

David Sacks on Pursuing U.S. Strategic Clarity Toward Taiwan and Enhancing Regional Deterrence

Interviewed by Tin Pak

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Tin Pak: You introduced the concept of “strategic clarity,” which refers to an explicit U.S. pledge to come to Taiwan’s defense in the face of Chinese aggression against the island. Can you lay out your thinking on this? Specifically, what are the major weaknesses of the current policy that is termed “Strategic ambiguity,” and how do you see strategic clarity addressing those weaknesses?

David Sacks: When Richard Haass and I were thinking about the concept of strategic clarity and the weaknesses of strategic ambiguity, one thing we were trying to address was that a lot of the assumptions underpinning strategic ambiguity, in our view, no longer hold. Fundamentally, strategic ambiguity was suited to deterring a China that was far weaker and more risk averse. For decades, even if China wanted to attempt to unify Taiwan by force, it did not have the military capability to do so. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was largely a ground-based force that did not have power projection capabilities and could not pull off the sophisticated joint operation necessary to subdue Taiwan and prevent or defeat U.S. intervention. Under Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and even Hu Jintao, Beijing prioritized building a functional relationship with the United States and getting access to the global economy and to U.S. investment above pretty much everything else, including Taiwan.

What we see now, though, is that China has been very determined to develop the military capabilities it would need to annex Taiwan and defeat U.S. intervention. Indeed, the U.S. intelligence community assesses that Xi Jinping has set a deadline of 2027 for the PLA to develop such capabilities. We also see Xi’s China as far more risk acceptant. He militarized the South China Sea even in the face of U.S. opposition. China and India had a deadly border

clash. China is providing significant support to Russia to aid its invasion of Ukraine. And Chinese pressure on Taiwan has increased dramatically. Meanwhile, Xi has stated that the Taiwan question cannot be passed on to future generations and he has intimately linked unification with Taiwan to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which he has said must be completed by 2049. Taking all of this together, the bar for deterrence has gone up. We believe the United States needs to adjust its force posture and its declaratory policy to ensure deterrence remains credible. We would rather have deterrence through certainty rather than through uncertainty, and to reduce the chances of miscalculation.

Similarly, my view is that China has not refrained from using force against Taiwan because it has felt as though it has to adhere to some international norm against the use of force or as a favor to the United States or out of goodwill toward Taiwan. I think that it’s mainly because it frankly has not had the ability to do so, even if it wanted to. And that gets me back to the previous point, which is that for decades, China did not have a credible military option to use force against Taiwan. In a sense, deterrence has worked almost by default, because China couldn’t challenge it. But the question is, what should your deterrent posture be when China potentially can challenge it? To us, you have to strengthen deterrence as China builds its military capabilities, and it sees the potential cost going down and the benefits going up for military action.

Another thing that looms in our minds as well is the international context. You have the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The wars between Israel and its neighbors. The deadly clash between India and Pakistan. The Trump administration’s use of force against Venezuela and Iran. This is not to say that there is an equivalency here, but the common denominator is that the normative constraints on the

use of military force is eroding. In that context, you have to look at bolstering deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. Especially because what we've seen with Vladimir Putin's moves in Ukraine is that autocrats don't necessarily have the same kind of cost-benefit calculus that we have, or that we assume that other rational leaders have, and that it might take more to deter this type of aggression. Because clearly, our package of deterrence in Ukraine failed, and we can't afford to have deterrence fail in the Taiwan Strait.

Tin Pak: In your Foreign Affairs article, you argue that strategic clarity is consistent with the U.S. one-China policy, that it would not amount to endorsing Taiwanese independence, and that U.S. pledges would be contingent on Taiwan refraining from declaring independence. But wouldn't China likely perceive a clear U.S. security pledge as de facto support for independence, since Beijing relies heavily on the threat of force as leverage to deter Taiwan from moving in that direction? If that leverage is weakened, wouldn't China interpret strategic clarity as effectively backing independence?

David Sacks: Our goal with strategic clarity is to bolster deterrence so that China doesn't embark on a war of choice against Taiwan that would be horrible for Taiwan's 23 million people, that would devastate the global economy, and that would imperil vital U.S. interests. What we fear is that Xi, once he has what he believes to be a credible military option, will convince himself that the United States will not intervene, and then moves forward and uses force. Strategic clarity is not about diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, and we are not advocating that the United States abandon its one-China policy. We believe that the United States should support any resolution of cross-Strait differences that occurs peacefully and with the consent of the people on Taiwan.

