

Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense?

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Abstract

Differences over Taiwan's status have fueled rising tensions between the island and the mainland. Conflict over Taiwan also has the potential to be a flash point in U.S.-China relations. Taiwan has been governed independently of China since 1949, but Beijing views the island as part of its territory. Beijing has vowed to eventually "unify" Taiwan with the mainland, using force if necessary.

Tensions are rising. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, whose party platform favors independence, has rebuked Beijing's efforts to undermine democracy. Beijing has ramped up political and military pressure on Taipei. Cross-strait tensions have escalated since the election of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. Tsai has refused to accept a formula that her predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou, endorsed to allow for increased cross-strait ties. Meanwhile, Beijing has taken increasingly aggressive actions, including by flying fighter jets near the island. Some analysts fear a Chinese attack on Taiwan has the potential to draw the United States into a war with China. The United States leaves the question of whether it would actually defend Taiwan unanswered, though Biden has said it would.

The primary aim of this research proposal is to analyze the current China-Taiwan, US-Taiwan and US-China relations and to find any relevance or potential influence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the risk of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the economic impact on Central Asian countries, and the political and diplomatic responses across the region more broadly. There are several questions, which should be answered, but probably the most important are: Why are tensions increasing recently?; What is the US' role in all this?; How likely is conflict and can China invade Taiwan?

Introduction

Taiwan, officially called the Republic of China (ROC), has become one of Asia's major economic players and witnessed rapid economic growth since the 1970s. Despite progress, Taiwan is historically under a lot of tension and scrutiny. From a historical perspective, Taiwan went through periods of self-governance, Dutch colonial rule, Chinese control, Japanese occupation and eventually was returned to Chinese Nationalist control in 1945 following Japan's defeat in World War II. Shortly after, the Chinese Civil War resumed between the Chinese Nationalists – Kuomintang led by general Chiang Kai-shek, and on the other side, the Chinese Communist Party led by its chairman Mao Zedong. The defeat of the Nationalist army on the mainland allowed the Communists to found the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Subsequently, Chiang Kai-shek, with its Nationalist government, fled to Taiwan, where they established the temporary capital of the Republic of China in Taipei. Martial law was declared in Taiwan in 1949 and lasted till 1987, when the democratization process began (Copper, 2009). Despite the authoritarian regime of Kuomintang, Taiwan flourished, especially in terms of economic growth since the 1970s. And it became one of the Four Asian Tigers along with Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea and was known as the Taiwan Miracle.

Taiwan has developed its own cultural identity, distinct from its Chinese roots, a process known as "Taiwanization" (Jacobs, 2005). Taiwan has operated de facto independently for more than 70 years and has its own government and democratic polity, while China's one-party rule continues. Since 1949, it has been administered independently of mainland China. However, most of the world's governments do not recognize it as an independent country, and it is becoming more and more isolated diplomatically. Over the years, an increasing number of governments have changed their diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

China claims that Taiwan is actually a Chinese province. Taiwan, in turn, that this island was never part of the modern Chinese state. In China's view, Taiwan is part of China's sovereign territory and was illegitimately lost as a result of the events. The Chinese government considers Taiwan a breakaway province and does not recognize its democratically elected government.

Nowadays, Taiwan is not only economically successful, but it is also a territory with high democracy index as Taiwan has managed a transformation into a multiparty democracy since the early 1990 (Chao, 1994). Despite the development and reforms, Taiwan is a contentious issue vis-à-vis PRC which considers Taiwan as its 23rd province, even though Taiwan is neither administrated nor controlled by the PRC. However, the legal status of Taiwan is a disputed topic as only 13 countries out of 193 United Nations (UN) member states and

Vatican City have full diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Moreover, Taiwan has never had official membership or observer status in the UN (World Population Review, 2023).

In 1971, the Resolution 2758 adopted by the UN recognized the PRC as the only holder of the Chinese seat in the UN, and the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek were expelled (Fukuda, 2022). Until that moment, the Republic of China was a representative of all China in the UN. Nowadays, 59 sovereign countries keep unofficial diplomatic relations with Taiwan by establishing Economic, Trade, and Cultural Offices in Taiwan and by hosting Taipei Representative Offices on their territory. They could be considered de facto embassies, even though the direct reference to Taiwan is usually avoided. The PRC views these initiatives as disruptive and refuses to have diplomatic relations with the countries and world bodies that recognize Taiwan as anything but part of China. Due to this, Taiwan is often represented as Chinese Taipei in various international bodies or even in the Olympics (Anand, 2022). For example, Chinese discontent could be seen in the latest case of Lithuania from 2021 when the Taiwanese Representative Office was permitted to open in Lithuania. PRC perceived the Lithuanian permission for the office under the name of Taiwan and not Taipei as an undermining of Chinese sovereignty and took retaliatory actions towards the diplomatic representation of Lithuania in the PRC by downgrading the level of diplomatic relations from ambassadors to chargé d'affaires.

