

## Taiwan in US Strategic Perspective: Lynchpin of the Indo-Pacific

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US and Chinese war planners pore over the map of a small and mostly mountainous island, gaming out every possible contingency to gain an edge in a hypothetical conflict. The tactics and outcomes vary across scenarios, but the costs remain consistent: trillions in damage, untold civilian and military casualties, and a permanent rupture in the global trading system.

What makes Taiwan so important? Why would these costs even be considered?

The reality is that Taiwan matters: militarily, economically, and symbolically. And the island's future status will resonate far beyond the lives of the 24 million people living there. This series examines the strategic weight of Taiwan through the perspective of the major players in Indo-Pacific security, beginning with the United States.

## **Geopolitics of the First Island Chain**

Taiwan is the centerpiece of what military planners [call](#) the “first island chain,” a line of islands stretching from Japan’s core islands, through Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines, together forming a natural arc along the edge of the Asian continent. In strategic terms, the chain acts like a gate: whoever controls it decides who can freely move ships and aircraft between the East Asian mainland and the wider Pacific Ocean.

So long as Taiwan is aligned with the United States and its allies, this “gate” is effectively closed to any rival seeking to project power outward. Taiwan becomes part of a defensive wall that hems in Chinese naval and air operations, keeping them close to their own shores and easily monitored. It also provides the U.S. and its partners with forward positions for surveillance systems, radar networks, and quick-response forces that can detect and respond to threats early.

If, however, Taiwan were to come under the control of a rival power, the outlook flips. Instead of a barrier, Taiwan becomes a platform for projecting power outward: a place where China can base radars, missiles, ships, and aircraft that would watch over and challenge US and allied forces across the Pacific. This would force the United States to operate from much greater distances, reduce its ability to respond quickly, and make it more expensive and risky to maintain influence in the region. Geography cannot be changed, which is why Taiwan’s position is not just another piece of territory but the key to whether the entire first island chain functions as a shield or a springboard.