

# Why Taiwan Matters to Beijing

*Dean Cheng*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Nowhere else do U.S. interests and the Chinese Communist Party's malevolent ambitions come to a clearer flashpoint than in the Taiwan Strait.

Seizing Taiwan would cement CCP control of the Western Pacific, threaten critical U.S. interests, and give the CCP unprecedented leverage over the global economy.

To deter China, the U.S. must expand its own military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific and provide robust political, diplomatic, and military aid to Taiwan.

American national security demands that even as attention is concentrated on Europe and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sufficient attention must be paid to the People's Republic of China (PRC), and especially the Taiwan Strait, to ensure that Beijing does not “burglarize during the house fire [*chen huo da jie*; 乘火打劫].” Geopolitical, economic, and technological considerations all militate in favor of sustaining American deterrence against any Chinese effort to seize the island.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been growing concern about the potential for conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Some fear that the West's attention will be so focused on the war between Russia and Ukraine that China will be emboldened to strike opportunistically.

---

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3725>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Even before Putin invaded Ukraine, however, American defense officials had publicly expressed worry about the ability of the United States to deter the PRC should Beijing decide to use force against the island of Taiwan. Outgoing Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) Commander Admiral Philip Davidson indicated that China might be ready to invade the island by 2027.<sup>1</sup> His successor, Admiral John Aquilino, expressed concerns that China might be able to move even sooner.<sup>2</sup>

These concerns are rooted in more than the precedent for aggression that has been set by Russia. The escalating size and frequency of China's aerial intrusions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone, the modernizing PRC fleet's circumnavigation of the island, the recent missile tests that overflowed the island, and China's broader military modernization efforts all reflect the steady improvement in the military capabilities that China could employ against Taiwan.

While the worst case has not occurred, there is little doubt that China-Taiwan relations are poor and are not likely to improve anytime soon. Beijing has consistently made clear that it will not relinquish its claim to the island; more important, it has never renounced the option of using force to achieve this end. The past three decades of modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have provided the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the wherewithal to act on its claims.

If the United States is going to deter Chinese actions against Taiwan, it is important to understand why the Chinese leadership in Beijing cares about this island of 23 million.

Fundamentally, the CCP's interest in Taiwan encompasses issues of party legitimacy, historical legacy, and strategic positioning. Taiwan touches aspects of all of the "core interests" that are central to the CCP's perception of security. In 2009, longtime Chinese foreign policy official Dai Bingguo best summarized those enduring "core interests" as maintaining:

- China's fundamental political system and state security, generally interpreted as preserving the rule of the CCP.
- China's state sovereignty and territorial integrity, defined as ensuring China's control of its own territory (which would include, in the CCP's view, Taiwan).
- The stable development of the economy and society, which entails not only preserving access to key materials and markets, but also sustaining China's economic growth.<sup>3</sup>

For the CCP, reclaiming Taiwan is integral to keeping the CCP in power and maintaining the strength of the PRC.

## Taiwan and CCP Legitimacy

It is a common fallacy to think that an authoritarian government does not have to worry about legitimacy. In reality, authoritarian systems do have to justify their hold on power. They do not have to do so through elections, but inflationary food prices, famine, massive unemployment, failure to handle natural disasters, and military defeats may all undermine their perceived legitimacy. While an authoritarian system has more repressive tools at its disposal, such as monitoring the Internet and arresting dissidents, such steps can work only as long as there is a broader tolerance of the regime's right to rule.

For the CCP, the issue of legitimacy will be especially critical in the interval between 2022 (the centennial of the CCP's creation) and 2049 (the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC). Given the suffering the CCP inflicted on China during its first decades, including the famine of the Great Leap Forward (1957–1960) and the chaos of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), it is essential that the party's governance now be marked by improvement and advancement.

Consequently, China's state-controlled press emphasizes the evolution of the PRC from a barely industrialized kingdom at the beginning of the 20th century to an economy with the world's second largest GDP and major space and information technology capabilities, ascribing these advances to the party's leadership. A Chinese astronaut recently noted that his mission "added a heroic chapter to the 100-year history of the struggle of the Party."<sup>4</sup> Another Chinese article notes that the party's rule has led to "technological advancements in such areas as military power, artificial intelligence, medical research, e-commerce and infrastructure development."<sup>5</sup>

As a centerpiece of its claim to legitimacy, the CCP argues that it is righting the wrongs of the past—in particular, the "Century of Humiliation." That century began in 1842 with the First Opium War, waged by Great Britain in order to compel China to accept the sale of British opium in the streets of China. China's loss led not only to the opening of China to British opium sales, but also to the seizure of Hong Kong as a British colony. For the next several decades, China lost wars and territory while also having to accept various forms of humiliation such as the imposition of "most favored nation" conditions, under which China could not set its own tariff rates but had to limit them to the levels accorded to "most favored nations."