Taiwan, People's Republic of China and the United States of America relations

Since 1949, the PRC has considered Taiwan to be a rebel region that is supposed to be reunited with the mainland. The so-called “One China” Principle refers to the narrative that there is but one China in the world. Taiwan is a part of China, and the government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China. Therefore, Taiwan is an inalienable part of PRC (Wei, 1999). Going back in time, not only the PRC continued to claim sovereignty over Taiwan, but Chiang Kai-shek also had his claims over mainland China and never relinquished them. Taipei abandoned its claims over mainland of China in 1991 as the Republic of China redefined its jurisdiction, limiting it to the islands of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu (Szczepanski, 2021). This all happened in the context of further political and social liberalization since 1988.

Other ambiguities started to rise after the “1992 Consensus” which refers to a tacit understanding reached between the Kuomintang government and the representatives of the Chinese Communist Party. The 1992 Consensus states that there is only “one China” while

allowing various interpretations both to Beijing and Taiwan (Albert, 2016). The tacit agreement brought up the issue that Taiwan will not seek independence. The Consensus was meant to serve as a starting point for future negotiations between Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese Communist Party evoked the 1992 Consensus to indicate that both the Mainland and Taiwan belong to “one China,” and both aim for unification under the “one country, two systems” framework (Wang, Wu et al., 2018).

The 1992 Consensus as a controversial term has been criticized by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in power in Taiwan, and the DPP government has insisted that no such consensus existed. Tsai Ing-wen, the current president of Taiwan, in her speech in 2019 in response to Xi Jinping speech calling for the adherence to the 1992 Consensus, emphasized that We have never accepted “the 1992 Consensus.” The fundamental reason is because Beijing authorities’ definition of the “1992 Consensus” is “one China” and “one country, two systems.” However, Taiwan absolutely will not accept “one country, two systems.” The vast majority of Taiwanese also resolutely oppose “one country, two systems,” and this opposition is also a “Taiwan consensus.” (Office of the President of ROC, 2019). A sticking point in cross-Strait relations was evident again in 2004 after Chen Shui-bian won the presidential re-election of the Republic of China. Political pro-independence developments on the island have worried PRC to such an extent that they decided to pass Anti-Secession Law in 2005. The Law was designed to oppose and prevent Taiwan’s secession from China; promote peaceful national reunification; maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait; preserve China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity; and safeguard the Chinese nation’s fundamental interests. Moreover, non-peaceful means to stop Taiwan’s independence are mentioned. There is no doubt the PRC’s approach worried the Republic of China. Therefore, Taipei solemnly proclaimed its opposition to this Law and called on the international community as the Law violates international law, deteriorates Taiwan’s democratic development, harms cross-Strait relations, and threatens regional security (Mainland Affairs Council of ROC, 2005).

The United States’ policy over Taiwan is often referred to as a strategic ambiguity under the “One China” Policy approach. In 1979, the United States (US) established formal diplomatic relations with the PRC by concluding a joint statement that the US acknowledged the PRC's government as China's sole legal government. Therefore, Jimmy Carter, the US president at those times, terminated official diplomatic relations with the Republic of China in Taiwan (Green, 2017).

On the other hand, the US simultaneously maintains unofficial relations with Taiwan and is committed through the Taiwan Relations Act passed by the US Congress in 1979. The

Taiwan Relations Act affirms important unofficial ties with the Republic of China, especially by replacing the previous bilateral defense treaty that was in place from 1954 to 1979, committing itself to the island's security and providing for the supply of necessary defense articles and services (Albert, 2016). On top of that, the US has its foreign representation in Taiwan in the form of the American Institute, and Taiwan maintains the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the US. Moreover, the administrations of Nixon (1972), Carter (1979), and Reagan (1982) issued three US-China Joint Communiqués serving as the foundation for US-China relations (Lawrence, 2020). The third communiqué also approved Six Assurances to Taiwan in which the US promised not to set an end date for arms sales to Taiwan, the US will not alter the Taiwan Relations Act, will not conduct prior consultation on arms sales with PRC, will not hold a mediation role between PRC and Taiwan, will not alter its position regarding Taiwan's sovereignty, and will not put pressure on Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC.

The US considers Taiwan as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific, and both share similar values and deep economic and commercial links. The "One China" Policy is a longstanding stance of the US, and they oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side. According to the US Department of State fact sheet about Taiwan, the US does not support Taiwan independence; and expects cross-Strait differences to be resolved by peaceful means. The US continues to have an abiding interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act, the US makes available defense articles and services as necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability. The US maintains its capacity to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize Taiwan's security or the social or economic system (US Department of State, 2022). The US and Taiwan are also engaged in joint programs addressing global challenges, such as environmental protection, energy, technology, international humanitarian assistance, and regional development. The US long-standing commitment to Taiwan is important in maintaining and developing an image of credibility in East Asia.

For the last few years, a new geopolitical condition has emerged. The United States and the People's Republic of China coexist in a multipolar world in which each side is deeply suspicious of and hostile to the worldview of the other. Simultaneously, both countries recognize that they cannot overpower their rival, which compels both to avoid direct military conflict, while pushing their rivalry into other domains. This geopolitical condition is called a cold war.