I do believe that if Taiwan were to pursue de jure independence or if it were to seek a seat at the United Nations, then China would use force against Taiwan, regardless of its military readiness or America's deterrence posture. In such an instance, China would believe it was faced with a war of necessity. We tried to make clear in our article that strategic clarity is not a blank check. It is meant to address the question of Chinese aggression. We expect Taiwan to maintain the political status quo and to not make unilateral moves towards independence. But I think it is a bit of a red herring to say that if Taiwan is given an assurance from the United States that it would intervene on its behalf in the face of Chinese aggression, that it will declare independence and trigger that attack. If you look at the public polling, it shows that Taiwanese voters are quite pragmatic, and that they, too, understand that if Taiwan were to declare independence, China would likely use force against Taiwan. This is why

most Taiwanese people prefer maintaining the status quo. There is very little support for pursuing independence immediately, and that has been consistent for decades. So I'm not really worried that strategic clarity would embolden Taiwan to be reckless. I think that Taiwanese political leaders understand that, regardless of U.S. declaratory policy, if China believes that it was backed into a corner and is at risk of losing Taiwan permanently, it would act, regardless of its readiness. What strategic clarity is trying to do is to prevent a war of choice, while understanding that China would likely act if it believed that it needed to fight a war of necessity.

Tin Pak: My next question ties Taiwan into U.S. foreign policy globally. Right now, we see a lot of talk about intervening in the Middle East, focusing on the Western Hemisphere, and withdrawing from Europe. I'm curious whether or not you think we should be drawing down from these areas and focusing more intently on Taiwan, considering the scarcity of resources. Are you of the opinion that we should be drawing down in these areas to address the threat posed to Taiwan?

David Sacks: At an abstract level, I think that for the United States deterrence is not divisible. What I mean by that is for a global power such as the United States, what it does – or does not do – in one part of the world has ramifications for how its power and political will is perceived in other regions. If we think about Taiwan, its political leaders have been consistent in asserting that Ukraine's fate matters to Taiwan's security. Japanese leaders have similarly made clear that what happens in Ukraine matters to Japan's security. We should take those statements seriously. I believe that the United States has an interest in providing military assistance to Ukraine to demonstrate that aggression does not pay and to uphold the norm that borders cannot be changed through force. If the United States were to abandon Ukraine by halting aid, it would turbocharge a lot of the skepticism of the United States that we already see in Taiwan, and it would do a lot of China's work for it in terms of sowing doubts about U.S. reliability and wearing down the Taiwanese people, so that they believe that unification is inevitable. I think it would also sow doubts in Tokyo, Seoul, Manila, and Canberra about U.S. staying power. I also think that it's a little disingenuous to say that the capabilities that we have been giving to Ukraine are exactly those we would need for Taiwan contingencies, and that everything sent to Ukraine is something not sent to Taiwan. For example, 155mm artillery is not necessarily the most critical munition for Taiwan. Yes, there are some capabilities where it is more of an issue, such as air defense interceptors and anti-tank missiles. Those are capabilities that we have sold to Taiwan that we need to deliver to Taiwan. This is an issue that we need to resolve, but the solution is to invest a lot more in our defense industrial base, to ramp up production, to fix bottlenecks, and to fix a broken procurement process.

I am far more uneasy about the extent to which the Middle East continues to soak up U.S. attention and military resources. The war against Iran – which is a U.S. war of choice – has led to a worrying expenditure of precisely those capabilities that the United States would need in a Taiwan contingency, from Tomahawk missiles to THAAD and Patriot air defense interceptors and long-range anti-ship missiles. Replenishing these stocks will take a long time. More fundamentally, I worry that the war against Iran will force the United States to spend far greater military and diplomatic resources – and more attention – on the Middle East in the years to come, when the strategic imperative for focusing on the Indo-Pacific is overwhelming. My bottom line is that I would continue to try to draw down in the Middle East. This is, of course, far easier said than done, as we have been explicitly trying to do this for a decade and a half with little to show for it. I believe that the United States can and should be able to sustain our commitments to our NATO allies in Europe while also deterring Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. To me, those are the top two priorities that we have to resource, and I would draw down in the Middle East and elsewhere to be able to fulfill these commitments.

Tin Pak: My next question is about the Trump administration. In one of your articles, you alluded to the possibility of Trump making a grand bargain or deal with China regarding Taiwan. I'm curious how you think policy towards Taiwan during the Trump administration will evolve? Can you envision any major changes in U.S. policy under his administration?

