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# Can Stability Across the Taiwan Strait Hold?

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## Introduction

The potential for conflict over Taiwan remains one of the most intractable security dilemmas in Asia and among the most dangerous issues in global politics. It is the main driver of the military dimensions of strategic competition between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The employment of military force by the PRC to determine the island's future cannot be discounted; however, for more than 40 years, that possibility has been held in check, conflict has been avoided, and a fragile stability has remained in place. This essay examines the factors that have contributed to that stability and identifies ongoing changes that have the potential to undermine it.[1] It assesses that although a war over Taiwan may not be imminent, the factors that previously created and supported relative stability across the Taiwan Strait are no longer fully operative. The situation is entering a potentially dangerous phase that will require careful management by all parties.

## Four Decades of Fragile Stability

The four-plus decades since the normalization of US-PRC relations and the US's derecognition of the Republic of China on Taiwan in 1979 have seen periods of heightened tensions and even military crises between Beijing, Taipei, and Washington over the Taiwan issue. To date, the PRC has not attempted to force a resolution of the status of the island, and a conflict over Taiwan has been avoided. The issue has largely remained a political challenge with a military component, not the converse. Overall, an uneasy stability that has benefited all concerned has persisted. This stability has been the result of Washington's, Beijing's, and Taipei's approaches to managing cross-Strait affairs since 1979, at least until the past few years.

[1] Although the views and opinions in this essay are strictly those of the author, I thank CNA colleague Dr. Thomas Bickford for his constructive comments and Dr. Richard Bush, former chairman and managing director of the American Institute in Taiwan, for a helpful exchange on the nuances of US policy toward Taiwan. Special thanks to Dr. Evan S. Medeiros, Penner Family Chair in Asia Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, for a careful read and thoughtful suggestions.

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# The US's Approach

Since 1979, successive US administrations have, for the most part, deftly managed the cross-Strait issue. A consistent set of US policies and, just as important, disciplined messaging have enabled Washington to maintain official relations with the PRC, engage in unofficial but productive ties with Taipei, and provide for Taiwan's defensive military needs. In addition, the possibility of US military intervention in any cross-Strait conflict has been a critical factor (but not the sole factor) that has given Beijing pause when contemplating the use of military force to compel unification.

These successful outcomes have been underwritten by six elements of the US approach: (1) recognizing the PRC as the sole government of China; (2) taking no official position on the future relationship between Beijing and Taipei other than calling for their differences to be resolved peacefully, without unilateral action by either side and with the consent of the people of Taiwan; (3) discreetly providing Taiwan with military assistance; (4) seeking to deter both Beijing and Taipei (i.e., deterring a PRC assault on the island by maintaining military overmatch and a credible military presence in the region and deterring Taiwan from pursing formal independence and otherwise provoking Beijing); (5) maintaining a policy of strategic ambiguity regarding whether the US would come to the defense of Taiwan should a conflict break out; and (6) employing consistent and disciplined messaging on the Taiwan issue across the US government. Students of US policy will differ on which of these elements have carried more weight, but collectively they have been effective.

# The PRC's Approach

For decades Beijing has employed a two-track approach to achieving its overall objective of placing Taiwan under PRC rule: incentives and coercion. Through various forms of incentives, the PRC has sought to convince Taiwan's leaders and others to support eventual unification (or at least not to support independence). The objectives of the coercion track have been to highlight to the leaders and people of Taiwan the risks and costs of moving toward independence, especially the risk of conflict. In doing so, Beijing seeks to undermine Taiwan's confidence by demonstrating the consequences of not acquiescing to eventual unification and deter Taipei from declaring independence. Both tracks have employed all the elements of national power: political, economic, diplomatic, informational, and psychological, as well as military means short of conflict.

Beijing has made clear that it reserves the right to compel unification by military means if necessary, and a potential Taiwan scenario has been a significant driver of Chinese military modernization. To date, however, the PRC has not sought to compel unification militarily for several likely reasons: (1) a stated preference for unification by peaceful political means, (2) an assessment that time is still on its side and a political solution will eventually be possible, (3) the absence of triggering events that would necessitate employing military force to achieve unification, (4) concerns about the ramifications of a failed attempt to take Taiwan by military means, (5) the prospects of US military intervention and the potential military, political and

economic costs that would likely be imposed on them from the US and its allies and partners, and (6) uncertainty about People's Liberation Army (PLA) readiness for "the battle for Taiwan." Again, students of PRC affairs can argue about which factors have been the most important. However, collectively they have resulted in Beijing's continued self-restraint.

