

# Xi Warned Biden During Summit That Beijing Will Reunify Taiwan with China

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Chinese **President Xi Jinping** bluntly told **President Joe Biden** during their recent summit in San Francisco that Beijing will reunify Taiwan with mainland China but that the timing has not yet been decided, according to three current and former U.S. officials.

An NBC News report said:

Xi told Biden in a group meeting attended by a dozen American and Chinese officials that China's preference is to take Taiwan peacefully, not by force, the officials said.

The Chinese leader also referenced [public predictions](#) by U.S. military leaders who say that Xi plans to take Taiwan in 2025 or 2027, telling Biden that they were wrong because he has not set a time frame, according to the two current and one former official briefed on the meeting.

Chinese officials also asked in advance of the summit that Biden make a public statement after the meeting saying that the U.S. supports China's goal of peaceful unification with Taiwan and does not support Taiwanese independence, they said. The White House rejected the Chinese request.

A spokesperson for the U.S. National Security Council declined to comment.

The revelations provide previously unreported details about a critical meeting between the two leaders that was intended to reduce tensions between their countries.

The NBC News report said:

Xi's private warning to Biden, while not markedly different from his [past public comments](#) on reunifying Taiwan, got the attention of U.S. officials because it was delivered at a time when

China's behavior toward Taiwan is seen as increasingly aggressive and ahead of a potentially pivotal presidential election in the self-governing democratic island next month.

After the initial publication of this story, **Sen. Lindsey Graham**, R-S.C., issued a statement calling for Republicans and Democrats to work together to deter China.

"This story as reported is beyond unnerving," Graham said. "I will be working with Democratic and Republican Senators to do two things quickly. First, create a robust defense supplemental for Taiwan and second, draft pre-invasion sanctions from hell to impose on China if they take action to seize Taiwan."

Officials familiar with the conversation between Biden and Xi described the Chinese leader as blunt and candid, but not confrontational.

"His language was no different than what he has always said. He is always tough on Taiwan. He has always had a tough line," said a U.S. official with knowledge of the conversation.

Xi's saber-rattling on Taiwan has been a top concern for Biden administration officials, who are aggressively trying to avoid a military conflict with China.

At last year's Chinese Communist Party Congress, Xi [stated publicly](#) that China would attack Taiwan militarily if it declares independence with foreign support. The Chinese leader said the threat of force "is directed solely at interference by outside forces and the few separatists seeking" Taiwanese independence.

Xi, who has set a goal of doubling the size of the Chinese economy by 2035, [also said that](#) "we must continue to pursue economic development as our central task." Some experts believe it is doubtful that China would attack Taiwan if it does not declare independence because a military conflict would likely prevent Beijing from reaching its economic goals.

During the summit in San Francisco, Xi expressed concerns about the candidates running for president of Taiwan in next month's election, according to U.S. officials. Xi also noted the influence that the U.S. has on Taiwan, they said.

When Biden asked that China respect Taiwan's electoral process, Xi responded by saying that peace is "all well and good" but that China needs to eventually move toward a resolution, one U.S. official said.

Biden's meeting with Xi, their first in a year, took American officials months to secure after relations between Washington and Beijing reached a low point in February after the U.S. shot down a Chinese spy balloon. The White House hoped the meeting [would ease tensions](#), and afterward Biden stressed the need to avoid conflict.

"We are in a competitive relationship, China and the United States, but my responsibility is to make this rational and manageable, so it does not result in conflict," Biden said. "That is what I am all about. That is what this is about."

CIA **Director William Burns** [said earlier this year](#) that U.S. intelligence shows that Xi has directed his military to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027.

"Now, that does not mean that he has decided to conduct an invasion in 2027, or any

other year, but it is a reminder of the seriousness of his focus and his ambition,” Burns said.

Biden [has said in the past](#) that the U.S. military would defend Taiwan if China invaded, but the White House has walked back his comments.

Under its longtime “One China” policy, the U.S. recognizes Beijing as China’s sole legal government but maintains unofficial relations with Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its territory. Most of the island’s 24 million people favor maintaining the status quo, neither unifying with China nor formally declaring independence.

After the summit, Biden reiterated long-standing U.S. policy.

“We maintain an agreement that there is a ‘One China’ policy,” he said, adding, “I am not going to change that. That is not going to change.”

One Chinese official who attended the meeting, **Hua Chunying**, posted afterward on X that Xi had told Biden and other U.S. officials that the

“Taiwan question remains the most important and most sensitive issue in China-U.S. relations.” Hua added that the U.S. should “support China’s peaceful reunification” and that “China will realize reunification, and this is unstoppable.”

## **Taiwan’s Ability to Defend Against China Invasion Thrown Into Question**

A Bloomberg report said:

When former U.S. National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien visited Taipei earlier this year, he suggested that one million AK47-wielding Taiwanese “around every corner” and “in every apartment block” would be an effective deterrent to any Chinese invasion plans.

It did not go down well.

