

Will Trump Walk Away From Taiwan? The Quiet Signals Alarming Taipei

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Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).

1. Reading Passage

In early June 2026, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth stood before a security summit in Singapore and warned that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan 'could be imminent.' It was the bluntest American language in years. Then something strange happened: for the rest of the week, in meetings with allies and reporters, Hegseth refused to say the word 'Taiwan' at all. To officials in Taipei, who spend their lives parsing Washington's every syllable, the silence was deafening.

Taiwan has depended on the United States for arms and an unspoken security guarantee since 1979, when Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act. That law commits the US to selling Taiwan weapons sufficient for self-defense — but says nothing about sending American troops if China attacks. This deliberate vagueness, known as 'strategic ambiguity,' is the cornerstone of US Taiwan policy. The logic is elegant: Beijing cannot be certain an invasion would be unopposed, and Taipei cannot be certain a declaration of independence would be defended. Both sides are forced to behave.

But ambiguity only works if it's credible. And lately, the signals coming out of Washington have begun to wobble. President Trump, fresh from a summit with Xi Jinping in Xiamen, has publicly called Taiwan the 'cornerstone' of US-China relations — language that echoes Beijing's own framing. An \$8.4bn arms package approved under President Biden has been sitting unprocessed for over four years. Taiwanese officials worry, openly, that the island could be traded away as part of a wider US-China deal on tariffs and trade.

Here's the catch: the threat isn't merely that Trump might 'abandon' Taiwan in some dramatic televised moment. The deeper risk is that deterrence erodes quietly. China's People's Liberation Army has steadily escalated pressure — warplane incursions across the median line, coast guard ships circling Kinmen, exercises that the US Indo-Pacific commander has described as 'rehearsals' for invasion. Every American hesitation, every word swapped or omitted, is logged in Beijing's calculations. If Xi concludes that the US lacks the will to fight, the ambiguity that has kept the peace for forty-five years stops working.

Taiwan has one unusual card to play: chips. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, TSMC, produces the overwhelming majority of the world's most advanced semiconductors — the brains inside every modern smartphone, electric vehicle, and artificial-intelligence server. A war over Taiwan would not just be a regional crisis; it would freeze the global tech economy overnight. That dependence is Taiwan's strangest insurance policy: the world is so wired into the island's factories that any great power thinking about destabilizing it has to weigh the cost of breaking civilization's supply chain.

Still, history is not reassuring. Great powers have a long record of trading away smaller allies for larger strategic prizes — Czechoslovakia in 1938, South Vietnam in 1973. Taiwan is determined not to become the next entry on that list. Trump is expected to visit China later in 2026, the first such trip in years. What he says — and, perhaps more importantly, what he doesn't say — will tell Taipei whether the old bargain still holds. For now, the island is watching, listening, and bracing.

2. Explanation

A US defense secretary refusing to say the word 'Taiwan,' a stalled arms package, and a president echoing Beijing's talking points – Taipei is reading the tea leaves, and it doesn't love the brew.

What's Going On?

Taiwan has relied on American weapons and an implicit US security guarantee for decades. But in early June 2026, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth gave a Singapore security speech warning that a Chinese invasion 'could be imminent' – and then, in a follow-up week of meetings, pointedly avoided saying 'Taiwan' at all. Meanwhile, an \$8.4bn arms package approved under Biden has been sitting in limbo for over four years.

President Trump, fresh off a summit with Xi Jinping in Xiamen, has begun publicly echoing Beijing's framing – calling Taiwan's relationship with the mainland the 'cornerstone' of US-China ties and refusing to confirm whether he'd defend the island. Taiwanese officials are now openly nervous that Taiwan could become a bargaining chip in a wider US-China trade deal.

How To Think About It

Taiwan's security has always run on a doctrine called 'strategic ambiguity' – the US deliberately never says whether it would defend the island, so Beijing can't be sure it's safe to invade and Taipei can't be sure it's safe to declare independence. The whole arrangement is a balancing act of calculated uncertainty.

- Think of it like a nuclear standoff during the Cold War: the threat works only if both sides believe you might actually pull the trigger. The moment one side openly doubts you, deterrence collapses.
- Or think of a landlord who's never put the eviction notice in writing but everyone assumes he will if the rent stops coming. If he suddenly starts chatting warmly with the tenant's biggest rival, the tenant has to wonder whether the lease is really enforceable.