There is a tendency in some analytical circles to dismiss this narrative as Chinese propaganda. It *is* propaganda, but it is also the nation's founding myth and deeply held belief. The CCP uses the average Chinese person's attachment to that myth to its political advantage. This CCP narrative picks up with the rise of the CCP, its victory in the Chinese civil war, and the reversal of China's decline. China regained the respect of other states as its material situation improved. In a speech commemorating the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Chinese leader Xi Jinping reminded the audience of the "Century of Humiliation" before declaring that "the Party and the Chinese people showed the world that the Chinese people had stood up, and that the time in which the Chinese nation could be bullied and abused by others was gone forever."<sup>6</sup>

For the CCP, an essential part of regaining this international respect is the recovery of various territories lost by previous regimes (including the Qing dynasty and the Republic of China), and Taiwan is an especially prominent part of that narrative of renewed respect.

In the wake of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), China was forced to cede Taiwan to the growing Japanese empire. Like Hong Kong, the loss of Taiwan was emblematic of the humiliation visited upon China by foreigners. According to the CCP, Taiwan's continued separation is due in part to the United States and its meddling in China's "internal affairs."

This latter aspect gains further salience because Taiwan's separate status was not due initially to a desire for independence; rather, Taiwan is seen as the last unresolved element of the Chinese Civil War. When Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan, it was not to lead a secessionist movement, but because Chiang's Nationalists had been defeated on the mainland. For the CCP, a China that does not include Taiwan is a China that is not whole.

Xi's speech on the founding of the CCP is also emblematic of the reality that since 2012, the issue of party legitimacy has been bound up in the persona of Xi Jinping. When former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping ruled, he made a deliberate effort to reduce the CCP's identification with any single individual, reversing the near deification of Mao Zedong. Instead of the cult of personality that surrounded Mao, Deng sought to inculcate a policy of consensus leadership. The top leader (Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao) was important, but he was sharing power (and responsibility) with the other 24 members of the CCP Politburo and especially the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). This made each of the top leaders that succeeded Mao less powerful, but it also meant that mistakes were not the sole responsibility of the top leader.

Since assuming the top state and CCP positions in 2012, Xi Jinping has assiduously reversed Deng's policy of collective, consensus leadership. Instead, he has arrogated to himself far more power than either of his post-Deng predecessors held. He is now the head of an array of "leading small groups," the organizational cells that actually manage key issues, linking the PRC state government and the CCP's top leadership. He has largely installed his own people in the PSC and reduced its role. The anti-corruption campaigns that have continued since he came to power have been used not only against actual corruption (one of the greatest threats to CCP legitimacy), but also to attack Xi's opponents. Not since Mao has a single person so dominated the Chinese political scene.

Nonetheless, no Chinese leader or anyone else who aspires to leadership can afford to be seen as soft on Taiwan. Any leader who sits by as Taiwan makes real steps toward independence (for example, by gaining a seat at the U.N. or expanding its diplomatic recognition) would be accused of "losing" Taiwan. The political resonance of "Who lost Taiwan?" in the PRC would be comparable to the political resonance of the 1950s "Who lost China?" debate in the United States. Any leader or faction that "lost" Taiwan would suffer a significant domestic political loss as well as a foreign policy loss. Depending on political developments in Taiwan, this equation extends to even smaller "losses," such as Taiwan's gaining new meaningful participation in international organizations and seemingly innocuous changes in the diplomatic treatment of Taiwan by nations around the world.

For Xi Jinping, these issues are of particular urgency in 2022 when the CCP will be holding its 20th Party Congress. It is expected that Xi will manage to stay in staying in power beyond the previous norm of two terms and probably beyond three. This will allow him to remain as head of both state (having amended the Chinese constitution to abolish term limits in 2017) and the party for 10 more years, overturning Deng Xiaoping's limits on leadership. Such a move undoubtedly antagonizes key elements and factions within the CCP, many of whom have already suffered losses of power due to Xi's sustained "anti-corruption" campaigns.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the PRC continues to be roiled by the effects of COVID. Cities that have followed lockdowns have been unable to meet production schedules as residents protest and even riot on a small scale. Meanwhile, food prices were rising even before the most recent bout of inflation as diseases decimated livestock herds.

