

**JIPA**

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# *Indo-Pacific Perspectives*

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

March 2021

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# Indo-Pacific Perspectives

March 2021

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# 1

## Introduction

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

Dr. Peter Harris, editor



**F**rom 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**

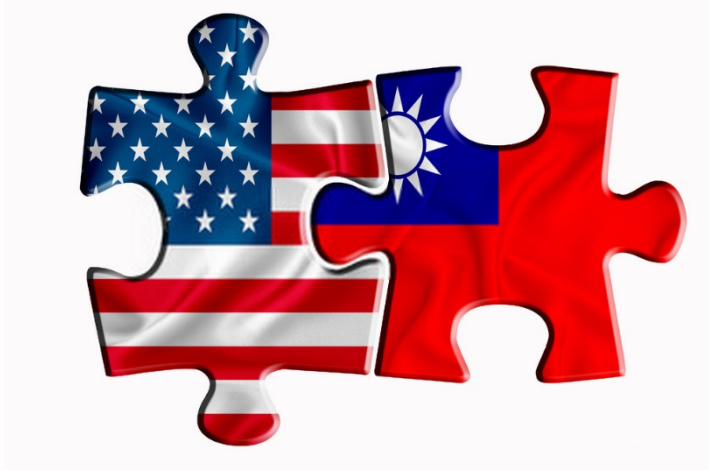
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# 2

## “Rock-solid” America’s Past and Present Commitment to Taiwan Michael Mazza



On 23 January 2021, 15 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft flew into the southwest corner of Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ). Thirteen aircraft repeated the exercise the following day. The US Department of State called on Beijing “to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan” and, in what must have been reassuring words to leaders in Taipei, described American “commitment” to Taiwan as “rock-solid.” Those are strong words from the new Biden administration, especially given the lack of a legal obligation to defend Taiwan and the lack of formal bilateral diplomatic ties.

That rock-solid commitment has endured for decades, even as the particulars of Taiwan policy have evolved. In the Formosa Resolution of 1955, Congress pre-authorized Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower to use force in defense of Taiwan, noting that armed attack “would gravely endanger the peace and security of the West Pacific area” and that “the secure possession by friendly governments of the Western Pacific Island chain, of which Formosa is a part, is essential to the vital interests of the United States and all friendly nations in or bordering upon the Pacific Ocean.”<sup>1</sup>

The American switch in diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1979 did not fundamentally change that outlook. The Taiwan Relations Act, passed with veto-proof majorities and signed into law by Pres. Jimmy Carter, described US policy thusly:

2. to declare that peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern; [ . . . ]
4. to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States . . .<sup>2</sup>

Why is the US commitment to Taiwan “rock-solid” and why must it remain so? The commitment has its origin in the aftermath of World War II, as American strategists were establish-



ing a forward defense perimeter to ensure the events of 7 December 1941, would never be repeated. Gen Douglas MacArthur, fretting that Taiwan might fall into communist hands, in a memorandum transmitted to Washington just 11 days before the outbreak of the Korean War, compared the island to an “unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender ideally located to accomplish Soviet offensive strategy and at the same time checkmate counteroffensive operations by United States Forces based on Okinawa and the Philippines.”<sup>3</sup> Seven decades later, that logic still holds relevance.

Were China to one day occupy Taiwan, the defense of Japan and the Philippines, both US allies, would become far more complicated. China would bolster its ability to control the South China Sea waterways should it choose to do so. Most troubling of all, the PLA would for the first time have unimpeded access to the Pacific Ocean, allowing it more easily to threaten Guam, Hawaii, and the continental United States. PLA ballistic missile submarines might ply the waters of the Western Pacific, allowing China to pose a more potent nuclear weapons threat to the United States.

As long as Washington assesses that American security is best served by defending forward—an approach that has served the United States well over the past 70 years—Taiwan’s *de facto*

independence will remain a key US interest and driver of American policy in Asia.

The PRC’s annexation of Taiwan would, moreover, usher in a new regional order in Asia—one that would be conducive to the interests of no one but Beijing and its hangers-on. The presiding, if currently contested, order is marked by widespread (though not unanimous) embrace of an understanding of law of the sea grounded in both customary law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, liberal approaches to international trade, and a preference for the peaceful settlement of disputes. Some in Asia may bristle that the current order has long been dominated by the United States, but it is hard to argue with results: the emergence of several high-income countries in the decades since World War II, healthy growth in several developing economies, and more than four decades without great-power war.

But a successful PRC occupation of Taiwan would overturn the norms governing the current regional order. The Asia-Pacific would fast become a realm in which might makes right; in which traditional conceptions of freedom of navigation are likely jettisoned; in which security competitions grow in intensity, to the detriment of economic prosperity; and in which China increasingly sets the terms of trade for those inside and outside the

region. Such an outcome would not be conducive to the national security of the United States as it is traditionally understood.

Economic wellbeing is another key driver of the American commitment to Taiwan. US economic interests in Taiwan are significant. Taiwan is consistently a top-10 trading partner. According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative, Taiwan was America’s 13th-largest goods export market in 2019 and the 6th-largest agricultural export market.<sup>4</sup>

What is more, Taiwan occupies a key position in global tech supply chains. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, LTD, the world’s largest dedicated semiconductor foundry, is a chip supplier for major American companies from Advanced Micro Devices to Qualcomm and from Apple to Nvidia. Bloomberg News described “Taiwan’s grip on the semiconductor business” as “a choke point in the global supply chain.” Its dominance of the industry, moreover, has “helped Taiwan form a comprehensive ecosystem around it: ASE Technology Holding is the world’s top chip assembler, while MediaTek has become the largest smartphone chipset vendor.”<sup>5</sup> Put simply, if the United States were to lose access to Taiwan’s innovators and manufacturers, the American tech industry could be paralyzed.

Last, but certainly not least, Taiwan is important to the United States

because it is a thriving liberal democracy—one whose freedom is threatened by a much larger authoritarian neighbor. American leaders have long assessed that a world in which democracies are prevalent is a world that is conducive to US interests and national security. And although a crusading impulse has waxed and waned as a driver of American foreign policy, it has arguably never been absent. Ensuring Taiwan’s survival as a de facto independent democratic state, then, is critical if Washington wants to shape a world in which the United States can thrive.

The existence of Taiwan’s democracy serves as proof-positive that there is nothing incompatible between a Chinese-speaking polity and self-government. Quite the contrary. If democracy is one day to come to China—a hope, even if not, at this point, an explicit aim of American policy—it may be in no small part due to dissidents and reformers looking admiringly at, learning from, and drawing inspiration from Taiwan’s own experiences with one-party rule, liberalization, and democratic consolidation.

