the Quincy Institute have gone so far as to assert, incorrectly, that Beijing has long sought and is committed to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question.<sup>29</sup>

These articulations of political ambiguity conceive of the United States as a cross-strait “traffic cop” with cross-cutting interests on both sides. This perspective dates back decades, and finds its origin in President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s trip to China in 1972. The result of that trip was the Shanghai Communique, in which the United States acknowledged “that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position.”<sup>30</sup> Privately, however, Nixon and Kissinger went further. In his notes for his meeting with Mao Zedong, Nixon wrote the following of Taiwan:

1. Status is determined – one China, Taiwan is part of China
2. Won’t support Taiwan independence
3. Try to restrain Japan
4. Support peaceful resolution

### 5. Will seek normalization [with the PRC]<sup>31</sup>

This secret agreement between Washington and Beijing bound subsequent administrations without the knowledge of members of Congress. When the Carter administration normalized relations with the PRC on January 1, 1979, it did so on these five conditions, as well as a sixth: the withdrawal of American officials from Taiwan and the shuttering of its embassy in Taipei.<sup>32</sup> In return, the Carter administration attempted to secure a commitment from Deng Xiaoping that the PRC would seek a peaceful resolution of the cross-straits question. Deng refused. “Instead,” in the words of diplomatic correspondent James Mann, “the two governments worked out a deal in which, at the time of normalization, the United States would call for a peaceful resolution of Taiwan’s future, and China would not dispute or challenge the American position.”<sup>33</sup> Thus began the long-held fiction, believed by many U.S. analysts, that Beijing had credibly committed to peacefully resolving the cross-strait situation.

The reaction in Congress was severe. Ten years after U.S.-PRC normalization, then-Senator Richard Lugar looked back on the moment and wrote, “To some, the diplomatic axiom ‘reward your friends and punish your enemies’ seemed to have been turned on its head.”<sup>34</sup> That same year, then-Senator John Glenn sounded a similar note: “Although I favored establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC, I was not prepared to mortgage Taiwan’s future in the process.”<sup>35</sup> From these concerns came the *Taiwan Relations Act*, Congress’ attempt to preserve America’s credibility as an ally and a partner.

The intent of the TRA is defined in Sec.2(a): “To help maintain peace, security, and stability in the Western Pacific and to promote the foreign policy of the United States by authorizing the continuation of commercial, cultural, and other relations between the people of the United States and the people on Taiwan.”<sup>36</sup> Practically, Congress was attempting to preserve the *status quo ante* with Taiwan. Former Speaker of the House Jim Wright



characterized the TRA as a “unique entity in the exercise of Congressional prerogative” that preserved relations between Washington and Taipei “for every practical purpose precisely as we have dealt with them in the past.”<sup>37</sup> Then-Senator Dick Stone was even clearer: the TRA signaled that the United States “does recognize the Republic of China is to be represented as if it were a foreign country.”<sup>38</sup> The clearest articulation of the TRA’s intent, however, is found in the words of former Sen. Chris Dodd: “U.S. laws and programs will continue to apply to Taiwan as if derecognition had not taken place.”<sup>39</sup> In 1989, Harvey Feldman, an architect of the American Institute in Taipei and an author of the TRA, argued that Section 2(b) “virtually recreates a defense treaty with Taiwan.”<sup>40</sup>

Importantly, the U.S.-ROC mutual defense treaty that remained in effect from 1954 to 1979 was not a self-executing obligation for America to come to Taiwan’s defense. Article V of the treaty obligated both parties to “act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.”<sup>41</sup> The true purpose of the TRA, then, comes into fuller focus. Its intent was not to box the United States into a defense commitment.<sup>42</sup> Rather, its purpose was to make America’s relationship with the PRC contingent on Beijing’s treatment of Taipei. It established the very link that Mao and Deng refused to acknowledge, and that American leaders like Nixon, Kissinger, and Carter rejected out of hand.