These disasters make the triumphal tone of a centenary of CCP leadership ring hollow. As important, having arrogated so much power to himself, Xi now cannot avoid bearing at least some responsibility for the problems

that have arisen on his watch. Given these pressures, Xi cannot afford to be seen as relaxing the goal of reunification with Taiwan, as it would undermine not only party legitimacy, but his own personal claim to power as well.

This does not mean that Xi is going to order an invasion of Taiwan by the time of the Party Congress. If anything, the Ukraine war demonstrates the difficulties involved in undertaking high-intensity conflict—and that was across a land border. A massive amphibious assault is even more difficult because it entails sustained logistics and fire support from the sea.

This does not mean, however, that there is much likelihood of reduced cross-Strait tensions in the coming months or even years. Instead of relaxing its claim to Taiwan, Beijing in all probability will press ever harder for reunification in the next quarter-century, if only to allow the CCP to retain its claim to legitimacy. Moreover, as long as Xi is in power, he cannot relinquish China's claim. Beijing is therefore not likely to be more flexible regarding the island; instead, if only for internal political reasons, it will probably take an even harder line.

## Geostrategic Considerations

Beyond internal party politics, there is a PRC interest in reclaiming Taiwan for strategic imperatives. The modern PRC, with its trading economy, is unique: It is a land power that is dependent on the seas. This is in sharp contrast with previous continental powers (and even China historically) that generally have not depended on the seas for their day-to-day well-being. Ming-dynasty China, Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, the Soviet Union—all could operate their economies and exercise much of their power without significant naval forces.

By contrast, today's China needs the oceans to sustain its economy. China is a net importer of food and energy. It also must import many of the raw materials that sustain and support its economy while also having to move finished products to market. All of this depends on maritime routes. The PRC could not sustain its current economic activity, which in turn keeps its people fed and employed, without easy access to the seas. One report estimates that China moves 60 percent of its trade (by value) by sea.<sup>8</sup> Even with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other infrastructure investments, in the near term and mid-term, China cannot replace its dependence on the seas.<sup>9</sup>

China also finds itself vulnerable to attack from the sea. In the 1950s and 1960s, China developed its “third front” or “third line” of defense industries. Chinese industrial planners prepared for a protracted conflict even after

a nuclear exchange or invasion by either the U.S. or the Soviet Union and deliberately built economic infrastructure to buffer those facilities deep inside the Chinese interior.<sup>10</sup>

With the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, however, the PRC's economic center of gravity shifted from inland to the coast. Most of Deng's "special economic zones" were on the coast, and the subsequent economic development has been heavily concentrated in Chinese coastal cities.<sup>11</sup> The disparate development rates between the Chinese coast and the interior is believed to be a source of tension.

While access to shipping lanes and ports has facilitated China's ability to integrate into the global economy, it also has elevated the vulnerability of China's newly built industries. Unlike the "third front," there are no vast expanses of territory to provide concealment or in which to deploy substantial defenses in depth. The American penchant for employing sea-launched cruise missiles also likely worries Chinese military planners, who will have to defend China's economic centers.

Hainan Island in southern China epitomizes China's vulnerable maritime flank. The province is home to the Yulin naval base, which houses a number of China's nuclear-powered submarines.<sup>12</sup> This apparently includes China's ballistic missile submarines, a key part of the PRC's deterrent structure.<sup>13</sup> There also are several military airfields as well as China's newest spaceport—the only one capable of handling its largest rockets. In addition, Hainan's economy reached \$100 billion in 2021.<sup>14</sup> In every sense, Hainan would be a lucrative target for any potential adversary. Unless China can control access to the waters off its coast, Hainan and every other major economic center on the coast would have little advance warning of an attack.

For Beijing, however, establishing control of the seas is a major task. Chinese maritime traffic must physically transit the "first island chain," the various nations and territories that extend from the Japanese Home Islands through Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines to the Straits of Malacca. Much as the Greenland–Iceland–U.K. (GIUK) gap of the Cold War North Atlantic was for the Soviet Union, the first island chain is a key geographic feature that necessarily shapes Chinese military thinking.

