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Introduction

The Past, Present, and Future of Cross-Taiwan Strait Relations

Dr. Peter Harris, editor



From the vantage point of the United States, it is difficult to envisage a long-term solution to the problem of cross-Taiwan Strait relations. Beijing is adamant that Taiwan must one day be incorporated into the People's Republic of China (PRC)—ideally through a peaceful process of reconciliation, but via force if necessary. According to Chinese leaders, this is a fundamental question of national sovereignty and territorial integrity and so there can be no compromise on the idea that, ultimately, both

sides of the Taiwan Strait will have to recognize that they belong to a single jurisdiction.

However, in Taiwan there is little appetite for unification if this means absorption into the PRC. Even Taiwanese politicians who have long believed in the principle of “One China” cannot accept their island becoming just another province of an authoritarian hegemon. For Taiwanese who oppose unification altogether, the prospect of a union with China is nothing less than an existential threat to their national identity and democratic system.

Given the intractability of the Taiwan Question, it makes sense that US foreign policy is not ordered toward the end of encouraging a permanent political settlement between Beijing and Taipei—at least not in any meaningful sense. Instead, Washington's priority is simply to deter the PRC from using military force to impose a settlement on its terms. To be sure, the importance of this goal should not be diminished. America's political and military power has helped foster stability across the Taiwan Strait for decades—arguably averting a military confrontation of catastrophic proportions.

Nevertheless, there are some serious questions about the durability of US policy toward Taiwan that demand consideration. Can the PRC be deterred forever, or will leaders in Beijing one day calculate that taking Taiwan by force is preferable to a never-

ending standoff across the Strait? If push comes to shove, is the United States truly committed to the military defense of Taiwan against a Chinese invasion? What about military actions short of a full-scale invasion? Is there any prospect for a peaceful resolution? In this second Indo-Pacific Perspectives roundtable, a distinguished group of experts suggest some answers to these and related questions.

The roundtable begins with two assessments of what Taiwan's current political status means for the United States and the wider region. First, Michael Mazza provides a forceful justification for America's continued commitments to Taiwan. Mazza makes a two-pronged argument: (1) Taiwan's political independence generates substantial material benefits for the United States in terms of both security and economics; and (2) the survival of democracy on at least one side of the Taiwan Strait ought to be considered a moral imperative. Mazza's arguments are clear and compelling, an uncompromising rejection of the idea that America's self-interest can be secured via retrenchment and restraint in East Asia.

Sana Hashmi goes beyond the US-China-Taiwan trilateral relationship to highlight the importance of Taiwan's political status in a regional context. She notes that a growing number of states now invoke the concept of a unified "Indo-Pacific" region

when describing their geopolitical environment. The Indo-Pacific regional construct seems to be rooted in the idea that states from India to Japan share a common set of interests in the shadow of China's rise. Most importantly, Hashmi argues, Indo-Pacific states share an interest in preserving a rules-based order. Given that Taiwan is a democracy and a reliable follower of international rules, why is Taiwan so often excluded from imaginations of the Indo-Pacific? Giving Taiwan a formal role in the emerging Indo-Pacific order would not be well received in Beijing, but Hashmi argues that the benefits of including Taiwan as a responsible Indo-Pacific stakeholder should not be overlooked.

Zuo Xiyang provides a methodical analysis of how the issue of cross-Strait relations is viewed from Beijing. While Mazza argues that Taiwan *should be* considered a core issue by the United States, Zuo points out that Taiwan *already is* treated as a core concern by PRC leaders. This will not change. While Hashmi argues that Taiwan can contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific, Zuo cautions war in the Taiwan Strait could easily bring the regional security architecture crashing down. These are sober observations about PRC strategic thinking that demand contemplation in the United States and elsewhere. Zuo maintains that the United States can have a positive role to play in

resolving the dispute between Beijing and Taipei, but he provides a frame for viewing cross-Strait relations that will be uncomfortable for many US-based analysts.

Turning to the question of the military balance across the Taiwan Strait, Wu Shang-su gives a masterful overview of Taiwan's ability to withstand military pressure from the PRC. Could Taiwan retain control of its airspace in the event of a Chinese assault? For how long could the island resist a full-scale invasion? Wu gives a clear-eyed technical assessment of the military situation as it currently exists. He makes several conclusions, including the argument that Taipei's defenses are currently deficient in some key areas, and that the prospect of US involvement in a cross-Strait confrontation—which, he points out, would transform such a conflict into a much wider conflagration—is likely critical to deterring China from attempting a direct assault.

How likely is a military invasion of Taiwan? Based on her analysis of public pronouncements by Xi Jinping, Hsiao-chuan Liao offers some reasons to be skeptical Beijing would resort to a military “solution” in the imminent future. Liao is pessimistic about the current and future state of cross-Strait relations. She notes that Xi is committed to the idea of unification between the PRC and Taiwan and that his rhetoric has become more forceful over

time. Xi would be an unlikely peacemaker, to say the least. But in Liao's analysis, Xi's focus remains on achieving the so-called “China Dream”—that is, a strong and confident PRC. Xi's interest in unification is not so urgent that he would sacrifice his domestic agenda for a costly war over Taiwan.

Finally, Jessica Drun returns the focus to the Taiwanese side of the Strait. She points out that political actors inside Taiwan have divergent views over the existing cross-Strait relationship, let alone the future political status of Taiwan. The concept of a “status quo” is important, given that parties to the dispute often cry foul—and, on occasion, have even threatened war—whenever the prevailing political settlement between Beijing and Taipei is placed in jeopardy. But what if there is no agreement over how to describe the status quo? According to Drun, the absence of an intersubjective agreement over how to interpret the cross-Strait status quo has wide-ranging political and diplomatic consequences. Drun's contribution is a fitting conclusion to the roundtable, encapsulating just how complex cross-Strait relations are—and just how difficult it will be for Beijing and Taipei to resolve their differences through negotiations.

What advice do the contributors have for Taiwan, China, the United States, and other regional powers? None would disagree with Winston Churchill that “meeting jaw-to-jaw is better

than war,” but they each have different views on how diplomacy can be returned to center stage. All are somewhat pessimistic about the future, even if they support the basic idea that war can be avoided through adroit political leadership and strategic thinking on all sides. That, at least, is something for far-sighted and peaceable leaders to build upon. Not much, but not nothing. ■

Dr. Peter Harris

Dr. Harris is an assistant professor of political science at Colorado State University, where his teaching and research focus on international security, international relations theory, and US foreign policy. He serves as the editor for the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*' new “Indo-Pacific Perspectives” series.

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