Key Things To Know

- The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act legally requires the US to sell Taiwan weapons sufficient for self-defense – but says nothing about sending troops if China attacks.
- China has been steadily ramping up military pressure: warplane incursions, coast guard ships near Kinmen, and what the US Indo-Pacific commander calls 'rehearsals' for invasion.
- Key players: Xi Jinping (China), Lai Ching-te (Taiwan's president, whom Beijing labels a 'separatist'), Pete Hegseth (US Defense Secretary), and Trump himself, who has called Taiwan a 'cornerstone' of the US-China relationship.
- TSMC, Taiwan's chip giant, makes most of the world's advanced semiconductors – meaning if China takes Taiwan, it controls the supply chain behind nearly every modern phone, car, and AI system.
- What most people miss: the danger isn't necessarily a Trump 'betrayal' – it's that ambiguity itself erodes if one side stops believing in it. Beijing watches every signal.

Why It Matters

If you're reading this on a phone, a laptop, or anything with a chip, Taiwan made the brain inside it. A conflict in the Taiwan Strait would shock the global economy harder than any event since World War II – wiping out chip supply, freezing trade routes, and potentially dragging the US into a war with a nuclear power. For your generation, this isn't an abstract foreign-policy debate; it's the single most consequential geopolitical question of the next decade, shaping job markets, prices, and whether the world stays roughly peaceful.

The Bigger Picture

Trump is scheduled to visit China later in 2026 – the first sitting US president to do so in years – and Taiwan worries it will be the unspoken price of any 'grand bargain' on trade and tariffs. Watch three things: whether the stalled \$8.4bn arms package finally moves, whether Trump uses the word 'defend' regarding Taiwan, and whether Beijing escalates pressure to test US resolve. Historically, great-power deals over small allies (Czechoslovakia in 1938, South Vietnam in 1973) rarely end well for the small ally – but Taiwan, unlike them, holds a chokehold on the world's chip supply, which is its strangest and strongest insurance policy.

3. Key Terms Glossary

Strategic ambiguity

The longstanding US policy of deliberately not saying whether it would militarily defend Taiwan, designed to deter both a Chinese invasion and a Taiwanese declaration of independence.

Taiwan Relations Act (1979)

The US law that governs unofficial relations with Taiwan and obligates the US to provide weapons for the island's self-defense, passed after Washington formally recognized Beijing.

People's Liberation Army (PLA)

China's national armed forces, controlled by the Chinese Communist Party rather than the state. Its growing exercises around Taiwan are central to the current tension.

Shangri-La Dialogue

An annual security summit in Singapore where defense ministers from across Asia and the West meet – the venue where Hegseth made his 'imminent' invasion remark.

Deterrence

The idea that an adversary won't attack if they believe the cost of attacking outweighs the benefit. It depends on credibility – the threat must be believable.

Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM)

The US military command responsible for operations across Asia and the Pacific, including any potential Taiwan contingency.

Magazine depth

Military jargon for how much ammunition and weaponry a country has stockpiled – a key measure of whether you can sustain a long war versus run out fast.

Sovereign state

A country with full self-government and recognized authority over its territory. Whether Taiwan qualifies is the central political dispute with Beijing.

4. Reading Comprehension Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Q1. The passage primarily argues that:

- A) Trump has formally ended US support for Taiwan's independence movement.
- B) Taiwan's leaders are growing anxious that US security commitments may be weakening.
- C) China's military is now strong enough to invade Taiwan within the year.
- D) Semiconductor exports have replaced military aid as Taiwan's main defense.

Q2. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

- A) US-China trade deals always come at the expense of smaller allies in Asia.
- B) Taiwan's chip industry guarantees that no US president would abandon it.
- C) Subtle shifts in US rhetoric and arms policy are unsettling Taiwan's longstanding security assumptions.
- D) Pete Hegseth's Singapore speech marked an official change in US defense doctrine.

Q3. According to the passage, the \$8.4bn arms package matters because:

- A) It would immediately deter any Chinese invasion attempt.
- B) Its delay signals possible cooling of US commitment to Taiwan's defense.
- C) It includes nuclear weapons for the first time.
- D) It would replace the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'cornerstone' most nearly means:

- A) Decorative feature
- B) Foundational element
- C) Final obstacle
- D) Hidden weakness

Q5. As used in the passage, 'ambiguity' most nearly means:

- A) Dishonesty
- B) Confusion
- C) Deliberate uncertainty
- D) Open hostility

Q6. Which statement about deterrence can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

- A) Deterrence works only when both sides have nuclear weapons.
- B) Deterrence depends on the adversary believing the threat is credible.
- C) Deterrence has failed every time it has been tested historically.
- D) Deterrence is no longer a useful concept in modern conflict.