Moreover, like the GIUK gap, the first island chain is comprised of allies and friends of the United States and therefore constitutes a political as well as physical barrier to PRC access to the broader Pacific. Peacetime exercises and operations between the United States and its allies allow American pilots and sailors to develop a familiarity with the hydrographic conditions of local waters more easily than is possible for their Chinese counterparts; equally important, those same exercises are a political signal

of both American presence and participating nations' alignment toward the United States. The political influence of those alliances means that there will be significant voices in each of these states calling for supporting the U.S., or at least resisting aligning with and assisting the PRC.

The first island chain is therefore both a physical and a political barrier that constrains Beijing. However, the Soviet Union never had a formal claim to any of the islands or territories comprising the GIUK gap. The PRC does make such a claim for Taiwan. If the PRC were able to neutralize Taiwan (and ideally other parts of the first island chain), then it would no longer be trapped in littoral waters. At a minimum, it would be able to move shipping into the open central Pacific more easily, which in turn would divert an adversary's forces to sealing off the gap in the chain.

The more China actually reincorporates Taiwan, the greater the benefits that it will gain. An accommodating Taiwan, even if still autonomous, would likely allow Chinese forces to operate in its waters and monitor the transit of foreign submarines and surface ships. Adversary forces could not shelter in the island's eastern waters.

An accommodating Taiwan would also begin the strategic isolation of Japan and South Korea. Energy and food imports to those states would now be even more vulnerable to being restricted in time of war. This reality would exert an implicit influence on leaders in Seoul and Tokyo. This does not mean that either state would break with the United States, but it would remind them that alienating the PRC can carry a price. Just as China's use of "weaponized tourism" and business pressure affected former South Korean President Moon Jae-in's willingness to deploy the Theater High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system, intimidating Taiwan into friendlier relations would give Beijing additional tools with which to intimidate and coerce China's neighbors.

Outright ownership of Taiwan would give Beijing even greater advantages. Deploying surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), radars, and airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft to Taiwan would allow Beijing to develop a better situational awareness of the air and sea space extending deeper into the central Pacific. This would make it much harder to attack China's economic center of gravity. There would be substantially more early warning of any sea or air attack; there would also be improved chances of intercepting cruise and ballistic missiles. Similarly, it would complicate any effort to wage mine or submarine warfare against the PRC, as Chinese anti-submarine and mine countermeasure forces could be based on the island. Owning Taiwan would give PLA planners a badly needed buffer for defending the coast that China currently lacks. If the PRC were able to



reverse the current situation and absorb Taiwan and the broader first island chain, they could serve more as a shield for China's key strategic centers than as a barrier to Chinese maritime activities.

## Economic and Technological Aspects

Another reason why the PRC cannot relinquish its claims to Taiwan is the island's economic and technological capabilities. Taiwan is an important economic partner for China. Even in the midst of volatile cross-Strait relations, economic relations have generally remained stable, and this stability is a two-way street: The island has continued to be one of the biggest investors in the Chinese economy. According to Taiwan's own statistics, "Between 1991 and the end of May 2021, approved investment in China comprised 44,577 cases totaling US\$193.51 billion. In 2020, the value of cross-strait trade was US\$166 billion."<sup>15</sup> China remains Taiwan's largest trading partner in terms of both imports and exports.<sup>16</sup> Much of Taiwan's economy depends upon the Chinese market, the Chinese workforce, and plants operating in China. At the same time, Beijing is dependent on imports of certain goods from Taiwan, especially electronic components.

This mutual economic dependence may not suffice to prevent conflict, however. Beijing may well emphasize political or strategic considerations that would eclipse economic elements. Russia's invasion of Ukraine serves as a reminder that economic rationality is not always the decisive influence.