# Taiwan's Approach

Taiwan's objectives are to sustain its political autonomy, preserve and expand its international space, and avoid a conflict. Ensuring strong and continued US and international support has been at the heart of Taiwan's strategy. Its approach has rested on political, diplomatic, and economic initiatives. To date, no administration in Taipei has stepped over, or too close to, the line of declaring independence—although some initiatives by former presidents Lee Teng-hui (Nationalist Party, *Kuomintang* (KMT), 1988 to 2000) and Chen Shui-bian (Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), 2000 to 2008) were highly controversial. Most of the island's populace have been content to preserve their political autonomy and the status quo without a formal declaration of independence because of the credibility of Beijing's threats to employ military force, the anticipated damage a conflict would inflict, and the ambiguity of the US's commitment to the island's defense.

# Stability Under Pressure

For the past decade, the conditions and policy approaches that have undergirded the precarious stability across the Strait have been under increasing pressure. That pressure is the result of systemic changes or policy choices on Taiwan, in the PRC, and in the United States—all of which are now playing out in the context of heightened tensions in US-PRC relations.

## Change in Taiwan

The most significant changes in Taiwan affecting the cross-Strait equation have evolved over time: the deepened roots of democracy, an evolving national identity, and the rise of the DPP. The implications of Taiwan's democratic transformation on cross-Strait dynamics cannot be overstated.

First, among the island's almost 24 million people, a new Taiwan-centric identity distinct from the mainland has developed. Even the previous societal tension between those who fled to the island from the mainland in the late 1940s (*waisheng ren*) and those whose ancestors had long lived there (*bensheng ren*) is fading into the past.

Second, the PRC can no longer attempt to negotiate solely with the island's political elite—the people of Taiwan now get a vote on their future. Beijing needs to convince them that unification is in their best interests. On this account, Beijing is falling short, and the example of Hong Kong's experience since its return to the mainland in 1997 makes unification a harder sell.

Third, democracy in Taiwan means that Beijing often faces governments in Taipei that it finds distasteful. For example, the DPP, reviled by Beijing as "separatists," has morphed from its origins as a fringe element of the electorate into a mainstream political party that has won five presidential elections (2000, 2004, 2016, 2020, and 2024). Beijing's preferred interlocutor, the KMT, has not held the presidency in a decade.

Fourth, a democratic Taiwan generates support from the United States and many other countries, which creates tensions with Beijing. Beyond Asia, Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine appears to have increased empathy among many liberal democracies for Taiwan's situation, notably in Europe. Support for Taiwan's democracy is now an issue of global interest and concern, which may affect how the world reacts—and responds—to possible Chinese military actions against the island.

Finally, a more recent and noteworthy change in Taiwan is that Taipei, with both goading and assistance from the United States, is committing to enhancing its military capabilities, developing realistic defense plans, and improving civilian wartime resilience to make the island a harder military target for the PRC.

## Change in the PRC

The biggest change in the PRC's approach to Taiwan over the past few years has been the increased use of coercion. This shift has been accompanied, if not motivated, by Beijing's newfound confidence in its national power, a more capable PLA, and a willingness to employ the PLA against Taiwan in more risk-tolerant ways short of conflict.

Beijing has consistently rejected unconditional engagement with the successive DPP-led governments that have held Taiwan's presidency since 2016. The DPP's rejection of the "1992 consensus" between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the KMT, its refusal to adopt the "One China Principle," and Beijing's deep animus toward former President Tsai Ing-wen and especially current President Lai Ching-te have resulted in Beijing's perceived need to place more pressure on the island.

As the size and reach of China's economy has grown, the PRC has shown that it is willing to deploy a diverse toolkit to punish not only Taiwan but also any country (or corporation) whose policies toward the island meet with its disapproval. Beijing also uses its economic power as a reward as it continues to attempt to entice away those few nations that still recognize Taipei. With Nauru severing its diplomatic ties with Taiwan in January 2024, that number is down to 11 small nations and the Vatican.

The PRC's use of diplomatic pressure and economic coercion is not new. What is new is the increased leverage that the PRC has in these realms and the scale of economic pain that it can inflict on Taiwan and other nations, recently exemplified by Beijing leveraging its grip on critical minerals during the height of the trade war with the US in 2025.

Even more significant is the emergence of a more capable PLA. Since the 1990s, a Taiwan scenario that assumes US military intervention has been the predominant contingency-based driver for PRC investments in military modernization. Many of those investments are now in place: a large multiplatform navy that includes aircraft carriers, new generation fighter aircraft, advanced missiles, cyber and outer space

capabilities, and organizational and doctrinal changes to conduct multiservice joint operations—all necessary for a Taiwan scenario.