Q7. The passage suggests that TSMC and Taiwan's chip industry function as:

- A) A reason great powers might be cautious about destabilizing Taiwan.
- B) The only remaining reason the US still sells Taiwan weapons.
- C) A vulnerability that makes Taiwan easier to invade.
- D) An economic burden that drains Taiwan's defense budget.

Q8. The author's tone in describing Taipei's reaction to Trump's signals is best described as:

- A)** Mocking and dismissive
- B)** Alarmed and partisan
- C)** Concerned but analytical
- D)** Optimistic and reassuring

Q9. Which can most reasonably be inferred about Taiwan's strategic position?

- A)** It depends primarily on European, not American, support.
- B)** Its security rests on signals as much as on actual military hardware.
- C)** It has already lost any meaningful US backing.
- D)** Its semiconductor industry will inevitably move to the US.

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A)** The reference to TSMC making most of the world's advanced chips.
- B)** The note that the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act requires weapons sales.
- C)** The description of Taipei scrutinizing Hegseth's avoidance of the word 'Taiwan.'
- D)** The mention of China's coast guard ships near Kinmen.

My Score: _____ / 10

5. Answer Key with Explanations

Q1. The passage primarily argues that:

Answer: B

The passage centers on Taipei's rising unease – stalled arms sales, Hegseth's silence, Trump echoing Beijing – all signals that US commitment may be softening. A overstates the case (no formal end has occurred – TRAP A, wrong direction). SAT Tip: 'Primary argument' questions reward the broadest claim the whole passage supports, not the most dramatic single detail.

Q2. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

Answer: C

The passage emphasizes signals – word choices, stalled packages, summit framing – not a formal policy reversal. D overstates (the speech is a signal, not a doctrinal change – TRAP B, passage vocabulary in wrong combination). SAT Tip: Central-idea answers usually use hedged language ('shifts,' 'concerns'); options with absolute claims like 'always' or 'official change' are often traps.

Q3. According to the passage, the \$8.4bn arms package matters because:

Answer: B

The passage treats the four-year delay as a measurable signal of weakening US support. A is a real-world-plausible overstatement the passage never makes (TRAP C). SAT Tip: When the question asks why a specific detail matters, look for how the author uses it in argument – not what it could theoretically do.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'cornerstone' most nearly means:

Answer: B

Trump calls Taiwan the 'cornerstone' of US-China ties – meaning the foundational, defining issue. A misreads the architectural metaphor as merely ornamental (TRAP B, passage vocabulary, wrong combination). SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context, substitute each option into the sentence – only the one that preserves the original meaning is correct.

Q5. As used in the passage, 'ambiguity' most nearly means:

Answer: C

Strategic ambiguity is described as a deliberate policy of not committing – uncertainty by design. B treats it as accidental, which misses the 'strategic' part (TRAP B). SAT Tip: Watch for adjectives modifying the vocab word – 'strategic ambiguity' is very different from plain ambiguity.

Q6. Which statement about deterrence can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

Answer: B

The passage implies the whole problem is that Trump's rhetoric makes the US threat less believable – i.e., credibility is what makes deterrence work. C is a real-world claim the passage never makes (TRAP C). SAT Tip: Inference answers must be implied by the passage; if it's true in the real world but the passage doesn't suggest it, it's a trap.

Q7. The passage suggests that TSMC and Taiwan's chip industry function as:

Answer: A

The passage notes Taiwan's chip dominance as 'insurance policy' – global dependence raises the cost of any conflict. B overreaches into 'only' territory the passage doesn't support (TRAP A, wrong direction). SAT Tip: Beware options containing 'only,' 'always,' 'never' – they require the passage to rule out all alternatives, which it rarely does.

Q8. The author's tone in describing Taipei's reaction to Trump's signals is best described as:

Answer: C

The author lays out worrying signals carefully but offers context (chip industry, historical parallels) rather than panicking or taking sides. B is tempting but the piece is not partisan – it analyzes Trump's moves rather than condemning them (TRAP B). SAT Tip: For tone questions, look at the author's adjectives and verbs, not the topic itself – a worrying topic can still be discussed analytically.

Q9. Which can most reasonably be inferred about Taiwan's strategic position?

Answer: B

The whole passage shows Taipei reading words, omissions, and gestures as critical to its safety – meaning signals shape security alongside weapons. C overstates current reality (TRAP A, wrong direction). SAT Tip: The strongest inference is usually the one the passage's overall structure points toward, not an extreme version of a single sentence.

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

Answer: C

Taipei treating a single word's absence as a security signal directly supports the inference that signals matter as much as hardware. B is about hardware/law, not signaling (TRAP B, passage vocabulary used in wrong combination). SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, find the passage line that supports your previous answer first, then match it to the option – don't pick based on which sounds most impressive.