“Arming citizens is not the answer,” ran the headline in the Taipei Times, over an op-ed responding to his proposal to make the assault rifle widely available in a territory with one of the world’s lowest crime rates. “Ludicrous and unimaginable” was former President Ma Ying-jeou’s verdict, condemning what he called the island’s “weaponization” and a “tendency to turn Taiwan into a second Ukraine.”

The outcry over a remark by a straight-talking former U.S. official points to the challenge of preparing Taiwanese society for the worst-case scenario with China. For all the support given by Washington, the reality is that when it comes to both civil and military defense, the democratically governed island still has a lot to do.

“Taiwan is far from ready,” former Chief of the General Staff Lee Hsi-min said in an interview, citing “lots of improvements” that are needed in areas from weapons acquisition to civilian training. Deterrence is key, and equipment can of course help, he said, “but the most important thing is whether you have the will to defend yourself.”

Conversations with US-based security analysts and former administration officials, as well as

with members of the government in Taipei, cast doubt on Taiwan's ability to deter, let alone resist China — with some even questioning the will to do so.

The U.S. sees important progress being made by the government in Taipei, "but the administration is also concerned that the threat facing Taiwan is significant and growing, and as a result more is needed to ensure Taiwan is keeping pace with that threat," said Jennifer Welch, chief geo-economics analyst with Bloomberg Economics, who served as director for China and Taiwan on the U.S. National Security Council until this year.

Those concerns have been fanned by the war in Ukraine, and are all the more acute going into January Presidential elections that are likely to determine the degree of strains with China across the Strait of Taiwan. Polls show a lead for Vice President Lai Ching-te, who wants to strengthen ties with Washington, suggesting no easing of tensions in sight.

The wars in Ukraine and in Gaza show that preparations need to go beyond the military field to areas including critical infrastructure security, civil resilience, cybersecurity, and continuity of operations and government, said Welch. "This is a massive undertaking that naturally requires significant time and resources," she said.

Among the issues officials and analysts cite are the size of Taiwan's military, which has shrunk in recent years, with the number of voluntary recruits dropping to a four-year low. A 12.5% increase in defense spending this year on last has only amplified questions over the suitability of the kit being purchased. And the state of unreadiness is compounded by a backlog in U.S. arms sales to Taiwan including F-16 fighter jets and Abrams M-1 tanks that the Cato Institute estimates at more than \$19 billion.

"I do not think Taiwan is in very good shape," said Kevin McCauley, former senior China analyst for the U.S. Army National Ground Intelligence Center. "They are not making the right modernization decisions," from buying heavy M-1 tanks and large ships "that would not survive" to poor training. "They are talking about how they will improve these things," he said. "But I do not see it."

Oriana Skylar Mastro, a Center Fellow at Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, said that if it came to war with China, "Taiwan 200% will fall."

"It is an island. They run out of food and gas in 40 days," she said. "A blockade is risky because it gives Taiwan time for the U.S. to arrive. So the question is: can Taiwan hold off long enough to allow the U.S. to arrive?" The assessment of the U.S. government, she said, "is that they cannot hold out long."

Chinese President Xi Jinping said during his November visit to San Francisco that China was not preparing to "fight a cold war or a hot war with anyone." But that is done little to calm speculation over Beijing's intentions, since it openly claims Taiwan as Chinese territory. For his part, President Joe Biden has repeatedly said that the U.S. would come to the self-governing island's assistance if it was attacked.

U.S. Department of Defense spokesman **Martin Meiners** said the U.S. is focused on preventing military conflict over Taiwan "with both deterrence and diplomacy," adding that "our entire policy is geared toward that goal."

There is no current information to suggest a war in the Taiwan Strait is imminent, the director general of the Taiwan's National Security Bureau, Tsai Ming-yen, said in October.

But he noted that the Chinese Communist Party “has not given up its intention to invade.”

Beijing and the People’s Liberation Army have used that grey zone of uncertainty to conduct a campaign of intimidation spanning the gamut from military harassment, economic coercion and diplomatic oppression to spreading fake news, according to officials in Taipei. Most visibly, it carries out frequent incursions across the median line of the Taiwan Strait, a tacit boundary that has separated the rivals for decades, and the government has warned it expects more intimidation heading into the elections.

Maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait “will require heightened urgency, attention, and resources in the critical years ahead,” U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary Ely Ratner said in September.

Taiwan is actively discussing and exploring all possibilities with the U.S. to strengthen its defenses, whether civil, military, or infrastructure, said a senior government official in Taipei, asking not to be named discussing private contacts. Some adjustments are ongoing, the official said, citing work with Taiwan’s tech sector to produce thousands of drones by 2024.

With China’s intimidation, Taiwan’s government concludes that it cannot discount any possibility — including that an unexpected accident triggers an escalation, said the official. So the emphasis is on preparing for the worst, something Taiwan has actively been doing since 1949 and its split from Communist China.

There is discussion over whether China would attempt a full-scale invasion or rely on a blockade to choke off Taiwan economically. Both carry risks for the aggressor, but analysts say that China does not have the ships required to pull off an invasion – yet.