China has increasingly sought to insulate itself from the broader global economy. In a 21st century version of mercantilism, China wants to be part of everyone else's supply chain while minimizing its dependence on foreign players in its own. This is the underlying concept of "dual circulation" announced by Xi Jinping two years ago. Another plan, "Made in China 2025," an official Chinese economic planning document formulated in 2015, highlights 10 key areas in which the PRC hopes to improve its own industries and increase its products' domestic content. For the 10 areas, which include both high-tech areas such as microchips and more traditional industries such as railroads and merchant shipping, the goal is to reach 70 percent domestic content by 2025.<sup>17</sup>

Reclaiming Taiwan would make an important contribution toward the underlying goals indicated in "Made in China 2025." Taiwan is the one of the world's largest shipbuilders, ranking sixth in 2020.<sup>18</sup> In the same year, it also was ranked 11th in global steel production.<sup>19</sup> Because industries could not easily be evacuated, unlike monetary holdings or service-sector enterprises, Beijing would likely be able to secure these facilities in the wake of

even a military reunification. They would mark a substantial addition to the PRC's economic capabilities, elevating both its quality and its supply chain autonomy.

An especially salient issue is Taiwan's capability in information and communications technologies (ICT). Taiwan is a key link in the global ICT supply chain. Taiwanese firms, along with South Korean and some American companies, are the key producers of microchips and microprocessors, the silicon-based components that effectively animate the world's electronics. Because of the ubiquitous nature of microchips in everything from automobiles to durable consumer goods to aircraft and gas pumps, any interference with microchips will have rapidly rippling effects. This has been amply demonstrated by the current shortage of chips, which in turn has led to reduced automobile manufacturing. The rise of smart cars, smart cities, and the Internet of Things will only exacerbate this dependence on microchips of all sorts.

Taiwan plays a key role in the microchip industry. Taiwanese firms have over 60 percent of the global market share of chip production. This includes over 90 percent of the most advanced chips (currently, five-nanometer and seven-nanometer wafers).<sup>20</sup> One Taiwanese company alone occupies a globally dominant position in key microchip production. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC) "accounts for more than half of global foundry revenue while in the manufacturing of advanced chips under 10 nanometers it controls about 84% of the global market...."<sup>21</sup> Many of the company's foundries are on the island.

For Beijing, those foundries and their products are essential. PRC microchip manufacturing is not nearly as advanced as Taiwan's. While several Chinese companies are now designing advanced, specialized chips, they and China's broader economy are dependent on imports to supply the more powerful chips currently needed to run advanced systems. China's Semiconductor Manufacturing Industries Corporation (SMIC) is still largely manufacturing 14-nanometer chips and working on producing seven-nanometer chips, while TSMC has been manufacturing the latter for several years.<sup>22</sup>

Were that capacity in Chinese hands, Beijing would be far less dependent on imports. If it possessed the fabrication plants (and the designs) that produce the bulk of the world's most advanced chips, it also would have the ability to influence other countries to an overwhelming degree. This would affect not only the United States, but such key allies as Japan and Germany. Production of weapons, computers, and cell phones would be subject to Chinese pressure.

To China, a relatively peaceful reunification is preferable, since a war would almost certainly see much of this infrastructure damaged if not destroyed. But Beijing would make significant gains even if this particular sector was badly damaged.

## Implications for the United States

It should be clear that for a variety of reasons, the CCP will not relinquish its claims to the island of Taiwan. The CCP has repeatedly warned that it is prepared to use force to effect reunification, and the PLA's foremost mission is to be able to reclaim the island by force if necessary. This is a long-standing task, reiterated formally as a "new historic mission" by Hu Jintao in 2004 and reaffirmed more recently by Xi Jinping.

For the United States, it is a matter of long-standing policy that its foremost interest in the Taiwan Strait is maintaining the peace, and because of its enormous impact on global economic security, the need for peaceful management of this relationship has only increased in recent decades. American decision-makers have therefore sought to support Taiwan not only militarily, but also diplomatically, enjoying the benefits of Taiwan's economic and technological capacity while not openly antagonizing Beijing.

To this end, per the Taiwan Relations Act,<sup>23</sup> the United States has provided Taiwan with military equipment and other support to ensure its security. Furthermore, under the "Six Assurances" provided by President Ronald Reagan:

- The United States has not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan.
- The United States has not agreed to consult with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan.
- The United States will not play a mediation role between Taipei and Beijing.
- The United States has not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act.
- The United States has not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan.

- The United States will not exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC.<sup>24</sup>

The United States has also refrained from making any formal commitment to the defense of Taiwan. It has done so partly because the situation with Taiwan is complicated by the reality that Taiwan is an autonomous democratic actor whose leaders are driven at times as much by their own internal political debates as by broader foreign policy considerations. In this context, it is vital that American leaders neither mislead Taiwan's leaders into thinking they have unconditional American support nor create conditions that complicate the island's security situation.