One of the unique attributes of cold wars is that their beginning can only be perceived in retrospect. Belligerents don't issue formal declarations; a cold war starts incrementally as the

weight of actions by both sides builds until we reach “a peace that is no peace.” If your rival is reluctant to acknowledge a cold war exists, it can be advantageous to paint them as harboring a “Cold War mentality” to complicate their political decision-making, even as you wage one yourself. Cold wars are costly and dangerous, but they are the least bad option. It is even more costly and dangerous to pretend that one isn’t taking place, to allow ambiguity and miscalculation to fester. As a society built on the consent of the governed, The USA must face this challenge and achieve broad consensus on their goals. Pretending that this challenge will go away if they just don’t talk about it leads to instability and miscalculation. While it may seem comforting to some, it is the opposite of a responsible policy.

To be clear, this is not the outcome Americans wanted. It would have been objectively better had China gone through a process of political liberalization to match the economic development the Chinese people experienced since the death of Mao. The US strategy had been to assist with economic development and strengthen people-to-people relations, in short, to engage with China, so that political liberalization could take place and the PRC could become more soluble within a liberal international order. This had been a strategy the United States employed with numerous authoritarian regimes. Some resulted in spectacular successes and others in failure (Turpin, 2023).

To appreciate this new geopolitical condition, it is important for Americans to understand that the Chinese Communist Party perceived the US strategy of engagement as an existential threat to the party., although the US aim was different - peaceful and cooperative intentions. No doubt, many Chinese citizens understood the US policies as being in good faith and focused on mutual prosperity. However, it is not how the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party interpreted the US strategy. Where we perceived reassurance, the party saw infiltration and hypocrisy. From their perspective, engagement weakened the party’s monopoly on power and sought to constrain it within a set of rules and norms that favored transparency, rule of law, separate spheres for civil society, and limited government — concepts that pose mortal threats to a Leninist party system. Acknowledging that the party perceives the United States as an existential threat is critical for understanding the changes over the last decade.

Tensions rising again

Tensions between the PRC and Taiwan never really get long periods of easing. The other way around, tensions are cyclically rising. Since 2016 after the Taiwan’s presidential election of Tsai Ing-wen, the first female president and a member of the DPP, Beijing has shown a

willingness to oppose any Tsai's intentions to reset and restart cross-strait relations because of Tsai's reluctance to adhere to the 1992 Consensus (Goldstein, 2020). Tsai's statements posed a challenge to the PRC's core interests, and therefore they used their economic leverage to punish Taiwan, especially by suspending individual tourist permits to Taiwan (Hancock and Liu, 2019). Presidential elections in the US and the arrival of Donald Trump on the scene even more threatened the PRC's interests in unification after Trump's initial statement that his administration may reconsider One China Policy. Even though Trump later reaffirmed the One China Policy that eased down both Beijing and Taipei, the PRC reminded Washington and Taipei of their readiness to use all available means to resist any actions that might reduce the prospects for Taiwan's eventual unification with the PRC.

Trump's administration on China's policy played its role in Sino-Taiwanese relations, although there was obvious volatility in Trump's positions and conflicting statements. That is why it makes it difficult to understand whether there was a consistent policy on China under Trump's administration (Mercy, 2017). Another escalation of Sino-Taiwanese relations happened in 2018 when the political coalition in Taiwan, Formosa Alliance, was formed to hold a referendum on Taiwan independence and subsequently apply for membership in the United Nations (UN). Although none of this ever happened, the PRC conducted military exercises around the island to push pressure on Taiwan and discourage independence attempts.

The re-election of Tsai Ing-wen in 2020 gave another opportunity for a PRC's reminder of their determination to intervene if necessary. The ultimate escalation of tensions between PRC and Taiwan happened recently in August 2022 when the speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, visited Taiwan with her delegation despite the Biden administration's recommendations not to do so in times of low point in US – China relations (Gan, Wang et al., 2022). Biden administration's approach to China is a topic of its own sort as in August 2021 Biden mentioned that the US would provide military support to Taiwan, Japan, or South Korea if they were invaded. Similar Biden's statements on this topic were downplayed by the White House administration, reassuring that there has been no shift in US policy towards Taiwan. Despite the clarification of Biden's comments, the PRC expressed strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to such statements. Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang pointed out that the US is substantially uplifting the official links with Taiwan by sending more officials to the island. It is sending sophisticated weapons to Taiwan and even claims that the US will defend Taiwan militarily (Pattesson, 2022). The visit of Nancy Pelosi, a strong critic of Beijing, intended to show support for Taiwan and therefore provoked PRC's officials. Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that this visit will severely impact the political foundation of

China-US relations. Chinese anger about Pelosi's visit emerged from PRC's historical attempts to isolate Taipei on the world stage by blocking diplomatic ties and admissions to international organizations.