Taiwan is a country of only 24 million people. It lies less than 100 miles from the PRC coastline and is separated from the United States by the entire width of the Pacific Ocean. Its quarrel with China has its roots in a civil war that ended in 1949 and Cold War conditions that have persisted despite the

Cold War's end. With US–China tensions on the rise across multiple facets of the bilateral relationship, some may question whether Taiwan is worth the trouble for Washington. It is. Indeed, Taiwan is where various points of friction converge. It is arguably where American and Chinese national security concerns, visions of regional order, economic and technological interests, and core values most directly collide.

Of course, the country is also home to freedom-loving people who want nothing more than to live in peace with their neighbors. The United States has every reason to ensure Taiwan's citizens can continue doing so. ■

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See: "Joint Resolution by the Congress," 29 January 1955, <https://history.state.gov/>.

<sup>2</sup> For the full text of the Act, see: Taiwan Relations Act, 1 January 1979, <https://www.ait.org.tw/>.

<sup>3</sup> See: "Memorandum of Conversation, by the Ambassador at Large (Jessup)," 25 June 1950, <https://history.state.gov/>.

## Michael Mazza

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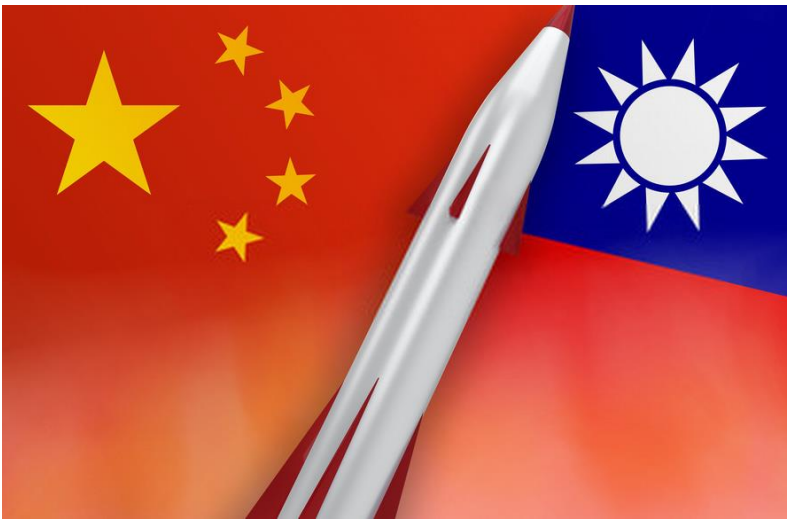
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<sup>4</sup> Figures are taken from the Office of the United States Trade Representative, "U.S.-Taiwan Trade Facts," <https://ustr.gov/>.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Crawford, Jarrell Dillard, Helene Fouquet, and Isabel Reynolds, "The world is dangerously dependent on Taiwan for semiconductors," *Japan Times*, 26 January 2021, <https://www.japan-times.co.jp/>.

# 3 | Taiwan's Security in the Emerging Indo-Pacific Order

Dr. Sana Hashmi



The past few years have seen dramatic changes taking place in Indo-Pacific geopolitics, such as China's rise, Beijing's increasingly assertive foreign policy, and the erosion of American supremacy. As the region's two major powers, the changing relationship between China and the United States impacts regional and international security dynamics and the affairs of small and middle powers. After all, most of the small and middle powers of the Indo-

Pacific region are reliant on—and have tilted toward—either of the two superpowers.

Amid growing competition between the United States and China, the Indo-Pacific region has gained significant prominence. Interestingly, the countries that are trying to avoid entanglement in the US–China confrontation—which are not interested in choosing one major power over the other—are also supporting the idea of the Indo-Pacific. The recently released Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN) outlook on the Indo-Pacific region, shows a growing acceptance of the Indo-Pacific construct. Several other countries—including those of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—have embraced the Indo-Pacific as a means to preserve a rules-based order in the twenty-first century. These developments are shaped, in part, by the growing US–China competition that reached a high level during the Trump administration and is likely to be continued under Pres. Joe Biden.

Taiwan's security is directly linked with the United States and its relations with China. Any major change in the regional or bilateral dynamics will have a direct impact on Taiwan. Taiwan has been quick in sensing the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region on strategic, diplomatic, and economic fronts. As a result, Taiwan has expressed its willingness to play



an active role in shaping the region. While Taiwan is yet to devise its own blueprint for the Indo-Pacific region, such a step will likely materialize sooner rather than later. Taiwan's expression of interest in joining the Indo-Pacific region has been sufficiently showcased by Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen, who on several occasions has stated that Taiwan can play an instrumental role in the region. Speaking at the 2020 Taiwan–US–Japan Trilateral Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue on 8 December, Tsai urged the Indo-Pacific countries to work together toward a resilient and peaceful future. She stated, “Leveraging expertise and capabilities, Taiwan and its like-minded partners in the region can effectively address the challenges ahead.”<sup>1</sup>

Taiwan—like other major rule-abiding stakeholders—advocates a rules-based order, inclusiveness, and transparency; its COVID-19 response is an important example in that context. Taiwan's emerging response seems aligned with the officially declared policies of the US (Free and Open Indo-Pacific), India (Act East Policy), and Japan (Partnership for Quality Infrastructure). So far, only the United States has formally included Taiwan in its Indo-Pacific strategy; while being open to the idea, other leading Indo-Pacific countries have shied away from officially mentioning Taiwan as a partner country. Nevertheless, the last

four years of Tsai's government have witnessed a stronger relationship between Taiwan and its Indo-Pacific partners.

A key aspect of Taiwan's strategic ties in the region is its relationship with the United States. Over the past four years, the Taiwan–US relationship has gained in considerable strategic weight. During the Trump administration, Taiwan became more prominent in US foreign policy pronouncements—even though at times Trump appeared to use Taiwan as a card in his China agenda. The pro-Taiwan initiatives brought forth by the Trump administration are, in all likelihood, going to be carried forward by the Biden administration. At least, recent statements by Biden's advisers are indicative of continuity. There has also been speculation that the Biden administration would pay more attention to Taiwan, as to give it a greater place in the Indo-Pacific deliberations. America's response has been amplified by Taiwan's proactive engagement with the Indo-Pacific countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A region as diverse as the Indo-Pacific should not forget the variety of mutual concerns and common interests that include traditional and nontraditional security issues. One such common concern has continued to be the rise of China. If the COVID-19 pandemic made countries of the region realize how interconnected they were on the

health front, then the perception of unprovoked Chinese aggression has led to an increasing realization of vulnerabilities on the security front. Over the past year—amid a global pandemic, no less—China's trade war with the United States, border conflict with India, trade boycotts of Australian goods, and the encroachment into Taiwanese and Vietnamese territories has portrayed China in an increasingly aggressive light on the world stage.