In this regard, Taiwan's population is very much divided on how it would like to relate with the PRC. It should not be surprising that there is minimal support for reunification with Beijing. However, there is also no more than minimal support for near-term formal independence. Taiwan polling suggests that the vast majority of the population also has no wish to seek immediate formal independence.<sup>25</sup> Taiwanese polling suggests that the majority of Taiwanese prefer the status quo, differing mainly on whether to address the issue in the indeterminate future.<sup>26</sup>

It is not for the United States to determine the ultimate fate of Taiwan or to dictate the relationship between Beijing and Taipei. But it is in America's interest to ensure that this sensitive region, with its enormous impact on global economic security, does not see the outbreak of conflict or reunification by force. It is also in America's interest, both economically and strategically, to ensure that China is not able to intimidate or coerce Taiwan into submission. American efforts to support peace in the Taiwan Strait, including deterring a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, are therefore essential to sustaining global peace and stability.

There have been growing efforts, especially by some in Congress, to dictate Taiwan's defense purchases in particular directions. While consultations are useful and necessary, telling allies and friends what kinds of capabilities to buy is problematic, especially when the U.S. military has recently suffered such defeats as the debacle in Afghanistan. Equally important, as both the fall of South Vietnam and our withdrawal from Afghanistan have demonstrated, when local forces are dependent on American intelligence, air support, and logistics, they will collapse if said support is not promptly forthcoming. Taiwan's defense planning should be seen in this light.

Worse, telling friends and allies what to buy presupposes that American military and political decision-makers necessarily know better than local

authorities what is best for them. At best, it belies the reality that decisions are best made by those closest to the point of decision, a point that is true in defense as well as in economics. That U.S. defense authorities are now openly suggesting that they will veto Taiwan defense requests based purely on their American policy assumption is deeply troubling. This has reportedly been the basis for the decision not to sell Taiwan the MH-60 anti-submarine warfare (ASW) helicopter and the E-2D airborne early warning aircraft.<sup>27</sup>

The emphasis on “asymmetric” weapons is especially problematic in light of the Russia–Ukraine war. While Javelins have received the lion’s share of public press, it should be noted that the Ukrainian government is pushing for tanks, self-propelled artillery, and fighter aircraft—the very *symmetric* systems that the Administration would deny Taiwan. Bizarrely, the Administration has apparently also refused to sell Taiwan E-2D airborne early warning aircraft—a key battlefield command and control (C2) system that goes far to ensure that Taiwan can obtain an information advantage like that of their Ukrainian counterparts.<sup>28</sup>

## What the United States Should Do

- **Support Taiwan both politically and militarily.** Taiwan, an island of 23 million, is not likely to deter Chinese aggression on its own. In the years since 1949 when the Nationalist government fled to Taiwan, the island’s political and strategic situation has been guaranteed by American military and political support. This guarantee has become even more important as China’s economy has grown and its political influence has expanded. Unlike Ukraine, Taiwan has no partners other than the United States that are willing to provide arms. If Taipei and Washington are going to deter China from using force against the island, it is essential that the United States provide Taiwan with the wherewithal to defend itself.

Recent operations in Ukraine demonstrate the lethality of modern weapons, as systems such as Javelin and Stinger assume an outsized prominence in decimating Russian formations. Less discussed in the press is the role of intelligence support so that these weapons can be used to the best effect. The United States has already provided Taiwan with a variety of systems, including not only Stingers and Javelins, but longer-range systems such as Harpoons, Patriot air defense systems,

and F-16s. To maximize these capabilities, the United States should also provide intelligence support and undertake joint planning with Taiwan's intelligence and military services to ensure that those weapons are used as effectively as possible.

- **Expand Taiwan's diplomatic voice.** The more Taiwan is isolated by China and denied its own voice in the international community, the more China's ability to pressure and coerce the island is evident. Conversely, a Taiwan that has more diplomatic space commensurate with its economic and geographic importance, the more Chinese leaders cannot assume that the world would stand by if Beijing acted against the island.

The United States, along with other democratic states, should therefore work to ensure that Taiwan's diplomats can participate in discussions of transnational issues. In particular, Taiwan should have at least meaningful participation at various international organizations, such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), Interpol, and other entities that help to create and monitor international standards.