The PRC views any action giving Taiwan international legitimacy as a threat to its sovereignty. Moreover, Pelosi's visit to Taiwan happened in line with the Taiwan Travel Act passed by the US Congress in 2018, allowing high-level officials of the US to visit Taiwan and vice-versa (Public Law, 2018). The PRC condemned the Pelosi's visit and called it a provocation. As a reaction to this development, the Chinese military started naval and air force exercises and drills near the island (Gangitano, 2022). Even on the 2nd August 2022, the day Nancy Pelosi arrived in Taiwan, warplanes of the PRC flew into Taiwan's air defense zone. Later on, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched long-range rockets and conventional ballistic missiles into multiple exercise zones surrounding Taiwan. The estimations suggested that at least four of the missiles flew over the island, which is considered as an unprecedented move by the PRC (Lin, Hart et al., 2022). The last time China fired missiles into waters around Taiwan was in 1996 when President Lee Teng-hui, who had visited the US a year ago, was running for re-election. Some of the ballistic missiles fired on the 4th of August 2022 landed in the exclusive economic zone of Japan. Japan pointed it out as a severe problem that affected Japan's national security and the safety of its citizens. That is why Japan protested the act through diplomatic channels with the PRC (CNA, 2022). The PLA's exercises around the island from August 2022 were happening much closer than the preceding ones and are drawing attention to the fact that the PRC has become more confident in the operations around Taiwan. The escalation of tensions in the region is comparable to the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, when the exercises of the PRC around Taiwan happened in multiple stages throughout 1995 and 1996.

On the contrary, the 2022 Chinese military exercises have been carried out during a very short and intense time span. Some objectives of the PRC may be identified in the latest developments, such as trying to undermine public support for President Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan by pointing out that closer relations with the US will be protested by the PRC. Secondly, the PRC took the opportunity to demonstrate to the international community its capability and readiness to exert control over Taiwan and enforce One China Principle at any cost (Lin, Hart, 2022). Moreover, from a long-term perspective, the PRC aims to establish a new status quo in Sino-Taiwanese relations.

In October 2022, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the status quo is no longer acceptable for China and the PRC has begun to ratchet up pressure on the self-governing island, including holding out the possibility of using power. On top of that, in August

2022 the PRC published the first white paper on Taiwan since Xi Jinping came to power called “The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era “. The white paper was published only a few days after the Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, and the conclusion of the white paper points out that no foreign interference in Taiwan will be tolerated. The PRC emphasized as follows: we will thwart any attempt to divide our country, and we will combine as a mighty force for national reunification and rejuvenation. The historic goal of reuniting our motherland must be realized and will be realized (Huaxia, 2022). Overall, the PRC urges again for the reunification of Taiwan under the “one country, two systems” formula as its historic mission. Taiwan’s reaction to the PRC’s statements and military actions shows that Taiwan clearly rejects the “one country, two systems” formula and that Taiwan’s people can decide their future.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China stated that Taiwan will continue to deepen cooperation with the US and other like-minded countries to defend the free and open Indo-Pacific region and prevent China’s “continuous expansion.” The escalation of tensions grew at the end of 2022 when the PRC sent 71 warplanes and seven ships toward Taiwan in a display of force over 24 hours. It has reacted to the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) passed by the US Congress and signed by President Biden by the end of December. The NDAA contained several provisions about Taiwan, such as The Taiwan Fellowship Act allowing the US federal government employees to live in Taiwan for a two-year fellowship. Another provision was related to grants to purchase US weapons and annual loans to Taiwan to acquire hardware under the Foreign Military Financing Program scheme (Madjar, 2022). Chinese Foreign Ministry named this action as an interference in internal affairs that cannot be tolerated (Moore, 2022). Taiwan is aware of growing tensions and that is why they have decided to extend compulsory military service to one year from four months from 2024. President Tsai Ing-wen argued that the democratically governed island is under the rising threat of the PRC, and the current four-month military service is not enough to cope with a rapidly changing situation (Lee and Wang, 2022).

There is no longer a doubt whether the PRC is threatening the Republic of China as numerous military exercises have been recently carried out by the PLA around the island. The more striking question is whether there might be an imminent invasion of Taiwan in the upcoming future. Speculations and considerations may be made in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where common features and differences are to be found. The Centre for Strategic and International Studies, established in Washington D.C., conducted a survey among experts to assess their opinions about the likelihood of military conflict in Taiwan within the framework of China Power project. The results indicate that an invasion of Taiwan is possible,

but more likely not. On the other hand, a more limited use of force by the PRC is likely to happen. However, the respondents largely agree that the PRC would invade Taiwan if independence was declared. What would happen if the US ended its historic strategic ambiguity, giving the US space for maneuver when deciding whether to come or not come to Taiwan's defense, is again just speculation. The polled experts believe the PRC would not immediately invade Taiwan in such a scenario (Lin, Hart et al., 2022).

Taiwan, like Ukraine, finds itself in the midst of a conflict between democracy and autocracy. Although no geographic, historical, or cultural links are found between the two territories, the power of analogy may be there. The invasion of Ukraine made people reflect whether a similar scenario may happen in Taiwan Strait. Similarities are found in the way the PRC is putting Taiwan under pressure in military, economic, political, and information terms. Moreover, the PRC denies Taiwanese identity, which resembles Russia's narrative about Ukraine (Applebaum, 2022). However, there are lessons to be learned from the Russia-Ukraine case. Especially the response to the Ukraine crisis seems to be contagious as growing Chinese aggression has pushed Taiwan to reach out to allies and seek closer integration. Despite similarities between the Ukrainian and Taiwan situations, the differences are profound enough to result in different offensive and defensive opportunities to the aggressors and defenders.

The spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, Ma Xiaoguang, said by the beginning of 2023 that the PRC is committed to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity and countries allied with the island are sending the wrong signals and cease playing with fire. Despite the increased military activities in Taiwan Strait and verbal threats, the US Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, seriously doubts the imminent invasion of Taiwan (Masing, 2023). These words came after the Centre for Strategic and International Studies carried a wargame exercise reaching two main conclusions. First, under most circumstances, the PRC is unlikely to succeed in its operational objectives or to occupy Taipei. Secondly, the cost of war would be high for all possible parties involved. The PRC, Taiwan, the US, and Japan would probably experience enormous losses in such a conflict.

Taiwan as a major topic in the “New Cold War”?

Great power competition has entered a new and unstable phase. With Russia launching an invasion of Ukraine and China launching military exercises around Taiwan, the risk of escalation from great power competition to great power conflict has risen markedly, inviting comparisons with the proxy wars and crises of the Cold War.

The United States is entering a consequential period in its relations with China and how the contours of this bilateral relationship are defined will dictate both countries' foreign policy agendas for decades to come. Some have characterized the intensifying competition between the United States and China as “a new Cold War.”

Competition is a defining feature of human existence and is omnipresent at all levels of social interaction. The United States and China, as the world's first and second-largest economies, top military spenders, leading filers of patents, and elite contenders for Olympic medals, are bound to be in competition for the foreseeable future. But whether this competition can remain rational or drift in a debilitating direction to the detriment of the United States and China's respective interests, and the interests of the world, will depend on the choices and political will of both sides.

The last time Washington found itself in an intense peer rivalry was during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a fierce competition for geopolitical dominance. Washington's guiding strategy at the time was a policy of containment to check Soviet expansionism and the spread of communism. This containment was necessary because the Soviets viewed the “capitalist world” as a direct threat to its socialist system and that Moscow would never see “any sincere assumption of a community of aims” between itself and non-socialist powers. Over the next four decades, Moscow would go on to fund left-wing revolutionary movements across the globe. The United States and the Soviet Union found themselves facing off in proxy battles in far-flung regions — too many of which were “hot” conflicts that cumulatively left millions dead and spawned historical legacies and political dilemmas that continue to destabilize regions today.

There are many reasons why China cannot simply be slotted into the role of the Soviet Union, including the oft-cited fact that the US and Chinese economies are too deeply intertwined following a period of rapid globalization in the post-Cold War era. In addition to this important reality, a fundamental difference between today's China and the Soviet Union is that Beijing does not seek to overthrow democratic regimes or force its political model on others (with the critical exception of Taiwan, which it claims as its territory). At home, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) runs an increasingly repressive authoritarian system and justifies its model as “fit” for China's “national conditions.” It seeks respect and admiration for its own system, rails against outside criticism, and seeks to shape the global order to favor its interests. Yet it does not see capitalism or the existence of other democracies as antithetical to its own existence. In short, China does not pose an existential threat to the U.S. homeland or way of life. In fact, China's comprehensive ties with the United States and other democracies since the

launch of its “reform and opening” policy have been foundational for its rise and the vast improvement of its people’s quality of life over the last three decades

China is not intent on displacing the United States as the world’s dominant military power and is unlikely to present a global military challenge in the near future. However, China does seek military superiority in its immediate periphery to advance its claims vis-à-vis Taiwan, in the South and East China Seas, and other contested territories along its borders. This poses a distinct and critical threat to the United States’ alliance commitments and its ability to operate freely in the Indo-Pacific region and must be counterbalanced in conjunction with allies and partners.

Given Beijing’s heightened sensitivity on Taiwan’s political status and the unofficial character of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship, the fact that Taiwan no longer embraces the One-China principle (as it did during the Cold War) means that reviving a Cold War strategy in the Taiwan Strait would likely trigger a conflict between Washington, Taipei, and Beijing. Recent policy proposals in the United States, such as recognizing the Taiwan or adopting strategic clarity, have Cold War precedents but bear a far greater risk of escalation because they would likely be interpreted by Beijing as an attempt to bring about Taiwan’s permanent separation from China. The strategic importance of Taiwan, on the other hand, means that the national security of the United States rests on the security of Taiwan to a far greater extent than it did during the Cold War. Given the high stakes involved, the policy implication of this finding is that the United States (and the international community more generally) should adopt a status-quo, risk-averse approach that focuses on bolstering support for Taiwan within the framework of the One-China policy (Lee, 2022).

The United States has consistently feared entrapment by Taiwan: starting in the 1950s and continuing to the present day, there has been a concern that excessively strong commitments to Taipei could lead Taipei to use the cover of U.S. support to act in a way that would trigger conflict with Beijing. During the Cold War, this concern was focused on the KMT’s preparations for a counteroffensive against the Chinese Communists, while in the period since the Cold War, this concern has been focused on the possibility of a unilateral declaration of independence by Taiwan. In both periods, the United States has practiced “dual deterrence” against Taipei and Beijing through a policy of strategic ambiguity.

Taiwan is now a genuine democracy, and the United States’ support for that democracy is a symbol of the United States’ commitment to the defense of the rules-based international order and to its other democratic allies. These factors mean that Taiwan’s strategic importance for the United States has risen dramatically since the Cold War. At the beginning of the Cold

War, the Truman administration concluded that based on Taiwan's geography alone, it was important, but not vital for U.S. interests. Now that Taiwan is essential for semiconductor supply chains and Taiwan is a democracy, it has arguably risen to the level of a vital interest.