The idea of an Indo-Pacific region—spurred by former Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe's idea of bringing together the Indian and Pacific oceans—has created anxieties for China. China feels threatened by the emerging Indo-Pacific order—fearing marginalization. While support for the notion of an Indo-Pacific region derives from much more than just shared concerns over China's rise, it is true that China has played an instrumental role in shaping countries' respective visions of what the Indo-Pacific region needs to look like. In August 2020, Tsai used her keynote address at the 2020 Ketagalan Forum to state:

It is time for like-minded countries, and democratic friends in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, to discuss a framework to generate sustained and concerted efforts to maintain a strategic order that deters unilateral aggressive actions. We need a strategic order that encourages cooperation, transparency and problem-solving through dialogue, not threats of war. We need a strategy that

avoids war, yet clearly conveys our resolve to protect our democracies.<sup>2</sup>

Such statements by world leaders were common throughout 2020, as they struggled with how to deal with the pandemic. Simultaneously, countries such as India, Australia, and Canada during this time began to feel the brunt of China's aggression. The Indo-Pacific construct has resulted in giving countries a platform to deal with common challenges in a seemingly intractable situation. The Indo-Pacific is not premised on an overtly anti-China component and is even open to including China as a responsible stakeholder in the future. Nevertheless, it is true that growing Chinese aggression has been a common concern for those countries advocating for a rules-based order. It is somewhat puzzling, despite convergent interests and shared concern in the face of the "China threat," that Taiwan—a democratic country that is aligned with the United States and its other allies—is still not often a part of the Indo-Pacific official discourse. Protecting Taiwan's integrity is vital to preserving a rules-based and inclusive order where peace and stability are of the utmost important values.

As the Indo-Pacific region evolves, it will open new opportunities for Taiwan to diversify its partnerships and expand cooperation with countries of the extended region. It is equally important for Taiwan to gather support

from fellow democracies in the Indo-Pacific region. While Taiwan has been able to secure bipartisan support in the United States in recent years, the Biden administration's focus, for at least the first few months, is likely to be on containing the pandemic and other domestic issues. This does not mean the Biden administration will lose interest in the Indo-Pacific. The appointment of an "Indo-Pacific czar" and other renowned foreign policy and security experts in the new administration demonstrates that the United States is attempting a renewed "pivot" to Asia. The Indo-Pacific region will continue to remain the top priority in US foreign policy. It will be critical for Taiwan and other Indo-Pacific countries to reorient its joint focus. It is in the interests of regional powers to facilitate Taiwan's greater participation in collective diplomacy—leading to a robust security network against common threats.

In the twenty-first century, countries are seeking beyond traditional ways of cooperation to elevate relationships. New technologies and new challenges have led to this novel, yet challenging phase in international relations. Some countries are opting for "minilateral" mechanisms within the Indo-Pacific region. The Global Cooperation and Training Framework should be expanded beyond its current membership of the United States, Japan, and Taiwan, to include more Indo-Pacific

countries. This will allow more regional powers to learn from Taiwan's best practices and for Taiwan to demonstrate its acclaimed "Taiwan model." Like other major stakeholders, Taiwan's policy has been open, transparent, and inclusive. Its participation in regional frameworks will only strengthen the rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

Most importantly, Indo-Pacific nations must recognize that, if China escalates a military conflict with Taiwan, then such a move would disrupt the peace and stability of the entire region. This scenario is not in the best interests of the countries of the region. Integrating Taiwan more formally into regional deliberations and processes would make countries more aware about the shared risks of a cross-Strait conflict. In turn, this might pressure the region to find ways to avoid such a situation. As far as Taiwan is concerned, a clearly articulated Indo-Pacific policy would serve its interests better, placing it amid all critical debates of the region. ■

**Dr. Sana Hashmi**

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> “President Tsai Attends Opening of 2020 Taiwan-US-Japan Trilateral Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue”, Office of the President of Republic of China (Taiwan), 8 December 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/>.

<sup>2</sup> “President Tsai attends the Ketagalan Forum — 2020 Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue”, Office of the President of Republic of China (Taiwan), 8 August 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/>.



# 4

## Irresistible Trend

### The US–China Interest Asymmetry and Taiwan’s Future

Dr. Zuo Xiyong



**T**aiwan is one of the core issues in US–China relations. America’s position on the Taiwan issue has been the weathervane in the Western Pacific. This was true during the early stages of the Cold War, in US–China strategic cooperation after the Sino-Soviet split, and in the contemporary context of China’s rise. China’s rise after the Cold War.. In the past decade, with the deterioration of US–China relations, some US analysts have discussed crucial issues concerning Taiwan. Three profound questions needing further thought are should the United States abandon

Taiwan,<sup>1</sup> can the United States reach a grand bargain with China,<sup>2</sup> and does US policy toward Taiwan need to be unambiguous?<sup>3</sup> Behind these discussions lies a core question: Is Taiwan’s security a core concern of the United States? Like in the United States, there are also different views in China. This article will try to provide an interpretation.

#### The Taiwan Issue in American Foreign Policy

In the context of China’s rapid rise, a growing number of US-based analysts have endorsed Taiwan as a core concern in the past decade. This trend is related to two factors. First, US policy toward China has undergone fundamental changes. Since the Obama administration, the United States has gradually adjusted its China policy, trying to strengthen US–Taiwan relations, while dealing with the unstable situation in the Taiwan Strait. Second, mainland China’s desire for reunification will be promoted accordingly. With Taiwan’s Tsai Ing-wen’s rejection of the 1992 Consensus, Beijing has switched its guideline for promoting reunification from “placing hope on the Taiwanese” to “placing more hope on the mainland itself.”<sup>4</sup>

In the United States, analysts debate whether Taiwan’s security is a core concern or not. Supporters of this idea point to the island’s strategic value for containing mainland China and to the issue of American credibility.

Opponents are concerned about the worst-case scenario: a showdown between China and the United States. This situation will ascertain the high costs that the United States will have to pay if it is determined to intervene to prevent a nonconsensual reunification. However, Taiwan's status as an issue in American foreign policy is dynamic. Whether Taiwan's security is a core concern of the United States depends not only on the historical framework but also on the United States, Taiwan, and mainland China. In different periods, the answer will not be the same.