- **Tread carefully on the issue of "strategic ambiguity" versus "strategic clarity."** As should be clear, allowing Taiwan to separate from China is a nonstarter for both Xi and the CCP. Any foreign support for a Taiwan move toward independence therefore will be seen as jeopardizing the party's hold on power. It is equally important that Taiwan itself recognizes that it must pursue a careful policy of pushing for greater autonomy while not expressly and officially renouncing the one-China concept. Not surprisingly, Taiwan's leader Tsai Ing-wen has refrained from overtly calling for independence or making moves in that direction (for example, by holding a national referendum on independence, amending the constitution, or actively seeking a seat in the U.N.). The United States should maintain its current policy of "strategic ambiguity" and not get ahead of the island's own political leadership.
- **Strengthen U.S. capabilities in the Indo-Pacific.** If the United States is going to support Taiwan, it needs to go beyond rhetorical support and demonstrate actual military capabilities. Yet American military readiness has been declining. The Heritage Foundation's

*Index of U.S. Military Strength* finds serious problems in such key areas as numbers of pilots, Army rotations through combat training centers, and spare parts for the *Virginia*-class nuclear attack submarine.<sup>29</sup> Worse, in light of the tensions in Europe amid the war between Russia and Ukraine, limits on overall American forces raise questions about how well the U.S. could respond to a crisis in the Taiwan Strait.

For the United States to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan or anywhere else in the Pacific, it must field trained forces that are equipped with the best the nation has to offer and be able to sustain those forces in the field. This will require additional resources as well as additional thinking about how best to apply those resources against what the CCP values.

## Conclusion

For several decades, the Taiwan Strait has been a potential flashpoint between the United States and the People's Republic of China. Nowhere else in the Western Pacific do the interests of the PRC and the U.S. collide so directly. The rise of the Information Age has added techno-economic considerations to historical and geopolitical factors. Navigating these waters, literally and figuratively, will be a major challenge for current and future American Administrations.