David Sacks: I think it is important to set the framework that I'm working off of to evaluate President Trump's approach to China and Taiwan. First, President Trump is not, personally, a China hawk, and I don't believe that he really prioritizes geopolitical competition with China or other nations. President Trump views things primarily through an economic lens, privileging questions of trade and investment. In that sense, while he believes the U.S.-China trade relationship is unbalanced, he also believes that this can be remedied and that China is a potential partner – a large market and a source of capital. The language in President Trump's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy regarding China is actually quite mild. It's milder than the Biden administration's strategic documents. It's far milder than the language in the strategic documents of his first term. President Trump consistently speaks of his good relationship with Xi Jinping and his respect for Xi. He has publicly endorsed the idea of a "G-2" with China. If we look at the president's State of the Union address, the longest in history, there was not a single mention of China. This is not somebody who believes that we are in a long-term strategic competition with China that is akin to something like the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. We also know that President Trump's views on Taiwan are not very favorable. He has accused the island of stealing the chip industry from the United States, while stating that the United States gets nothing in return for

providing security to Taiwan. My fear, then, is that Xi will present Trump with a deal that essentially trades economic issues for geopolitical ones. Xi would commit to purchasing commodities – such as soybeans, corn, and natural gas – from the United States, and would even dangle large investments in the United States in areas where China has a technological edge such as electric vehicles and batteries. In return, Xi may ask for a statement from the United States that it opposes Taiwan independence – current U.S. policy is that it “does not support” Taiwan independence – or that it will support efforts toward unification. Xi could even ask Trump to curtail U.S. security cooperation with Taiwan. In President Trump's mind, he may weigh that deal and conclude it is a good one. My view, though, is that such a shift in U.S. rhetorical policy on Taiwan would increase skepticism of the United States in Taiwan, make it far harder for President Lai to push for greater defense spending, and make it far harder for the United States to rally its allies and partners to support Taiwan. I fear that China is going to dangle the economic carrot with President Trump, and it has already shown that it has a major stick that it can wield by cutting off access to rare earths, and then, in exchange, President Trump will believe that concessions on Taiwan are worth making.

Tin Pak: So now shifting to Taiwan and what their government is doing. President Lai has recently pledged that defense spending will reach five percent of GDP, and has put forward a \$40 billion special defense budget. I'm curious if you think Taiwan is doing enough right now for its security, and whether or not these goals that Lai set specifically for the defense budget are realistic considering domestic opposition. And I'm also curious to hear if you have any other recommendations, or policy suggestions, that Taiwan should be taking that they're not doing right now?

David Sacks: I think that for Taiwan, spending five percent of GDP on defense is a reasonable target. Countries that face similarly grave external security environments, such as South Korea and Israel, spend similar sums on defense. The fact is that Taiwan faces an existential threat; China has made clear its determination to bring Taiwan under its control, by force if necessary. And China is devoting considerable money and effort to developing viable military options to do so. In Taiwan, China's crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to a recognition that the threat environment has changed and that a potential Chinese use of force is not just some abstract threat that the United States has made up, but it could actually happen. Second, I think Taiwanese people understand that they have underinvested in their defense over the years. Under President Ma Ying-jeou, defense spending as a percentage of GDP dipped below two percent, while he also shifted Taiwan to an all-volunteer force and cut mandatory military service. Third, Taiwanese leaders also understand that in an era of “America First,” there is an expectation that America allies and partners will carry more of the burden for their

security and that America will help those that are seen as pulling their weight – and will be less inclined to help those that are not doing so. This is potentially one of the salutary things of President Trump's approach. The reality is that U.S. allies were not doing enough for their security and this was an unsustainable formula. For the long-term health of these relationships and for the continued strength of deterrence, it is good for allies and partners to take on more responsibility for their security. Fourth and finally, Taiwan has ample fiscal space to spend on defense. Its debt-to-GDP ratio is quite low, inflation is under control, and its economy is slated to grow by nearly eight percent in 2026, fueled by demand for AI-related products.

When President Trump was running for president, he said in an interview with the Washington Post that Taiwan should spend ten percent of its GDP on defense, and Elbridge Colby echoed that in his confirmation hearing. I think ten percent is not achievable. I'm not sure if any democracy has spent ten percent of GDP on defense during peacetime. But I think five percent is a reasonable goal. And it is important for Taiwan to pass the special defense budget under consideration and consistently increase defense spending to demonstrate its seriousness, as there are many in the United States who believe Taiwan is not doing enough on defense.

In terms of other steps that Taiwan is taking or needs to take, I think the investments in developing an indigenous defense industry are critical. The fact is that the only country that will sell arms to Taiwan is the United States, and there may be certain capabilities that Taiwan needs that we just don't make. Given Taiwan's manufacturing expertise, it may also be able to produce similar capabilities at a far cheaper price and deliver them to its military in a timelier manner. Finally, if deterrence fails and there is a conflict, resupplying Taiwan will be enormously difficult, and it will need to have domestic production to replenish its stocks. Taiwan is trying to learn lessons from the war in Ukraine and incorporate those into its military, and I think one lesson is of course the importance of drones and frankly how far behind Taiwan was in this area. We now see Taiwan investing in drones and autonomous systems, but it will need to significantly ramp up the scale of production. Taiwan's production targets are equivalent to what Ukraine is using every month on the battlefield. That gives a sense of just how many of these systems need to be produced for them to have an effect. One of the lessons of the war in Ukraine is that quantity has a quality all of its own, and that for these systems to be effective, you need to overwhelm your adversary. Taiwan needs to do a lot more in terms of just generating an enormous number of these low-cost expendable systems. Another thing that President Lai has focused on is whole-of-society resilience. This effort is really trying to address the likelihood that U.S. intervention does not occur on day one, because it will take time for the United States to make a political decision, to bring together a