To be sure, Taiwan is related to some vital interests of the United States, and the cost of abandoning Taiwan would be high. The United States would lose an essential tool with which to contain China in the Asia-Pacific region. Meanwhile, it would make a significant dent in the US commitment to its alliances, arguably weakening America's reputation in this respect. However, China is politically opposed to the United States regarding Taiwan as its core interest and even more opposed to the United States regarding Taiwan as part of its sphere of influence. Almost all Chinese people agree that the Taiwan issue concerns China's sovereignty. As stated in China's white paper, *The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue*, "[s]ettlement of the Taiwan issue and realization of the complete reunification of

China embodies the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation."<sup>5</sup> On this point, there is a fundamental conflict between China and the United States.

Historically, the United States has abandoned and revalued Taiwan several times since World War II. In Chinese interpretations, Taiwan is a vital card that the United States can use to contain China. However, China and the United States have asymmetric interests on this issue.<sup>6</sup> For China, Taiwan is related to the nation's reunification, which is a core issue of sovereignty upon which there can be no compromise. Regarded as one of China's constant core interests, Taiwan is at the forefront. For the United States, of course, Taiwan is also critical. Still, its significance is much lower than for China, which means it is a wavering core interest. Under some extreme circumstances in China and the United States, interests might be compromised. The constant core interest is one of the fundamental differences between Beijing's One-China Principle and Washington's One-China Policy: policies can change, whereas principles do not.

### **Will the US Intervene in a Future Taiwan Strait Conflict?**

Another critical issue is whether the United States would intervene by force if there were a crisis across the Taiwan Strait in the future. This question seems easy to answer. In the

Three Communiqués, the United States has repeatedly reiterated its interest in the Taiwan issue's peaceful settlement. In the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States has also clearly expressed its "grave concern" about the use of nonpeaceful means.<sup>7</sup> However, the United States' stated intention is one thing, and its realistic choice when facing the conflict is another. The tangible answer to this question is that it depends on the prevailing US calculation of its benefits and costs.

The United States has abandoned its allies twice in the Asia-Pacific: Pres. Richard Nixon's withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1973 and Pres. Jimmy Carter's establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and disconnection with the Republic of China in Taiwan in 1979. These two abandonment instances have in common that they were both high-cost and highly beneficial from the US perspective.

It is unlikely that the United States will choose to abandon Taiwan to be because it eyes strategic gains. The strategic opportunity that China and the United States had to balance against the Soviet Union during the Cold War jointly will not repeat. Additionally, the possibility of a grand bargain between China and the United States in the Western Pacific is also very low. However, China may impose high costs to compel the United States to

abandon Taiwan. After all, the United States has always been ambiguous about the form and extent of any interventions it would take in Taiwan's defense; *grave concern* is a phrase with a wide range of policy space. Therefore, it is uncertain how the United States might intervene in future conflicts in the Taiwan Strait, particularly if Washington judged the costs of intervention to be high. An intervention could be military in nature, but it could also take the form of political isolation or economic sanctions against Beijing.

America's conflicted position on whether it would intervene militarily in the Taiwan Strait has implications for China. According to common sense, it is unrealistic for China to formulate its strategy and policy to assume that the United States would not intervene in Taiwan. Instead, China must prepare for the worst-case scenario: a US military intervention in China's reunification. The expectation of US intervention will be a constant in Chinese strategic planning. This is not to say that China regards the United States as an adversary. Rather, the expectation of US intervention is merely unavoidable in the context of US equivocation and ambiguity.

China welcomes the United States to play a constructive role in China's peaceful reunification. As Huang Jiashu, a professor at the Renmin University of China, pointed out, "the

most ideal choice is to let the United States help us in the final peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue. If such a goal can't be achieved, at least we should not let the United States become an obstacle. If such a goal still can't be achieved, at least we can let the United States play a positive role in opposing Taiwanese independence.”<sup>8</sup> In the past, China and the United States accepted the ambiguity of each other's positions. However, with the growing intensity of strategic competition, all parties' policy space is getting smaller, and the Taiwan Strait crisis is emerging.<sup>9</sup>

The future conflict between China and the United States on Taiwan is a rivalry of strength and a clash of resolve—a contest between China's determination to uphold its state sovereignty and the United States' resolve to defend its commitment. As the power gap between China and the United States shrinks, the willpower contest will become a decisive factor. This historical trend is apparent. The strategy of using Taiwan to contain mainland China may entangle the United States in a disastrous direct conflict between China and the United States, turning Taiwan into a “strategic high-risk asset” of the United States.<sup>10</sup>

If China becomes determined to start the agenda of reunification, its leaders will do so prudently but ready to bear any costs, including political isolation,

economic sanctions, and military intervention. For the United States, the price is bound to be very high. The final result will most likely be that the United States cannot stop China's reunification process militarily. Washington can only impose costs on China through political isolation and economic sanctions to make up for its loss in reputation.

### **Conclusion**

There is a vast asymmetry of interests between China and the United States on the Taiwan issue, which leads to the asymmetry of resolve. That will be the crucial factor affecting the situation in the Taiwan Strait in the future. If one day, China and the United States must make independent decisions on the future of Taiwan, whether Taiwan's security is a core concern of the United States will become a simple choice. In this regard, some US-based analysts, such as Barry R. Posen, John J. Mearsheimer, and Charles Glaser, have pointed out the historical trend. Unfortunately, their view is not mainstream in the United States, and it is difficult to convert into foreign policy. ■

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# 5

## Taiwan's Security

### An Intertwined Knot

Dr. Wu Shang-su



Since 1949, the Taiwan Strait has been a potential flashpoint for conflict—something especially true in the last decade due to the shifting balance of the forces between the militaries on either side. Traditionally, Taiwan relies on the geographic barrier of the Strait and support from the United States—through arms sales and via the latent threat of potential military intervention—to balance against strategic pressure from China. However, Beijing enjoys both asymmetrical and symmetrical

military advantages. Asymmetrically, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has expanded the arsenal of standoff firepower with ballistic missiles, rockets, cruise missiles, and air-to-surface missiles in the last three decades. Therefore, the whole island of Taiwan is vulnerable to missile strikes from China.<sup>1</sup> Combined with other capabilities—such as surveillance satellites and submarines—these standoff weapons underpin the PLA's antiaccess/aerial-denial (A2/AD) strategy to counter US military deployments in the region.