**Dean Cheng** is Senior Research Fellow in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

## Endnotes

1. Adela Suliman, "China Could Invade Taiwan in the Next 6 Years, Assume Global Leadership Role, Warns U.S. Admiral," NBC News, March 10, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-could-invade-taiwan-next-6-years-assume-global-leadership-n1260386> (accessed August 22, 2022).
2. Agence France-Presse, "China Threat to Invade Taiwan Is 'Closer Than Most Think,' Says US Admiral," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/23/taiwan-china-threat-admiral-john-aquilino> (accessed August 22, 2022).
3. China News Network, "The First Round of the US–China Economic Dialogue: All Major Topics Other Than Going to the Moon Have Been Addressed," July 29, 2009, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2009/07-29/1794984.shtml> (accessed August 22, 2022).
4. Pratik Jakhar, "At 100, Chinese Communist Party in Renewed Drive for Legitimacy," *The Diplomat*, July 2, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/at-100-chinese-communist-party-in-renewed-drive-for-legitimacy/> (accessed August 22, 2022).
5. Adhere Cavince, "Impressive Achievements of CPC Offer Lessons for Other Nations," *China Daily*, updated March 31, 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202103/31/WS6063cb21a31024ad0bab2a86.html> (accessed August 22, 2022).
6. "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Speech on the CCP's 100th Anniversary," *Nikkei Asia*, July 1, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary> (accessed August 22, 2022).
7. Michael Cunningham, "Looking Ahead to China's 20th Party Congress," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 254, March 7, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/looking-ahead-chinas-20th-party-congress>.
8. China Power Team, "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, China Power Project, updated January 25, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/> (accessed August 22, 2022).
9. Jeff M. Smith, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Implications and International Opposition," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 3331, August 9, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-strategic-implications-and-international-opposition>.
10. Barry Naughton, "The Third Front: Defence Industrialization in the Chinese Interior," *China Quarterly*, No. 115 (September 1988), pp. 351–386 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/654862> (accessed August 22, 2022).
11. Henry R. Zheng, "Law and Policy of China's Special Economic Zones and Coastal Cities," *New York Law School Journal of International and Comparative Law*, Vol. 8, No. 2 Spring 1987), pp. 193–296, [https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1247&context=journal\\_of\\_international\\_and\\_comparative\\_law](https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1247&context=journal_of_international_and_comparative_law) (accessed August 22, 2022).
12. Damen Cook, "China's Most Important South China Sea Military Base," *The Diplomat*, (arch 9, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/chinas-most-important-south-china-sea-military-base/> (accessed August 22, 2022).
13. Hans Kristensen, "New Chinese SSBN Deploys to Hainan Island," Federation of American Scientists, Strategic Security Blog, April 24, 2008, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2008/04/new-chinese-ssbn-deploys-to-hainan-island-naval-base/> (accessed August 22, 2022).
14. Xinhua, "China's Hainan Sees Robust Economic Growth in 2021," *China Daily*, updated January 20, 2022, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202201/20/WS61e8ca36a310cdd39bc823c1.html> (accessed August 22, 2022).
15. Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Cross-Strait Relations" *Fact Focus*, [https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content\\_6.php](https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content_6.php) (accessed August 22, 2022).
16. Zhao Ziwen, "Explainer: China–Taiwan Trade, and Everything You Need to Know," *South China Morning Post*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3187890/china-taiwan-trade-and-everything-you-need-know> (accessed August 22, 2022).
17. Scott Kennedy, "Made in China 2025," Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Critical Questions*, June 1, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/made-china-2025> (accessed August 22, 2022).
18. "Taiwan Shipbuilding Industry Revenue Rises over 25 Percent," *Taiwan Today*, March 18, 2020, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=6&post=173625> (accessed August 22, 2022).
19. World Steel Association, "2021 World Steel in Figures," 2021, <https://worldsteel.org/wp-content/uploads/2021-World-Steel-in-Figures.pdf> (accessed August 22, 2022).
20. Mark Harris, "These Five Charts Help Demystify the Global Chip Shortage...and Reveal Why Even Infusions of Cash from the U.S. and European Union Won't Solve It," Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, *IEEE Spectrum*, February 14, 2022, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/global-chip-shortage-charts#toggle-gdpr> (accessed August 22, 2022).
21. Kazuhiko Shimizu and Kevin Hamlin, "China War Risk Sees Taiwan's TSMC Moving Fabs to US, Japan," *Asia Financial*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.asiafinancial.com/china-risk-sees-taiwans-tsmc-moving-chip-fabs-overseas> (accessed August 22, 2022).
22. Arjun Kharpal, "China's Biggest Chipmaker Is Still Years Behind Its Global Rivals," CNBC, August 5, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/06/smic-chinas-biggest-chipmaker-is-still-years-behind-its-rivals.html> (accessed August 22, 2022).
23. H.R. 2479, Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96-8, 96th Cong., April 10, 1979, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479> (accessed August 25, 2022).



24. Susan V. Lawrence, "President Reagan's Six Assurances to Taiwan," Congressional Research Service *In Focus* No. IF11665, October 8, 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11665.pdf> (accessed August 22, 2022).
25. Shelley Rigger, Lev Nachman, Chit Wai Jon Mok, and Nathan Kar Ming Chan, "Why Is Unification So Unpopular in Taiwan? It's the PRC Political System, Not Just Culture," Brookings Institution, Order from Chaos Blog, February 7, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/07/why-is-unification-so-unpopular-in-taiwan-its-the-prc-political-system-not-just-culture/> (accessed August 22, 2022).
26. National Chengchi University, Election Study Center, "Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1994/12-2022/06)," July 12, 2022, <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7801&id=6963> (accessed August 22, 2022).
27. Kathrin Hille and Demetri Sevastopulo, "US Accused of Undermining Taiwan Defences by Focusing on 'D-Day' Scenario," *Financial Times*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/dd0a987e-d2d3-4f8c-be65-bf897645dbf0> (accessed August 22, 2022), and Charles Au, "US, in Prescribing Taiwan's Mission, Rebuffs MH-60R Sale," Shephard Media, May 24, 2022, <https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/air-warfare/us-in-prescribing-taiwans-mission-retreats-from-mh-60r-sale/> (accessed August 22, 2022).
28. Lara Seligman, "'Deadly Serious': U.S. Quietly Urging Taiwan to Follow Ukraine Playbook for Countering China," *Politico*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/19/deadly-serious-u-s-quietly-urging-taiwan-to-follow-ukraine-playbook-for-countering-china-00033792> (accessed August 22, 2022).
29. "Executive Summary," in *2022 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, ed. Dakota L. Wood (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2022), pp. 9–22, [https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/2022\\_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength.pdf](https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/2022_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength.pdf).