This tension between Washington’s secret abandonment of Taiwan in 1972 and the TRA’s public effort to realign Washington with Taipei in 1979 is the basis of America’s political ambiguity on cross-strait relations. Ultimately, the disagreement comes down to a prudential question: do America’s core national interests lie in its relationship with Beijing or Taipei? This divide, and the history that produced it, suggest it is incorrect to characterize the United States as having a “one China” policy. Rather, Washington has had two competing policies toward Taiwan, which have splintered presidential administrations and divided the executive and congressional branches for

over forty years.

### **The Effects of Washington’s Political Ambiguity**

Three years after the enactment of the TRA, the contradictions within America’s Taiwan policy came to a head. During President Ronald Reagan’s first term in office, Beijing lobbied his administration to commit to cutting off arms sales to Taiwan. Then-Secretary of State Al Haig supported the move, as did then-Vice President George H.W. Bush. According to journalist James Mann, Bush told former U.S. Ambassador to the PRC Winston Lord, “You’ve got to realize where the big relationship is.” According to Mann, “Taiwan, Bush was saying, didn’t count nearly as much as China.”<sup>43</sup>

In the 1982 Joint Communique that Washington and Beijing ultimately signed, President Reagan committed “gradually to reduce its sale of arms to Taiwan, leading, over a period of time, to a final resolution.” The U.S. government also assured the PRC that arms sales to Taiwan would not exceed those of recent years in quantity or quality.<sup>44</sup> In so doing, Reagan arguably violated Section 2 of the TRA, which stipulated that arms sales to Taiwan should be “based solely upon... the needs of Taiwan.”<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, Reagan offered Taiwan six assurances to underscore America’s commitment to arming Taipei.<sup>46</sup> He also wrote a one-page memorandum that made his commitment to the PRC contingent on the security dynamics in East Asia.<sup>47</sup>

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Subsequently, George H.W. Bush’s measured response to the PRC’s Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 underscored the weight the forty-first president placed on Washington’s relationship with Beijing. It was not until he encountered a significant political challenge from Bill Clinton in the 1992 election – when he faced accusations of being “soft” on Beijing – that Bush decided to sell F-16



fighter jets to Taiwan.<sup>48</sup>

In the early months of Bill Clinton's first term, he nominated Amb. Winston Lord to serve as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. During his Senate confirmation hearing, Lord called for "nuance" in America's China policy and previewed a trade-off: if Beijing made marginal improvements on human rights, Washington would refrain from elevating its relationship with Taiwan. As part of this exchange, Lord formally adopted the "traffic cop" approach: "It is up to China and Taiwan to work out their future relationship; we insist only that the process be peaceful."<sup>49</sup> He went so far as to characterize Taiwan, along with Hong Kong, as "the greater Chinese communities," seemingly endorsing Beijing's view of Taiwan as part of "one China."<sup>50</sup>

In 1994, President Clinton dropped all semblance of negotiation and formally de-linked the PRC's human rights record from trade terms.<sup>51</sup> The impact on Washington's Taiwan policy was swift. The following year, Clinton privately made three commitments to General Secretary Jiang Zemin:

1. The United States would oppose Taiwanese independence.
2. The United States would not support "two Chinas," or a "one China and one Taiwan" policy.
3. The United States would not support Taiwan's admission to the United Nations.<sup>52</sup>

Around this time, the administration told Taiwanese diplomats in no uncertain terms to bring their concerns directly to the State Department instead of leveraging Congress.<sup>53</sup> Although every other nation enjoys the opportunity to engage both the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government, Taiwan has received intimidation and veiled threats from American officials not to do so for decades.

During the early days of President George W. Bush's first term, it seemed the tide was turning in Taiwan's favor.

