

## The Road to Crisis

*All events from December 2023 and onward are fictional and for educational purposes only.*

During a press conference in mid-December 2023, President Biden announced plans to provide Taiwan with additional Patriot air defense systems, two-dozen new F-16 fighter jets, eight surplus P-3 maritime patrol aircraft, and five destroyers equipped with Aegis Combat Systems. Biden explained that the arms deal—one of the largest in Taiwan’s history—was intended to bolster Taiwan’s ability to defend itself and its democratic way of life. In response to questions from reporters, President Biden also reiterated a pledge that he had made in early December: “If China attacks Taiwan, the United States will take steps to defend Taiwan.”

China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi issued an official statement criticizing the arms deal and accused the United States of “meddling in regional affairs” and “dangerously and unnecessarily escalating tensions.”

In the days following Biden’s press conference, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) significantly increased military flights through Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone. In a 72-hour period from December 20–December 23, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and PLA Navy (PLAN) flew more than 180 aircraft in the airspace surrounding Taiwan. Taiwan’s government responded by scrambling fighter jets to intercept many of these PLAAF and PLAN aircraft.

On December 24, a PLAAF J-11 fighter jet collided with a Taiwan Air Force F-16 fighter jet, leading to the deaths of both pilots. The domestic public in China takes to the streets demanding harsh action against Taiwan to avenge the death of the PLAAF pilot.

President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken urge calm, but also warn China—both privately and publicly—to not attempt to forcefully change the status of Taiwan.

On December 25, Christmas celebrations in the Taiwanese cities of Taipei and Kaoshiung are interrupted by extensive blackouts. More than six million people are left without power, and 279 Taiwanese citizens die as a result of the power outages (e.g., life support failures, etc.).

Recorded Futures, the Somerville, Massachusetts-based company that identified the Chinese malware behind power outages that plagued Indian cities during the Sino-Indian conflict of 2020, make a similar discovery in this case: the Taiwan backouts are almost certainly triggered by Chinese malware. The discovery was made possible by advances in machine learning that allowed Recorded Futures to find common patterns between the timings of sequential cyber-intrusion attacks in India and Taiwan. Recorded Futures identified a record of attempts to connect to the same network infrastructure registered to Tsinghua University that was implicated in the Indian outages. In the China-India incident, analysts believed China was signaling its ability to cause significant damage if India escalated the border conflict. The U.S. intelligence community has yet to confirm that the blackout is the result of a Chinese cyberattack, and some AI/ML scholars have raised doubts about the accuracy of the Recorded Futures machine learning algorithms.

President Biden schedules an emergency National Security Council Principals Committee meeting for this afternoon. You’ve been called into the office to help your organization prepare for this meeting. You open your email to find President Biden’s strategic objectives for dealing with the crisis:

1. Maintain status quo (i.e., no change to the status of Taiwan).
2. Protect U.S. citizens and interests in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan.
3. Prevent further escalation between the PRC and Taiwan; deter PRC aggression.
4. Should the PRC and Taiwan escalate, minimize direct U.S. combat involvement in conflict.

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