As a result, today the PLA can provide PRC leadership with a range of military options across the spectrum of conflict for dealing with Taiwan, a vast improvement over the limited options available to leaders in Beijing during the crises of 1995 and 1996. Regarding Taiwan, the PLA is now a force that can at least contemplate compellence if ordered to do so rather than just engage in deterrence.

Consequently, for the past few years, Beijing has employed the PLA in more risk-tolerant ways than in the past to keep pressure on Taipei. The PLA has held major military exercises and other demonstrations of force, some of which have encircled the island, and dozens of military aircraft regularly fly into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone. PLA Navy vessels operate east of Taiwan and transit key maritime channels north and south of the island, allowing Beijing to signal that it can cut off Taiwan quickly and from all sides. Also concerning is China's use of law enforcement and paramilitary capabilities. In the last year, Beijing increased use of its coast guard and maritime militia to harass Taiwanese vessels near the offshore islands and commercial ships operating to the east of Taiwan as part of gray zone operations. These types of coercive activities now constitute the "new normal." China is now close to being able to implement a blockade of Taiwan with minimal notice.

China's use of the PLA in more risk-tolerant ways is not solely a function of the military's new capabilities. It is indicative of Beijing's newfound confidence in its national power. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, a relentlessly cultivated nationalism has emerged that touts the rise of the East, the decline of the West, and the success of the CCP's developmental model. Accompanying the pursuit of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" has been a rhetorical stridency on the Taiwan issue. Reunification is continually touted as an inevitable future reality, with civilian and military officials declaring that Beijing has the will, resolve, and capability to decide the issue by military means if necessary. Analysts wonder whether Xi Jinping sees absorbing Taiwan as his legacy issue. Finally, there is a worrying perception in some quarters of the PRC that the capabilities gap between the PLA and the US joint force is starting to narrow, although the PLA still considers the US military to be the world's most battle-tested and capable force.

## Change in the United States

The biggest change in the US approach to Taiwan in recent years is that Washington is less willing to self-limit its support for Taiwan than in the past. This trend began in earnest during President Donald Trump's first term (2017 to 2021) and continued through the Joseph Biden Administration (2021 to 2025).

Since Trump's first term, Taipei's representatives in Washington have enjoyed better access to US officials than before, and they have been included in US-hosted events that they might not have been in the past. For example, in 2021 Taiwan's chief representative in the US attended a presidential inauguration for the first time since 1979 (President Biden's). In 2024 Taiwan participated in the US-hosted (virtual) Summit for Democracy.

The US has regularized its long-standing arms sales program to Taiwan and has been willing to approve licenses for the sales of technologies previously viewed as problematic, such as those in support of Taipei's

indigenous submarine program (2018). The US is also making available some of its most advanced anti-ship and air defense systems. In 2025 the Trump Administration approved an arms sales package to Taiwan worth $11.2 billion—the largest in history—and it is considering another $14 billion in sales. The fate of this second, larger package appears to be in limbo.

The Biden Administration worked assiduously to internationalize the Taiwan issue. US allies were encouraged to support Taiwan's quest for expanded international space. Joint statements with allies often included verbiage on the need to maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 2022 "Strategic Concept" voiced concerns about the PRC's "stated ambitions and coercive policies." Allied navies (Great Britain, Germany, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan) have conducted transits of the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate that they consider it an international waterway.

As in the earliest days of the Cold War, the importance of Taiwan to the US is again being described in geostrategic terms. Officials in the Biden Pentagon publicly stated that a Taiwan Strait scenario was the Department of Defense's pacing scenario. In the current administration, the Department of War is focused on the defense of the First Island Chain, and its "strategy of denial by deterrence" clearly has Taiwan in mind. Beyond the Executive Branch, support for Taiwan in Congress is at a high point likely not witnessed since 1979. Supporting "democratic Taiwan" is on a short list of issues on which there is bipartisan agreement.

At the same time, alongside enhanced US material and political support for Taipei, in the last few years, two sitting presidents have made statements on the Taiwan issue that have broken with precedent, thus raising questions about Taiwan's role in American strategic thinking.

On four separate occasions while in office, President Biden appeared to abandon the US's long-standing preference for strategic ambiguity by stating publicly that the US has a commitment to come to Taiwan's defense. On other occasions, President Biden seemed to suggest that Taipei should be left to decide for itself whether it should declare independence, which is contrary to the standard US policy position that the United States does not support Taiwan's independence.[2] On these occasions, the Department of State was quick to reassure that there had been no change to US policy toward Taiwan.