Symmetrically, Beijing has substantially modernized its conventional military assets; the PLA Navy (PLAN) boats new surface and underwater fleets could be used to block maritime access to Taiwan and establish sea control, an indispensable condition for amphibious invasion.<sup>2</sup> The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and the PLAN Air Force have each strengthened their fighter wings with new indigenous and Russian models, backed by aerial warning and command system and aerial refueling platforms to achieve the air superiority necessary for air strikes and air cover for a possible invasion of Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> Finally, both the PLAAF and PLAN have enlarged their airborne and amphibious capacities for projecting forces across the Strait.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Taiwan's defenses have fallen into inferiority. Air defense, sea denial, and antilanding measures

have been the core of Taipei's island defense strategy for decades. Still, related capabilities undermine the developments on the other side of the Strait.<sup>5</sup> Taiwan's fighters and surface-to-air missiles (SAM), and related surveillance facilities are the backbones to prevent airstrikes from China. But Taipei's airbases, radars, SAM batteries, and other air defense facilities have become the main targets of standoff firepower from the Mainland. Consequently, the loss of Taiwan's air defense capacity could be demolished in the first wave of Chinese attacks.<sup>6</sup> If Chinese Special Forces penetrated Taiwan in advance of an attack, then this would represent another serious threat to Taiwan's air defense. Taiwan's air defense capabilities—especially the fighters—have come to occupy a significant portion of the country's defense budget. There are severe doubts about the wisdom of military spending priorities.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding sea denial, Taiwan's fast attack craft and onshore launchers of antiship cruise missiles are the mainstays to deter the PLAN's surface vessels, which would be essential for an amphibious invasion to capture the island.<sup>8</sup> However, these defenses may also become the targets of China's standoff firepower, and airstrikes after the neutralization of Taiwan's air defenses. Taipei possesses four destroyers and 22 frigates, but these assets could be vulnerable to Beijing's A2/AD

firepower and may not have much capacity left for sea denial.<sup>9</sup> Antilanding may be more realistic to achieve because of Taiwan's possible quantitative superiority in terms of conventional forces (although the PLAN's amphibious capacity is increasing, for the foreseeable future, it will be limited). However, Taiwan's antilanding capability significantly relies on conscription, which is how the island can assemble a large reserve of soldiers. Yet conscription has been cut to four months of basic training without being deployed to regular units, raising questions about whether such inexperienced reserves could form the adequate mobilized units to accomplish antilanding missions. Regular units also face a shortage of soldiers due to the lack of conscripts.<sup>10</sup> Sabotage by Chinese Special Forces could further disrupt antilanding forces' preparation, or even paralyze the chain of command.

Since 2016, the Tsai Ing-wen administration has pursued a military buildup, with a focus on defensive capabilities. For air defense, Taipei has procured 66 F-16C/B Block 70 fighters, Patriot Advanced Capability-3 and FIM-92 SAMs, and other equipment from Washington, along with indigenous funding projects such as the Tien-Kung series SAMs and AT-5 advanced trainers/light fighters.<sup>11</sup> Such investment certainly strengthens the capacity and capabilities of air

defense. Additionally, the introduction of the indigenous Wan-Chien, American air-to-ground (AGM) missiles such as the AGM-154 and AGM-88, AGM-84 land-attack missiles, land-based Hsiung-Fung 2E cruise missiles, the Army Tactical Missiles, and other standoff munitions allow Taiwan to attack targets (whether standoff fire-power airbases or other military facilities) in Fujian province and even farther inland.<sup>12</sup> Such offensive operations lower the pressure on Taiwan's air defense.

However, the airbases' vulnerability of Taiwan is unchanged, meaning that Taiwanese fighters may not have a chance to take off or return to bases after flying their first sorties. Putting fighters in the shelters in Eastern Taiwan has been a solution for three decades, but it comes at the cost of reducing air defenses and limiting other aerial operations. There is also a risk that China may develop bunker-buster munitions. Taipei's offensive capabilities thus present a dilemma: a preemptive strike is militarily ideal for the most significant impact, but it may cause a "troublemaker" label by the international community with a risk of losing the support of third parties, especially the United States. Suppose Beijing launches the first salvo of attacks. In that case, most of Taiwan's fighters will be occupied with mere survival and air defense—if not entirely neutralized—which would

result in a missed opportunity to use offensive capabilities to relieve pressure on Taiwan's air defenses.

Taiwan's naval modernization program is ambitious. It covers a broad spectrum of vessels, including Tuo Chiang-class stealth corvettes, submarines, frigates, landing platform docks, high-speed minelayers, submarine rescue ships, and mine countermeasure vessels. These various projects reflect the Tsai administration's intention of developing the indigenous defense industry with a balanced naval strategy aimed at both sea control and sea denial.<sup>13</sup> Although sea control-oriented assets, such as frigates and amphibious transport docks, are valuable in peacetime, their prospects for survival in the face of the Chinese A2/AD fire-power are doubtful. As for the sea denial-oriented vessels, their survival during wartime would be better but far from guaranteed. The limited length of the Taiwanese coastlines could be studied by the PLAN in advance to know the "hideouts" of Taiwanese vessels, which would be vulnerable to Chinese antiship cruise missiles (ASCM) and other weapons.<sup>14</sup> The submarines with the highest stealth level constitute Taiwan's strategic reserve, but China's active deployment of underwater sensors may create constraints on their operations.<sup>15</sup> Besides, transforming an indigenous project of defense manufacturing into a credible fighting force is

expensive, time-consuming, and an uncertain endeavor. Considering the fast pace of PLAN naval construction, time is not on Taipei's side when it comes to maritime projects.

On land, various new procurements have added multiple layers of defense. These include M1A2T main battle tanks (MBT), onshore Harpoon and Hsiung-Fung series ASCMs, indigenous infantry fighting vehicles, multi-launch rocket systems, AH-64E and AH-1W attack helicopters, FGM-148 and BGM-71 antitank missiles, and UH-60M utility and CH-47D transport helicopters.<sup>16</sup> The ASCMs, rockets, and other munitions can directly sink the PLAN amphibious transport docks. The attack helicopters would engage remaining landing vehicles and vessels approaching coastlines and any Chinese airborne troops. The M1A2T MBTs have better armor and firepower than the old M-48Hs and M-60A3s. Along with the infantry and artillery firepower, these units would thwart attempts to form beachheads by Chinese amphibious forces.<sup>17</sup> Utility and transport helicopters could rapidly deploy troops for reinforcement. Tactically, warfare in this stage of fighting would take place under conditions of one side enjoying air superiority, which means that the outcome of antilanding operations depend on how many Taiwanese SAMs and other air defenses remained intact. The issues of conscription and recruitment of

voluntary soldiers will adversely impact Taiwan's ability to repel amphibious landings if not adequately addressed.

