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Suspected Trump Gunman Touted Potential ‘Taiwan Foreign Legion’

Ryan Routh proposed a force of thousands to defend the island against China

By *Chun Han Wong*

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Ryan Wesley Routh in Kyiv’s Independence Square in 2022, putting up flags of the countries helping Ukraine. PHOTO: SERGEI SUPINSKY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Ryan Wesley Routh, the man arrested in Florida in connection with an apparent attempt to shoot Donald Trump, counted among his international projects a proposed “foreign legion” to help defend Taiwan against a potential assault from China.

The Taiwan plan echoed Routh’s self-professed efforts to support the defense of Ukraine, in what he described in his LinkedIn profile as a mission to dedicate himself to “any monumental worthy cause to bring about real change in our world.”

There is no indication that Routh’s Taiwan ambitions ever materialized.

Routh, 58 years old, faces firearms charges following his arrest on Sunday, when a Secret Service agent spotted a rifle poking through a Florida golf course fence and opened fire, ultimately leading to the suspect's capture.

In a self-published book, social-media posts and interviews, Routh described Taiwan as a vulnerable democracy that deserves stronger support from the U.S.—and especially military aid against China, which claims the self-governed island as its territory.

“We should encircle Taiwan with military ships and support with military might,” he wrote in the book, published in early 2023. “If we wait, such as we have done in Ukraine, it will be a 10 minute war and we will all be standing around like fools yet again. We may as well put Taiwan on a silver platter for China.”

In a February email to a person he mentioned in his book, Routh said he had spent a month in Taiwan.

Routh also railed over perceived policy blunders by U.S. leaders, including the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Trump's 2018 exit from the multilateral nuclear accord with Iran.

He showed support for Taiwan during the early months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when he traveled to Kyiv in hopes of contributing to the Ukrainian war effort.

Routh included a flag of the Republic of China—as Taiwan is formally known—in a display on Kyiv's Independence Square, where he placed flags of countries with citizens who had volunteered to fight for Ukraine, according to his book and an interview he gave to Taiwan's Central News Agency that was published in June 2022.



Routh speaking during a rally in Kyiv in 2022. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

He told the agency that he had traveled to Ukraine with hopes of joining the fight as a combatant but wasn't able to do so because of his age. He began helping Ukraine's foreign legion recruit fighters and met at least five Taiwanese volunteers, he said.

If China were displeased with his flag display, "I can order another 1,000, they can't touch my flags," he told CNA.

Russia's February 2022 invasion had made Ukraine a magnet for Americans and others who sought a cause they deemed worth fighting for.

Routh, meanwhile, also directed his attention to another democracy thousands of miles away, where fears of a possible conflict were rising in tandem with tensions between the U.S. and China.

Among the solutions Routh put forth was the idea that the U.S. could help avert a war in Taiwan by donating American territory to China.

"If China is having a shortage of land perhaps we at the United States can donate the same land mass of Taiwan from our land in Alaska," he wrote in his book. "Perhaps we can give China part of Montana if Alaska is not acceptable; I would be agreeable to that."

At the same time, Routh urged more military support for Taiwan, saying that it shouldn't count on the U.S.—the island's biggest foreign arms supplier—to intervene on its behalf in a war against China.

Deliveries on many Taiwanese orders for defense equipment signed under both the Trump and Biden administrations have been stalled by bureaucratic delays and capacity limits at American defense manufacturers, which have strained to meet the demands of U.S. support for Ukraine and for Israel in its war with Hamas in Gaza.

Routh appears to have created a website to promote his idea for a “Taiwan Foreign Legion,” which he said would include soldiers from Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen who would fight as mercenaries, alongside international volunteers.

The website featured an application form for prospective fighters, with questions on whether an applicant was willing to “be a human shield for Taiwan” and able to “help us in a war against China.” It also asked whether applicants were able to run a festival, launch a social-media campaign, sit in a trench for months and accept having a bad commander.

The website included a list of purported supporters, several of whom said they had never discussed Taiwan with Routh when contacted by The Wall Street Journal on Wednesday. “I’ve never met him. Heard of him even, until now,” said one, who is listed on the website as a foreign fighter in Ukraine. “I don’t give a f— about Taiwan, American politics or this crackpot weirdo,” he said.

Another supposed supporter, an academic researcher who was working on a project about foreign fighters in Ukraine, had interviewed Routh on one occasion but said they had never discussed Taiwan. The researcher said it was not hard to imagine Routh glomming onto a new cause. “To him it was all about good versus evil so it wouldn’t be hard to push him in one direction or another,” he said.

In addition to his Taiwan scheme, Routh said in the February email that he was “willing to travel to North Korea” and “be a prisoner if needed until we can sit down with leaders of North Korea and show them that we are good people.”

Routh published an open letter, dated January, to Taiwan’s then-president-elect, Lai Ching-te, in which he claimed to be able to provide Taiwan with “thousands of Afghan soldiers that are NATO trained and that will fight for 100 to 200 dollars a month,” as well as fighters from Syria and Yemen.

He didn’t provide any evidence to show he had access to soldiers and volunteers.

Routh made similar assertions on his X account. In a June 2023 post, Routh said he was traveling to Taiwan with the goal of offering 50,000 Afghan soldiers. “They are economical and refugees. I need help pushing Taiwan and Tsai Ing-wen to take them,” he wrote, referring to the island’s president at the time.

He repeated his claim two months later in another X post, saying he wanted to “give Taiwan thousands of Nato trained Afghan soldiers” and start a Taiwan foreign legion of global volunteers to “protect the shores of Taiwan.”

Routh discussed Taiwan at length in his 2023 book, “Ukraine’s Unwinnable War: The Fatal Flaw of Democracy, World Abandonment and the Global Citizen—Taiwan, Afghanistan, North Korea and the end of Humanity.”

“Will we let Taiwan sit unguarded and turn it over to China without a care, and wonder after the fact how it happened?” Routh wrote.

—*Joel Schectman contributed to this article.*

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