More recently, President Trump raised new questions about US support for Taiwan in his comments on the way home from his May 2026 Beijing summit with President Xi Jinping. Seemingly echoing PRC talking points, President Trump stated that Taiwan's leaders want to "go independent" because they think that they have US backing, adding that he is not looking for the US to fight a war 9,500 miles away. President Trump also stated that he discussed US arms sales to Taiwan with Xi Jinping during the May summit and that future arms sales would make a good bargaining chip with Beijing, in contravention, some say, of the Six

[2] For a comprehensive review of Biden's evolving stances and statements on the Taiwan issue from Senator to President, see Thomas Shattuck, "Assessing Joe Biden's Long (and Complicated) Taiwan Legacy," Global Taiwan Institute, Feb. 5, 2025, https://globaltaiwan.org/2025/02/assessing-joe-bidens-long-and-complicated-taiwan-legacy/.

Assurances given to Taipei by President Reagan in 1982.[3] Yet again, administration officials reassured that there had been no change to US policy toward Taiwan.

In sum, both former President Biden and President Trump have raised concerns and uncertainties for both Beijing and Taipei. Neither knows what to expect when the next president takes office.

# Taking Stock

The new cross-strait dynamics at play are a cause for concern. This is not meant to imply that conflict is either imminent or inevitable. Rather, the points made in this essay suggest that the previous factors that created and supported a relative stability across the Tawan Strait are no longer fully operative and the situation is entering a potentially dangerous phase that will require careful management by all parties. How this phase will play out under these new conditions will become clearer over the next 18 months.

In the fall of 2027, the CCP will hold the 21st Congress of the CCP, at which Xi Jinping will almost certainly attain an unprecedented fourth consecutive term as CCP General Secretary. The discussion on Taiwan that will take place at the Congress will bear watching. Will the CCP continue to exude confidence that unification is inevitable? Will "One Country, Two Systems" still be described as "the best way to realize reunification across the Taiwan Strait," as was stated in Xi Jinping's report to the 20th CCP Congress in 2022? Or will the CCP offer some new formulation ahead of the presidential elections in Taiwan that will take place just three months after the congress?

How will the PRC deal with the January 2028 presidential and legislative elections in Taiwan? Will Beijing attempt to influence the outcome, and if so, how? What effect might yet another DPP victory have on the PRC's assessments of its prospects for bringing Taiwan under its authority by political means? In a September 2026 article in *Foreign Affairs*, PRC analyst Da Wei warned that "continued rule of the island by the more pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, combined with Beijing's strong desire to advance national unification and uncertainty about what kind of Taiwan policy the United States is going to pursue" is putting more pressure on the Taiwan issue.[4] Not comforting. Even if the KMT wins the presidency, Beijing likely understands there is no guarantee of reaching accommodation with Taipei because even within the KMT there are different views on how to deal with the mainland. In addition, the makeup of the Legislative Yuan will matter, and the people of Taiwan still need to be convinced.

Equally critical will be the Taiwan-related actions, policies, and messaging of the Trump Administration in its remaining two years. Since the weeks leading up to the May 2026 Beijing summit, the PRC has ratcheted up the pressure on Washington over the Tawan issue. This multifaceted strategic communications campaign has enlisted Xi Jinping himself, in his phone calls and meetings with the American president. The ubiquitous

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[3] Chris Buckley and Amy Chien, "Trump's Taiwan Gambit Is Already a Gift to China," *New York Times*, May 18, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/18/world/asia/trump-taiwan-china-weapons.html.
[4] Da Wei, "The Emerging US-China Détente: A Confident Beijing and a Pragmatic Washington Can Get Along," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 7, 2026, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/emerging-us-china-detente.

warning being sent by Xi, other PRC civilian and military officials, PRC analysts, and the party-controlled media is that the US must handle the Taiwan issue "properly" otherwise the risk of "clashes or even conflict" cannot be discounted.[5] Washington, in turn, has apparently attempted to lower tensions on the issue by having high-level Trump Administration officials tone down their rhetoric on the PRC and Taiwan in their public speeches and delaying the approval of a second large arms sales package for the island. The question is whether these recent actions by Washington are merely tactical or whether they represent a major recalibration of US Taiwan policy by the Executive Branch. The answer to this question is enormously important and is being closely watched not only in Beijing and Taipei but also among US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

Like many other aspects of the post–Cold War international order that are undergoing change, the political and military factors that for decades upheld a fragile stability across the Taiwan Strait are weakening. As such, the potential for miscalculation in Beijing, Taipei, and even Washington is growing.

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[5] Jan Camenzind Broomby, "China's Leader Warns Trump That Differences Over Taiwan Could Lead to a Clash," NPR, May 14, 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/05/14/nx-s1-5822168/trump-xi-summit.

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