On the other side, we can see the change and more aggressive foreign policy of China. When Xi Jinping took over a decade ago, he adopted a far more confrontational policy toward the United States and other countries that he called the "great rejuvenation." In addition to restoring strongman rule, radically centralizing power, tightening repression, and imposing a comprehensive system of digital surveillance, Beijing launched vast infrastructure and development projects to expand its influence in the Global South, took aggressive actions in the South and East China Seas that alarmed its Asian neighbors, formed a "no limits" strategic partnership with Russia just weeks before Putin invaded Ukraine, and conducted menacing military exercises and cyberattacks targeting Taiwan.

China's aggressiveness has caused many analysts to conclude that a new Cold War has broken out between China and the United States. The Biden Administration has acknowledged as much, at least implicitly, when it asserted in its latest National Security Strategy that the "post-Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next (Gershman, 2023)."

There are many differences between this new "Cold War" and the old one—not the least of which is that China is far wealthier and more integrated into the global economy than the Soviet Union ever was. However, recognizing the similarities has the advantage of providing a framework for countering a "rejuvenated" China. The question is whether the USA and its Western allies have the wisdom and political will to take the actions that are needed to preserve peace and security and deter aggression.

Three basic policy concepts that guided the West during the Cold War remain particularly relevant today to defending Taiwan—the epicenter of the U.S.-China confrontation:

1. The first is the concept of containment that the United States carried out through a comprehensive and vigilant policy of military deterrence designed to prevent Soviet expansion and keep the Cold War from becoming hot.
2. The second is the concept of "mellowing," as the process by which the inherent flaws of the closed Soviet system would gradually erode the regime's ability to maintain absolute control (Heer, 2018).
3. The third is the battle of ideas, which is the political and ideological competition between democratic and totalitarian systems (Gershman, 2023).

It is widely believed that the PRC could launch an invasion as soon as 2027, when it will have completed its military-modernization program. The time has come for Taiwan and its principal allies, the United States and Japan, to accelerate efforts to build the capability to repel and defeat Chinese aggression. This deterrence is the best way to prevent an invasion from happening in the first place. deterring the mainland's aggression against Taiwan is more than a moral issue of defending a small democracy against a much larger totalitarian state. Defending Taiwan is a vital U.S. security interest, and Japanese defense strategists increasingly believe that an attack on Taiwan would pose an existential threat to the security of Japan. The subjugation of Taiwan would have devastating consequences for the future of global peace and democracy in the world—something that is often overlooked in discussions of the danger facing Taiwan.

A successful invasion would shatter U.S. credibility throughout the Indo-Pacific and beyond. It would give China control of not just the South and East China Seas (sea lanes through which a third of global trade passes), but also of Taiwan's vital semiconductor industry on which the U.S., Japanese, and European economies heavily depend. Perhaps most dangerously, it would enable China to transform Taiwan into a huge military hub from which it could project power in all directions—northward toward Japan and South Korea, southward toward the Philippines and other countries in Southeast Asia, and eastward toward the Pacific Island states (Amonson and Egli, 2023).

Given the enormity of the global stakes involved, Taiwan will not be alone in trying to deter China. For example, Diamond and Ellis recommend many specific steps that the United States and Japan need to take to ramp up their military capabilities and increase joint training and exercises with Taiwan, while also making clear to Beijing the enormous risk it would be taking in attacking Taiwan. But they also stress that Taiwan cannot assume that the United States and Japan alone will be able to deter China from aggression. For deterrence to be effective, Taiwan must convince Beijing that it “will mount a fierce, determined, and creative resistance (in the spirit of Ukraine) that will enable it to hold out until support arrives from the United States and its allies (Diamond and Ellis, 2023)”.

When discussing Taiwan’s “international space”, we conventionally refer to a contest over the juridical sovereignty of Taiwan (the Republic of China, ROC). Whether departing from the perspective of international law or theories of International Relations, the cross-Taiwan Strait sovereignty conflict in global politics involves two issues: Taiwan’s capacity to gain formal diplomatic recognition or, at least, to maintain relations with the existing diplomatic partners; and Taipei’s capacity to re-enter—or gain informal association with—intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), such as the World Health Organization.

For the authorities of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan’s exclusion from the web of diplomatic partnerships and IGOs supports their claim that Taiwan—as the PRC’s rebel province—lacks internationally recognized statehood. For Taiwan, diplomatic isolation carries significant opportunity costs: Taipei cannot engage in regular diplomatic practices and must identify alternative—often clandestine and costly—methods to communicate with foreign governments. It cannot conclude formal agreements with foreign governments in the economic arena (such as free trade agreements) or security (mutual defense treaties). It also cannot participate in international norm-making, including on such issues as climate change or developmental assistance, but is expected to abide by norms established without its involvement or consent. Perhaps most importantly, the exclusion from the United Nations (UN) deprives Taiwan of UN Charter protection (Tubilewicz, 2023). In other words, UN member states (including China) are not obliged to refrain from threatening or using force against Taiwan’s territorial integrity and political independence.