Although Taiwan's military modernization in recent years has not entirely removed the weaknesses in its national defenses, it is essential to remember that security dynamics in the Strait are not just a question of bilateral relations. Given Taipei's geographic location on Taiwan's island, operations at the north end of the island are unavoidable. Yet US military bases in Okinawa would face the north flank of any Chinese military operations against Taiwan in this area. If Beijing decides to control the conflict scale, this exposed northern flank would be a potential vulnerability. On the other hand, if China attempted to neutralize the threat from Okinawa with the A2/AD firepower, warfare will naturally go beyond the Strait. In such a scenario, Taiwan's enhanced defenses would pose a problem for Beijing by prolonging the island's military resistance and allowing a longer time for Beijing to succumb to its exposed northern flank. Economic, political, and other nonmilitary policy tools from mainland China would be more effective in dealing with Taiwan and less likely to provoke an intervention from the United States. Threats of the use of force are likely to remain useful only insofar as they can help set a "red line" to deter Taiwan from declaring

*de jure* independence. In this sense, threats of military force can be used to coerce but not compel. As long as Beijing does not feel desperate, at least, a high-cost military option - even with some chance of victory – must be judged unfavorable in contrast to alternatives such as economic pressure.

If viewed in this wider context, one can see that Taiwan's enhanced military defenses have increased its capacity and capabilities to resist Chinese military threats, despite some drawbacks, and has thus contributed to the cross-Strait security's stability. ■

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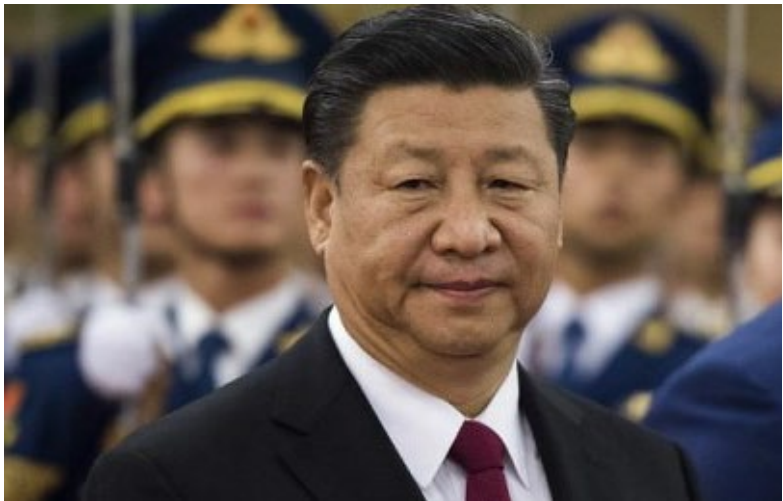
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# 6 An Interpretation of Xi's Taiwan Policy—and Taiwan's Response

Dr. Hsiao-chuan Liao



China's policy toward Taiwan has remained fairly consistent since Deng Xiaoping turned it from the position of "fight" to that of "negotiation" in 1978.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, peaceful reunification remains the ultimate goal of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Still, reunification by force is regarded as a possible outcome if a peaceful resolution is unattainable. In 1979, the Standing Committee of the fifth National People's Congress adopted its "Message to Compatriots

in Taiwan,"<sup>2</sup> which proposed the termination of cross-Strait military confrontation and called for peaceful reunification. Since then, direct transportation, postal services, and business ties have allowed for substantial engagement between both sides of the Strait. Other Chinese leaders since Deng have proposed their own Taiwan policies, but the specific content has never shifted substantially. However, on the 40th anniversary of the Message, Xi Jinping announced his "Five Points" policy, which positions China away from the opposition of an independent Taiwan to active promotion of reunification.<sup>3</sup> In the wider context of the PRC's more assertive diplomacy under Xi, this shift in emphasis gives cause for pessimism when considering the future of cross-Strait relations and East Asia's broader stability.

## Continuation and Adjustment of China's Taiwan Policy

When Xi assumed office in 2012, his policy toward Taiwan matched that of his predecessor, Hu Jintao. However, at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi revealed his "China Dream,"<sup>4</sup> which showed his ambitions to revive China's historical glory. Specifically, Xi predicted that China would become a well-off society and realize the modernization of socialism before 2035. He further set up a goal to establish China as a country with leading national capabilities and international influence by the mid-21st century. As

for cross-Strait relations, Xi insisted on “One Country, Two Systems” and “the 1992 Consensus.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, Xi’s speech to the 19th Party Congress paid more attention to the consolidation of the party and the economic situation in mainland China than it did cross-Strait relations.<sup>6</sup> When he did address the Taiwanese government and people, Xi sought to appeal to them rather than use the language of compulsion. Given that then-President of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou, recognized reunification as the ultimate goal, cross-Strait relations did undergo a relatively positive and intimate phase. An historic meeting between Xi and Ma was held in November 2015, the first such meeting between mainland China and Taiwan since the end of the Chinese Civil War.

However, in the 2016 presidential election, Taiwan elected Tsai Ing-wen. Tsai, a Democratic Progress Party member, supports an independent Taiwan, divorced from Xi’s One Country, Two Systems. At least at first, Tsai tried not to irritate China – for example, by not publicly announcing Taiwan’s independence – and used the diplomatic language of “the two sides of the Strait” to define Taiwan and China. Indeed, Tsai agreed with Xi that, in 1992, both sides across the Strait had jointly acknowledged that they could set aside differences to seek common ground.<sup>7</sup> But Tsai refused to promise that the One China principle

constituted a consensus between the PRC and Taiwan. In return, Beijing sought to shrink Taiwan’s diplomatic representation overseas by pressuring countries to cut ties with Taiwan and working to restrict Taiwan’s participation in World Health Assembly meetings. The PRC also suspended the official communications across the Strait.

It is in this context that Xi chose to update his policy toward Taiwan in 2019, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National People’s Congress’ Message to Compatriots in Taiwan. It is likely that Xi was trying to influence Taiwan’s presidential election, which were held in January 2020. The main shift detailed Xi’s renewed emphasis on unification instead of bilateral cooperation. This updated policy has become an essential part of the PRC’s approach to Taiwan. But three subsequent updates are also worth noting.

### **The First Adjustment: The Content of the 1992 Consensus**

In his speech to the 19th Party Congress, Xi portrayed the 1992 Consensus as referring to the One China principle, which describes mutual recognition of both sides belonging to one China. This mutual recognition is the traditional understanding in mainland China. However, in the updated version, Xi redefined the 1992 Consensus as an understanding that “both sides of the Taiwan Straits belong to one China and will work together toward national reunification.”<sup>8</sup> This

statement marked a departure from past understandings of the 1992 Consensus by conflating the One China principle with the goal of reunification.