A few weeks after the EP-3 spy plane incident in April 2001, Bush stated that America would do "whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself" if the PRC were to attack. When asked if America had a commitment to defend Taiwan, Bush answered: "Yes, we do ... and the Chinese must understand that. Yes, I would."<sup>54</sup> Three years later, however, Bush sternly warned then-Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian not to hold a vote on a referendum on sovereignty. The security issue at hand was the increasing number of deployed PRC missiles targeting Taiwan. Bush made no mention of these threats in his remarks with then-PRC Premier Wen Jiabao.<sup>55</sup>

Subsequently, the Obama administration intended to "pivot" American foreign policy to the Indo-Pacific in a show of strength to the Chinese Communist Party. Instead, it created confusion by creating a high-level strategic and economic dialogue with the PRC that signaled the high priority Washington placed on positive relations with Beijing.<sup>56</sup> The confusion grew worse when then-Assistant Secretary of State Danny Russell contradicted the administration's previous policy by declining to elevate Ronald Reagan's "six assurances" to equal importance with the TRA and the three communiques.<sup>57</sup>

Shortly before his inauguration, then-President-elect Donald Trump accepted a congratulatory call from Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen. PRC diplomats responded aggressively, and Trump moved quickly to salvage his relationship with General Secretary Xi Jinping.<sup>58</sup> He also abruptly recalled a State Department official after Beijing complained about his speech praising Taiwan's democracy.<sup>59</sup> Reportedly, Trump also signaled his ambivalence toward Taiwan's safety to a U.S. senator: "Taiwan is like two feet from China. We are eight thousand miles away. If they invade, there isn't a [expletive] thing we can do about it."<sup>60</sup> As described earlier, this whiplash has also characterized President Joe Biden's approach to Taiwan during his time in office.

To be sure, these administrations also had moments of sound policy toward Taiwan. From arms sales and





high-level visits to Taipei, the United States has not only avoided abandoning Taiwan, but has built a bipartisan record of supporting the island-democracy. Even so, Taiwan needs more than moments of friendship. Taiwan needs political clarity from the United States. For forty-two years, the United States has claimed it has a “one China” policy. In reality, Washington has oscillated between two policies, one favoring Beijing, and the other elevating Taipei.

### **The Deterrence Power of Clarity and Candor**

It is past time for America to affirm what has been true for decades: Washington’s strategic relationship with the ROC is more important than its economic interests with the PRC, significant though they are. Commercial exchange with Beijing has not yielded the political benefits America’s elected leaders anticipated. The PRC remains an authoritarian regime with revisionist interests that threaten the security of Washington’s allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. It has leveraged its considerable military modernization and buildup to isolate Taiwan and threaten it with invasion.

Moreover, Taiwan is the primary fault line between freedom and authoritarianism in the ongoing great power competition between the United States and the PRC. As Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2021, Taiwan’s fate matters geopolitically, economically, and ideologically to the United States and its allies.<sup>61</sup> Geographically, Taiwan – along with Japan and the Philippines – contains the People’s Liberation Army within the first island chain. Annexing Taiwan would supercharge Beijing’s ability to project its military unencumbered into the open Pacific.<sup>62</sup> Economically, Taipei is the epicenter of semiconductor manufacturing. Modern conveniences could grind to a halt in the United States if Beijing successfully seized control of this commanding height.<sup>63</sup> Ideologically, Taiwan is a thriving Chinese democracy. This reality exposes the lie at the heart of the Chinese Communist Party’s claim to power in China, that the CCP alone is capable of ruling the Chinese people.<sup>64</sup>

In light of these stakes, policymakers in Washington should revive the original intent of the Taiwan Relations Act. It was never meant to equally please Beijing and Taipei. Congress crafted the TRA to reassure Taiwan and to deter PRC aggression. The United States is not a traffic cop in East Asia. It is a sovereign nation with interests that must be clearly articulated. Taiwan is a partner, and the PRC is a geopolitical adversary. If policymakers want to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, candidly acknowledging this reality will bring more stability, not less.<sup>65</sup> 🦅

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# Indo-Pacific Security Program Memorandum

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For the United States, the Indo-Pacific represents a region of significant security challenges and enormous political and economic opportunity. AFPC's Indo-Pacific Security Program seeks to provide policymakers and the general public with the analysis, insights and recommendations necessary to properly understand and navigate this vital region.

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