At the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly, which began on September 5th, one issue came back like a boomerang: the exclusion of Taiwan from the international body. Even though the communists won the Chinese Civil War and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland in 1949, the authorities of the Republic of China (ROC)—based in Taiwan ever since—managed to keep China’s seat at the UN for the next two decades. However, coinciding with the “ping pong diplomacy” and Sino-American rapprochement, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 2758 in 1971 which gave the seat to the PRC and clarified that from then it was “the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations.” Concurrently, the “representatives of Chiang Kai-shek”, a reference to the ROC, were expelled from the organization.

In its official narrative, China has also linked this UN Resolution with Beijing’s “one China principle”, according to which “There is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory, and the Government of the People’s Republic of China

[PRC] is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.” Taipei has accused Beijing of “intentionally misinterpreting” the 1971 UN resolution as it does not define the status of Taiwan. In fact, the resolution does not even mention “Taiwan” or “the Republic of China” (Łuszczkiewicz and Mandis, 2023)

For decades, Taiwan has been trying to rejoin or gain “meaningful participation”, in the United Nations and its agencies. The most well-known case is Taipei’s exclusion from the World Health Organization (WHO), even though Taiwan was believed to be one of the most successful countries in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, Taipei has been blocked from participating in the WHO and other UN bodies despite support from the United States, all G7 economies, and a long list of democratic partners. This ostracism—which serves as an example of China’s far-reaching influence within the UN—has been part of Beijing’s grand coercive strategy aimed at limiting Taiwan’s international presence and its contribution to the global community.

The PRC’s efforts to rewrite Taiwan’s status at the UN ramped up in the 1990s and early 2000s at the same time as the island’s democratization. The PRC has since worked to “internationalize” its “One China” Principle and to conflate it with UN Resolution 2758, a revisionist shift from the original intent of the document.

Beijing has managed to further institutionalize and normalize its stance on Taiwan within the UN by signing secret agreements with UN bodies, restricting Taiwan’s access to the UN and its facilities, and embedding PRC nationals across various levels of UN staff. The UN and its specialized agencies have not made the texts of these agreements, such as that of the 2005 memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the PRC and the World Health Organization, available to the public or to any entity beyond the main signatories, though leaked guidance memos provide insights into the scope of the MOU’s content.

The PRC has likewise sought to force its views on nomenclature relating to Taiwan within the UN. This includes withholding UN accreditation from NGOs and civil society groups that do not refer to Taiwan as a part of the PRC in their organizational materials or on their websites. Recently, it has come to light that the PRC and its representatives have altered historic UN documents to change references of “Taiwan” to “Taiwan, Province of China.” These developments have played out alongside marked shifts in the guidance of the UN Office of Legal Affairs on Taiwan, where it only 15 years ago cited an ambiguous and undefined “One China” policy, but now reiterates the PRC position on Taiwan (Drun and Glaser, 2023).

The PRC has likewise used UN Resolution 2758 and bilateral normalization agreements with other member states to falsely claim that its “One China” Principle is a universally

accepted norm. It has also ensured that a plurality of countries back its views at the UN level and will cast votes alongside it—particularly on issues of Taiwan’s participation—and it reinforces this support through economic pressure on governments.

The PRC’s efforts to constrain Taiwan at the UN have broader implications for international governance, as it shows a prioritization of one-member state’s national interests over the global community’s—as exemplified by Taiwan’s damaging exclusion from global health debates during the coronavirus pandemic. The United States opposes the PRC’s attempts to redefine UN Resolution 2758 and has pushed back against UN statements claiming that Taiwan is a province of the PRC, including issuing a 2007 “non-paper” asserting its position that Taiwan’s status is not yet determined. The PRC has recently attempted to use its narrative of the “One China” Principle as embedded in UN Resolution 2758 to call into question the legitimacy of longstanding US policy on Taiwan—including the Taiwan Relations Act, which is US law.

Taiwan has become a technology superpower, leading the world in the production of advanced microchips, and it has blossomed into a vibrant multiparty democracy. It has a vast amount to offer the world, but at the U.N., this potential is stifled by China’s malign lobbying. Taiwan is a responsible global actor, contributing to international efforts from public health to disaster relief. However, its exclusion from international organizations impedes its ability to help address global challenges.

China has used its standing to push its officials to the top of international bodies and coerce countries into limiting contact with Taiwan. This lobbying has led to the willful misreading of Resolution 2758 in a way that is entirely contrary to the U.N.’s founding charter. Ultimately, if the U.N. fails to address Resolution 2758, Taiwan is destined to fall victim to China’s “One China — two systems” approach — a benign sounding slogan designed to make imperialism appear digestible. But the reality of what it really means has been made clear by China’s crackdowns in Hong Kong. And given Beijing’s disdain for democracy and dissent, Taiwan would quickly suffer a similar fate (Parello-Plesner, 2023).

The United States and its allies should stand up to Beijing, and advocating for Taiwan’s participation in international forums. This is just one way the world’s democracies can curb Beijing’s attempts to delegitimize Taiwan. The US and other Western powers should also push for all Memorandums of Understanding and agreements signed by China with various UN bodies to be made public — to shed light on how China uses its financial power to spread its agenda. By legitimizing the aggressor in the Taiwan Strait and ignoring Taiwan’s existence, the UN is failing in its mission.