This conceptual reformulation led the Tsai government to clarify—for the first time—that Taiwan cannot accept the 1992 Consensus.<sup>9</sup> Taiwan's version of the 1992 Consensus is that both sides recognize there is only one China but agree to differ on its definition. This concept is different from Xi's interpretation, which does not admit that the definition of "One China" may differ. Since Xi has further added the phrase "to achieve national reunification" to the 1992 Consensus, there are fears the PRC may continue to add or delete content from the concept as they wish. Hence, a 1992 Consensus based on mutual agreement does not exist now—if it ever did.

### **The Second Adjustment: Customized "One Country, Two Systems" for Taiwan**

In his 2017 speech, Xi's Taiwan policy was consistent with tradition. He used the formulation of "One Country, Two Systems" when mentioning Hong Kong and Macau. According to PRC propaganda, this framework for governance is conducted perfectly in Hong Kong and Macau. As such, there is no reason that Taiwan cannot be next. After 2012, China and Taiwan have had more and more substantial engagements. Two million Taiwanese—9

percent of Taiwan's population—stayed in China for business, family reasons, or schooling in 2018 alone. China further pushed Taiwan to consider political negotiations and to set up concrete steps for reunification. While most Taiwanese prefer the status quo, Xi has argued that "One Country, Two Systems" can be customized to accommodate Taiwan. He further explained that Taiwan's socio-economic system will be fully respected, along with private property, freedom of religion, and other lawful rights. From this viewpoint, different approaches should not be an excuse to suspend progress toward reunification. However, the reliability of "One Country, Two Systems" has come under scrutiny given the conspicuous recent events in Hong Kong. For Tsai, the model used to incorporate Hong Kong into the PRC cannot be accepted—calling instead for a "Taiwan consensus."<sup>10</sup>

Subsequent events in Hong Kong—especially the mass protests against extradition and national security laws—have reinforced the perception in Taiwan that incorporation into the PRC is unacceptable. Beijing insists the ultimate right of interpreting laws in Hong Kong belongs to the central government. Meanwhile, Hong Kong's own government appears to be too weak to defend its legislation and has dealt with the prodemocracy protesters strictly and violently. These

events have revealed the problems with trying to preserve a democratic system under Chinese autocratic rule. In this situation, “One Country, Two Systems” is a dead-end for Taiwan. Tsai’s decision to rebuff Xi has made her the only politician with the confidence to say “no” to the PRC, a status that likely contributed to Tsai winning a second term as the President of Taiwan.

### **The Third Adjustment: Gradually Unlinking “Reunification” from “Peaceful”**

In his 2017 speech, Xi mentioned “reunification” only three times and linked two of them with the term “peaceful.” The implication at hand is while reunification remained a core concern, “peaceful reunification” was the preferred means for achieving that goal. However, in his 2019 speech, Xi used “reunification” 46 times but only included the word “peaceful” as a qualifier 18 times. It appears the overall significance of reunification has increased for Xi—but the importance that reunification shall be peaceful has declined.

In response to Xi’s perceived shift in emphasis on this point, Tsai has re-asserted the Taiwanese view that interactions between both sides of the Strait must be peaceful and equal, not characterized by force or threats. Tsai has also proposed a security network for cross-Strait exchanges: security for people’s livelihoods, information

security, and a standardized democracy monitoring mechanism to prevent extreme penetration from the PRC.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion: Hot Spot of East Asia**

The three adjustments detailed above demonstrate that Xi appears to have become more urgent in his appeal for reunification. He has shifted away from cooperation by both sides of the Strait to an emphasis of reunification as a premise. Some scholars even argue that Xi will try to accomplish reunification while leader of the PRC. While reunification is undoubtedly important to Xi, his clear priority is to achieve the “China Dream”—something that Xi has explicitly invited Taiwanese to share in but regarded as a separate and higher-order goal than political reunification. Since Xi has so far declined to present reunification as part of his “China Dream” concept, he is unlikely to consider the use of force to absorb Taiwan into the PRC.

Finally, it is worth remembering that three structural factors influence China’s Taiwan policy: trilateral relations among the United States, Taiwan, and China; the bilateral interactions between China and Taiwan; and domestic politics in China and Taiwan. Each of these factors is dynamic but is moving in the direction of a hardened, more hostile policy. For example, China now faces serious competition from the United States. Support for an independent Taiwan has increased—alongside more negative

feelings toward mainland China. Additionally, Xi's suspension of cross-Strait cooperation has led Taiwan to lean more heavily on the United States. In Washington, leaders such as Pres. Donald Trump have viewed closeness with Taiwan as a tool for containing—or at least irritating—China. This hostile climate is perhaps why Xi's "Message" to Taiwan is full of anxiety, eagerness, and appeals to the Taiwanese people but not the Taiwanese government. On the contrary, China has intensified military maneuvers against Taiwan by violating Taiwan's air space with its fighter jets. Together, these trends mean that developments in cross-Strait relations cannot easily

be viewed with optimism, as there are grave implications for the wider East Asian region. ■

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# 7

## Status Quo? What Status Quo?

Jessica Drun



The past year has seen renewed attention and emphasis on Taiwan and its place and role in the world—from the reelection of Pres. Tsai Ing-wen and her administration’s almost unparalleled success in handling the COVID-19 pandemic to an upsurge in not only contacts with Washington but also in Chinese coercive measures against the island. In the final months of the Trump administration alone, a stream of policy announcements regarding China and Taiwan sought to embed a more hardline

policy toward the former and a more robust and collaborative relationship with the latter. But even without this flurry of activity, broader geostrategic considerations—namely, China’s growing influence and the shift in the cross-Strait military balance—would have required debate on the long-term suitability of key elements of US policy toward Taiwan.

These discussions are important and necessary. Yet, they often suffer from the vagueness surrounding the keywords and phrases used in cross-Strait discourse. In some cases, such as that of the contentious “1992 Consensus” and in US strategic ambiguity on whether to come to Taiwan’s defense, imprecision is deliberate—to shelve contradictions and advance dialogue in the former and to preserve policy options in the latter. Arguably, however, the most inexact concept of cross-Strait relations is what constitutes the so-called “status quo.”

General alignment between Beijing, Taipei, and Washington on what the status quo encapsulated allowed for an era of cross-Strait calm from 2008 to 2016, spurred in part by Pres. Ma Ying-jeou’s policy of rapprochement toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the adoption of the “1992 Consensus” formulation that served as the baseline for official cross-Strait contacts. Since the inauguration of President Tsai in May 2016, however, this tacit, mutual understanding began

to unravel. It continues to disintegrate to this day—and Taiwan’s domestic politics offers no reason to believe that this trend will go into reverse. This has clear implications for trilateral relations among the PRC, Taiwan, and the United States.