Taiwan meanwhile needs anti-ship missiles, air-defense systems, air and sea drones, and smart mines “to make such invasion a virtual impossibility,” says Dmitri Alperovitch, executive chairman of the Silverado Policy Accelerator think tank.

Still, the island’s mountainous terrain, rivers, and shallow waters in the Taiwan Strait make it “one of the most defensible places in the world,” said Alperovitch, author of a forthcoming book, “World on the Brink: How America Can Beat China in the Race for the Twenty-First Century.”

Limited stretches of coastline where invaders could establish a beachhead, the location of fish farms behind those beaches, plus the fact that few highways lead to the capital would all further impede the progress of any invading force.

The Bloomberg report said:

Walk through central Taipei of an evening and the malls are full, designer shops crowded, and teenagers with boom boxes perform K-pop dance routines in the street. There is little outward sign that this is an island at the nexus of global tensions.

Taiwan has attracted over \$70 billion from returning Taiwanese businesses since 2019, while foreign investment in 2022 was the highest in almost 15 years, outgoing President Tsai Ing-wen said at an opening ceremony for a Micron Technology Inc. plant on Nov. 6. The U.S. memory chip company’s presence endorses Taiwan as a safe place to invest, she said.

Equally, the island's relative affluence may help inure its citizens to the threat of conflict.

Polls suggest that a little more than half of respondents are willing to defend Taiwan if China attacks, meaning that "some 40% of Taiwanese people are likely to choose capitulation or rapprochement," said Puma Shen, associate professor at National Taipei University and the co-founder of Kuma Academy, a private organization dedicated to building civil defense. For Shen, the most important step for Taiwan "is to enhance the public's awareness of friend and foe," he said. "Without it, all other preparations are meaningless."

That ambiguity is reflected in Taiwan's political landscape, with some presidential candidates more willing to engage with China than others, potentially influencing the response to any future collision with Beijing.

Eric Heginbotham, a principal research scientist at MIT's Center for International Studies and a specialist in Asian security issues, said that he "would not be shocked if Taiwan threw up its hands in the first days of a conflict," especially if the U.S. was not "visibly committed." At the same time, he acknowledged that many similarly expected an early surrender in Ukraine that failed to materialize. Even leaving that aside, he said, the Taiwanese are "not well prepared psychologically or materially, and their training is not sufficiently realistic."

It is not just Taiwan. The pace of U.S. preparation is "still inadequate to the scale of the challenge," according to Bruce Jones, senior fellow at the Brookings Institute. Deficiencies include stockpiling relevant munitions as well as readying the U.S. public for "a deep crisis in the western Pacific" that could mean the significant loss of American lives.

Taiwan's 2023 Defense Report says the threat is building. China is "expanding military capabilities at scale," including constructing airfields along its eastern and southern coastline and stationing new fighters and drones there permanently to "seize air superiority in the event of war across the Taiwan Strait." It is just 8 minutes flying time from the closest airfield to Taipei, according to some estimates.

If those threats turned into action, Taiwan's strategy is to pre-emptively strike the mobilizing invasion forces, then use its geographical advantage to attack its enemy during the most vulnerable phase of crossing the strait, according to the Defense Report.

Capabilities are another matter, though.

Wellington Koo, the head of Taiwan's National Security Council, points to a reform of defense policy that means from 2024 the draft will be extended to a year, helping to provide "realistic training to enhance combat power." Yet further steps are needed on overhauling the reserve system, on joint forces training by the army, navy and air force, and on strengthening "whole society resilience," he said at a Nov. 13 briefing.

Building that resilience is the aim of annual exercises — this year's scenario was a magnitude 6.9 earthquake striking the island's main chipmaking hub in the northern city of Hsinchu — as well as simulated cyberattacks on key infrastructure such as the state water or oil company.

The goal is "to establish a mechanism and resilience that we can deal with no matter what kind of disaster, whether it is war or natural disaster — we all need to deal with it," Interior Minister Lin Yu-chang said in an interview.

That is what Enoch Wu is working to advance. Wu founded Forward Alliance in 2020, a non-profit that provides emergency training with the ethos that citizens' responses determine whether a society can come through crises. He sees Taiwan as "in a race against time" given Beijing's clear sense of urgency. "We need to respond accordingly," said Wu. "Given we are on the front line, we need to do more."

Forward Alliance instructors — serving firefighters and medical personnel — were at work on a recent November afternoon at a police department in New Taipei City, giving training on tactical emergency casualty care to officers. Taught how to use a tourniquet to stop bleeding and treating chest wounds, it seemed more suited to a war zone than an island where strict laws on ownership mean gun crime is rare.

For Lin, the interior minister, preparations are necessary for all eventualities. "Peace is important — no one wants to go to war," he said. "But Taiwan is a society facing lots of risks."

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*Featured image: President Joe Biden greets President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, Wednesday, November 15, 2023, at the Filoli Estate in Woodside, California.(Official White House Photo by Carlos Fyfe)*

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