coalition, and to flow forces to the region. As a result, Taiwan will have to hold out for long enough to allow the United States to mount an intervention. This touches on areas such as ensuring food security and energy security, protecting undersea cables, improving mobilization efforts, and developing a Starlink equivalent. Those are all things that Taiwan has frankly not thought that much about until recently, but that are very important things for Taiwan. I am quite encouraged about the efforts under the banner of whole-of-society resilience and think the United States should continue to support these activities.

If we want to think about one area where I think Taiwan also could reassess its policy, a natural place would be nuclear energy, which is a very contentious political issue in Taiwan. But I think that one could question the wisdom of mothballing the two nuclear power plants that were still in operation, because nuclear power would help bolster Taiwan's energy security, in case there is a blockade and Taiwan can't import LNG or oil for a period of time. That said, I think that the bottom line here should be a recognition that Taiwan has turned the corner and is doing a lot to improve resilience and to bolster deterrence.

Tin Pak: My last question would be focusing on allies and partners in the region. What role do you think that U.S. partners and allies will play in a potential Taiwan contingency and what their willingness would be to intervene and how much support you think each country would contribute?

David Sacks: Just to make clear, maybe an assumption that we share but don't necessarily say at the outset, there is no allied intervention without the United States leading the way. So any talk of what Japan would do or what South Korea would do during a Taiwan contingency is premised on the United States intervening militarily on Taiwan's behalf. Now, if the United States were to intervene on Taiwan's behalf, I think that Japan would provide pretty much all of the assistance that the United States would request – both because U.S. intervention cannot work without such assistance and because Japan views Taiwan as an existential issue for Japanese security. Prime Minister Takaichi made her view pretty clear that a Taiwan contingency would be considered a survival-threatening situation for Japan, which would enable it to exercise collective self-defense and work alongside U.S. forces. If you think about what Japan would contribute, there are certain missions that the Japanese self-defense forces would be good at, such as patrolling sea lanes providing air defense, protecting bases so U.S. forces can operate from them, escorting U.S. forces through the region, as from them, escorting U.S. forces through the region as they intervene on Taiwan's behalf, providing access to civilian airstrips and ports to U.S. forces, and conducting non-combatant evacuation operations. There is a lot that Japan

can bring to the table here. I want to again underscore that any U.S.-led defense of Taiwan cannot succeed without Japanese support. Japan recognizes that it does not want to live in a world where China controls Taiwan, where it can threaten the Senkaku Islands and Japan's Southwest Islands. I'm fairly confident that the United States and Japan are becoming increasingly aligned on this issue.

Beyond Japan, if we think about South Korea, their refrain has traditionally been that their job during a Taiwan contingency should be limited to ensuring that North Korea does not open another front. I think that it is fair that they fear North Korea would be opportunistic and invade or use limited aggression against the South, so they want to be focused there. All I would say on that is that in the era of "American First," it is going to be very hard for a U.S. treaty ally to not assist the United States when Americans are fighting and dying for another partner. If the United States chooses to intervene on Taiwan's behalf, I do not believe any alliance relationship in the region survives a decision in a regional capital to sit this out and not give the United States all the assistance it requests. Americans would naturally ask, "Why should we defend South Korea against a nuclear-armed adversary when they won't help us in our time of need?" So my own view is that if South Korea, the Philippines, or Australia were to basically attempt to sit out a Taiwan contingency, and not provide the support the United States was requesting, they would essentially be concluding that they are better off without the U.S. alliance than retaining an alliance with the United States. That is a decision they would have to make. For South Korea, a lot of what the United States would seek would be rear area support, evacuating wounded personnel, providing ammunition and fuel, and sustainment of U.S. forces, rather than for South Korean forces to be directly involved in a Taiwan contingency. I think for the Philippines, it would be mostly to grant access to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement sites that we've already identified and are building out, especially those in northern Luzon, and just allowing U.S. forces to operate from those sites. For Australia, given AUKUS, I think it's not only about having bases in Australia that U.S. submarines can use, but also that any future nuclear-powered submarines in Australia's navy would also be involved in operations in a Taiwan contingency.