Discussions on cross-Strait relations have centered on the idea of a status quo and the maintenance thereof. However, there has been insufficient attention to exactly what the status quo entails. Rarely do mentions of the status quo seek to explicitly define it, but instead, appear to defer to an obscure notion of a supposed ideal point in time or a universally tolerated state of relations—or as a “catchphrase to describe the stalemate in the Taiwan Strait” that was “convenient for all parties involved.”<sup>1</sup>

It matters how the status quo is defined, however—not least of all because any movement away from this assumedly fixed moment draws consternation from the other vested players. Official statements out of Beijing and Taipei regularly condemn the other for actions that challenge the status quo and call for a return to sometimes unspecified, but often disputed, baselines. Washington has likewise stressed the need for balance and dialogue, and for both sides to adhere to the status quo, though Washington has often itself been accused by the PRC of being an instigator in ratcheting up cross-Strait tensions by disturbing a status quo,

especially during the four years of the Trump administration.

The issue stems, at least in part, from a genuine lack of agreement over what specific circumstance or set of circumstances make up the status quo. This is a fundamental disagreement over *denotation* and not just *connotation*. In practical terms, the concept of a status quo in cross-Strait relations is perhaps best understood as a point on a spectrum—a range that, at certain points in time, has helped to disguise disagreements among the three sides on shared goals and objectives. At one end of the spectrum lies “unification,” or the merger of the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) into a single polity; at the other, “independence,” or formal moves to officially separate the two. The status quo is an imagined point between these two theoretical extremes—a way to describe and encapsulate “Taiwan’s ambiguous position as a de facto independent state that lacks de jure statehood.”<sup>2</sup>

The views of the major actors in cross-Strait relations—Beijing, Washington, and two major political parties in Taiwan, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—all exist at various points on this spectrum. The myth of a common status quo can be sustained whenever their respective views fall within proximity with one another. Politics, however, is never static, and, as the past four years have demonstrated, developments in

cross-Strait, US–China, and US–Taiwan relations have prompted shifts in each country’s perception of the status quo—leading to divergence along the spectrum and heightened tensions.

For example, for Beijing, the status quo is “One China”—accepted at this point under the “1992 Consensus” formulation. In China’s view, Tsai’s unwillingness to acknowledge the “1992 Consensus” constitutes a break from the status quo. This is despite of Tsai’s continued reassurance that she remains committed to the status quo—which, in her administration’s view, means building on the achievements of her predecessors. This was clear from Tsai’s first inaugural address, which included a nod to 1992:

Since 1992, over twenty years of interactions and negotiations across the Strait have enabled and accumulated outcomes which both sides must collectively cherish and sustain; and it is based on such existing realities and political foundations that the stable and peaceful development of the cross-Strait relationship must be continuously promoted.<sup>3</sup>

The Tsai administration’s approach to the status quo aligns with the broader, longstanding DPP position that Taiwan is already an independent country, as the ROC and thus does not need to formally declare itself as such, but which also makes any of Beijing’s One-China demands a nonstarter.<sup>4</sup>

This incongruence in views on the status quo has prompted policy responses that have further exacerbated existing differences—driving points on the

spectrum even further apart. The past five years are ripe with examples and include China cutting off official channels of communication with Taiwan, ramping up its campaign to poach diplomatic allies, restricting Taiwan representatives’ access to international forums, and increased military intimidation with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft regularly entering Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). In response, Taiwan and the United States have both deepened and enhanced their already robust bilateral relationship, to include more high-level meetings, more regular arms sales, and inclusion of Taiwan in US-led regional frameworks, among other actions.

Further, one of the most critical elements in Taiwan debates is also one of the more underexplored—at least in English-language discourse. Much like the discussions on cross-Strait relations referenced above, assessments on Taiwan domestic politics also tend to fall back on black-and-white characterizations of key players, especially by categorizing the DPP as “pro-independence” and the KMT as “pro-unification.” This type of framing not only aligns with how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) labels Taiwan’s two main political parties but also plays into Chinese discourse control efforts—of shaping global narratives to better align with Beijing’s narratives and, in the process, help advance

its interests.<sup>5</sup>

The truth is far more complicated and may compel a further downward spiral in cross-Strait relations by bringing about a domestic convergence of views among Taiwanese actors while simultaneously driving collective Taiwanese interpretations of the status quo even further from that of the Chinese government. The KMT—China’s preferred interlocutor—has been reassessing party priorities and policies while in opposition—including the party’s approach to cross-Strait relations, which has long centered on the “1992 Consensus.” However, there are signs that the Chinese leadership may no longer accept the vague One-China agreement moving forward, and may instead demand explicit recognition that “China” refers to the PRC.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Beijing has seemingly tied the “1992 Consensus” with “One Country, Two Systems”—which is vastly unpopular in Taiwan and rejected by both major political parties.

Accordingly, the KMT is at a crossroads on whether it will continue pursuing the “1992 Consensus” in its current construct, in a moderated form, or to scrap it altogether—a debate that will play out in the elections for party chair later this year. Whatever

happens, however, both major parties in Taiwan will continue to place varying emphasis on the sovereignty of the ROC—a trend that will likely gain greater traction in the future, as identity politics in Taiwan are skewed heavily toward a uniquely Taiwanese identity, separate from China. It is hard to discern any signs of movement toward mainland China’s interpretation of the status quo.

In short, any future confluence of views on the status quo is becoming increasingly unlikely—and with it, any common baseline for cross-Strait discourse between the two sides. This is an overlooked, yet fundamentally important, aspect of cross-Strait relations. ■

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#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Chih-Chieh Chou, “Contending Notions of the Cross-Strait Status Quo in Taiwan and Across the

Strait: Impacts on U.S.-Taiwan Relations,” *China Review* 18, no. 3 (2018): 121–48, at 122.

<sup>2</sup> Lev Nachman and Brian Hioe, “No, Taiwan’s President Isn’t ‘Pro-Independence,’” *The Diplomat*, 23

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April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Inaugural address of ROC 14th-term President Tsai Ing-wen,” Office of the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan), last modified 20 May 2016, <https://english.president.gov.tw/>.

<sup>4</sup> Nachman and Hioe, “No, Taiwan’s President Isn’t ‘Pro-Independence’.”

<sup>5</sup> Elsa Kania, “The Right to Speak: Discourse and

Chinese Power,” Center for Advanced China Research, 28 November 2018, <https://www.ccp-watch.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Drun, “Taiwan’s Opposition Struggles to Shake Pro-China Image,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

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