Conclusions

Speculating about a possible invasion of Taiwan seems to be breathtaking and worrying at the same time. There are no clear answers to whether the PRC would eventually invade the Republic of China with its ultimate goal of Chinese unification and whether the US would intervene under such circumstances. Although none of these scenarios seem to be coming soon, Taiwan has remained a central and contentious issue in the US – China relations. The recent development shows a clear Washington-Taipei-Beijing triangle, which proves to deepen the tensions in Taiwan Strait (Copper, 2019). The PRC's publicly prioritized policy of peaceful unification since 1979 seems to be again less reluctant to the use of force as military exercises around the island have increased recently. However, rhetoric and reality are sometimes tricky matters. The Russian invasion of Ukraine proved that for some players, neither economic nor human losses are constraining factors in pursuing "historic" purposes.

The fact is that beyond military deterrence, Beijing must come to realize that a military assault on Taiwan would devastate China's economy and thus put Xi Jin-ping's power at serious risk. The USA is now in a race against time to reduce its dependence on the Chinese economy - most of all for semiconductor finished products and inputs, but also for pharmaceuticals, rare earth minerals, and other key supplies. It should give the maneuvering room to impose crippling sanctions on a Chinese state that had committed naked aggression against Taiwan, even if these sanctions also impose great pain to the US economy. Besides, the USA and its Japanese and European allies should it make clear to Beijing's leaders the scope of sanctions and trade restrictions they would impose in the event of war, and their willingness to bear considerable costs.

For many years to come, the most critical strategic priority for the United States in the Indo-Pacific will be preventing China from swallowing a democratic and technologically advanced Taiwan. As the USA work to strengthen its ability, and Taiwan's, to respond to and defeat (and thus hopefully deter) a Chinese attack, it must also move with extreme caution to avoid triggering the development they are trying to deter. One element of this is ensuring that the next Taiwan government doesn't take gratuitous symbolic steps (however modest) to alter the status quo, in ways that Beijing would judge as confirmation that Taiwan is "drifting toward independence." The United States should strongly encourage the next Taiwan government to rigorously adhere to the status quo, as Taiwan's current president, Tsai Ing-wen, has done with

admirable restraint. Second, the USA should preserve that status quo itself, by avoiding future high-level visits at the level of the Speaker of the House or one of the most senior Cabinet officers, and by adhering to the policy of “strategic ambiguity.”

The United States of America will need words and visits at some level to reassure Taiwan that it will stand with them to defeat an invading force. However, the actions will speak louder than words. However, what is sure that the United States needs to do more and talk less (Brown, 2023). With much greater commitment, resolve, and imagination, the USA must accelerate its preparations to help Taiwan defeat an invading Chinese force. Preparing intensively for such a disastrous military conflict is the best way to ensure that it will never take place.

The PRC has used its economic clout and its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to silence any discussion of Taiwan’s status in the intergovernmental organization. It also blocks any contact between the government in Taipei and the UN’s agencies. This leaves 23 million Taiwanese citizens without a voice in the world’s leading international institution, meaning the UN is shunning its own commitment to the “self-determination of peoples.” Beijing points to Resolution 2758 as the ostensible reason to overlook Taiwan and interprets this to mean that Taiwan is just part of China, and thus shouldn’t be represented at the UN, but this is a willful misinterpretation, as the resolution doesn’t even mention Taiwan. It means that Taiwan’s position is undetermined. Besides, the Resolution addresses only the representation of China in UN, but it does not address the status of Taiwan or does not support the “One-China” principle. Another reason the UN should not use it as a legal basis to bar Taiwan from participating in its organizations.

The General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding and they are recommendatory. They are just the majority opinion of the UN member states on a specific matter at a given time. Therefore, the United States and its allies should stand up to Beijing, and advocating for Taiwan’s participation in international forums like the UN is.

The fact is that a potential China-Taiwan conflict will greatly differ from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in several ways. First, whereas Ukraine was flirting with stronger relations with the USA (namely joining NATO), the US has a long-standing military alliance with Taiwan, and there is an established precedent that, in the event of a Chinese invasion, the US will intervene. Secondly, the reasons given for the two conflicts would be completely different. Russia invaded Ukraine under the guise of ‘denazifying’ the country and recognized two breakaway states as independent. Conversely, Beijing doesn’t recognize Taiwan as anything other than a rightful province of China.

Both factors make a potential war between the United States and China far more likely than with Russia. So, what are the possibilities – both in the short and the long term? Perhaps the most likely outcome is the continuation of the status quo. Beijing is no stranger to flexing its military might in an attempt to influence Taiwanese politics. The 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis was a response to a Taiwanese Presidential election and as the ROC moves closer to a position of Taiwanese independence, thus outright rejecting the prospect of a potential reunification, we might see Beijing start to become more overt with its military threats. However, risking a potential nuclear war with the United States would be extremely costly for the Chinese government.

If the PRC does decide to re-take Taiwan through force, the world would look to the USA for their response. It's been a long-standing axiom in international politics that two nuclear powers will never cross swords, which has only happened in limited border conflicts and not full-scale wars. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has severely shaken up anything we thought we knew about global security. If the USA backs down over Taiwan, it will support the precedent that a rogue nuclear power can aggress another sovereign country with impunity.

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