

Caught Between the Two Superpowers — Taiwan Amidst US-China Great Power Rivalry

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Tensions seem to be on the rise in the Taiwan Strait again. In the five days following Chinese National Day on October 1st, the founding holiday of the People's Republic of China (PRC), [around 150 warplanes](#) were deployed into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The ADIZ does not refer to Taiwan's airspace. A country's ADIZ is the airspace in which aircraft normally identify themselves for security purposes. Taiwanese fighter jets were mobilized to conduct an interception, which is routine in response to Chinese air incursions, but were cursed at over the radio by Chinese pilots.

Chinese air inclusions into Taiwan's ADIZ have been on the rise in the past few years, taking place nearly daily on some occasions. In particular, the recent Chinese air incursions broke previous records three times consecutively, with over fifty planes deployed at once on October 4th. The flybys also seem intended to send a signal about the flexibility of China's military capacities, seeing they took place both during the [daytime](#) and [nighttime](#), to suggest that China can strike at any time. Military experts have stated that Chinese flybys now occur so frequently that they cannot only be viewed as warnings sent to Taiwan, they also serve as a form of training for Chinese pilots.

The incident is an illustrative anecdote of the current state of cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China. Namely, Chinese military threats directed at Taiwan are on the rise, particularly around the time of national commemorations. After the incursions, Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the state-run tabloid the *Global Times* [bragged on Twitter](#) that China's military parade was conducted in the Taiwan Strait instead of Tiananmen Square this year, referring to China's annual military parade for National Day.

Yet in the meantime, life goes on as usual in Taiwan, which has already had decades of coping with the threat of Chinese invasion. It is probably true that Chinese threats often seem more repetitive and monotonous than anything else. Despite international headlines about the incident, there was generally little panic in Taiwan.

Caught in the Crossfire of Military Threats

The timing of the Chinese air incursions could have been in response to any number of events. Apart from the obvious fact that Chinese National Day is on October 1st, Taiwan commemorates its own founding holiday on October 10th, which also saw a Chinese flyby. Indeed, [Chinese president Xi](#)

[Jinping gave a speech on October 9th, ahead of Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen's October 10th national address.](#)

Much international media reported on Xi's address as Xi refraining, from threatening military force against Taiwan, as has been a motif in his speeches in past years. Nevertheless, one notes that Xi does not really have to mention the quiet part aloud in light of the wave of military threats; this might be a case of "speak softly and carry a big stick."

On the weekend that immediately followed Chinese National Day, [two US carrier strike groups carried out joint exercises with a UK carrier strike group and a Japanese ship.](#) After the end of the weekend, the UK carrier strike group [traversed the Luzon Strait in order to conduct joint exercises with the Singaporean navy.](#) This could have been another reason for the air incursions.

These exercises, which were themselves scheduled to take place in the days immediately after Chinese National Day, illustrate the pattern of tit-for-tat escalation between the US and western powers on one side and China on the other. As tensions have worsened between the US and China, both sides have escalated military threats against the other, not only in the form of flybys, but also as naval exercises, or the carrying out of "freedom of navigation operations" through contested waters.

Western powers' heightened caution of China is highlighted in the recent formation of [the AUKUS nuclear submarine alliance.](#) in which the US agreed to share secretive nuclear submarine technology with Australia that it had previously only shared with the UK. Nevertheless, more broadly speaking, neither side perceives itself as the aggressor, but instead as responding to the actions of the other side. Escalation, however, increases the possibility of accidents that could lead to loss of life or otherwise be spun in a manner increasing regional tensions as a whole.

It is improbable that conflict between the US and China would break out at the tip of a hat. But an inciting incident, such as could occur during military flybys, could lead to a wave of nationalist sentiment, which would indeed increase the odds of war.

And as tensions that began under the Trump administration between the US and China continue under the Biden administration, Chinese military threats directed at Taiwan are not only directed at Taiwan itself, given Chinese territorial claims over Taiwan, but also has the US as an intended audience. As such, Taiwan stands to be caught in the crossfire between the US and China, something reflective of its long-term fate.

A Tenuous Client State Relation with the US

Taiwan saw decades of "White Terror" under the authoritarian rule of the KMT, which saw the successive dictatorships of Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo. The KMT retreated to Taiwan following its defeat to the Chinese Communist Party during the Chinese Civil War.

Some are under the perception that Taiwan had no inhabitants prior to the KMT retreat to Taiwan, but this is not the case. Namely, apart from the two percent Indigenous population, around eighty-eight percent of the population are individuals of Han descent from earlier waves of migration from China to Taiwan.

The last time the same political polity controlled both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland was in 1895, after which Taiwan was ceded to the Japanese empire, resulting in the fifty-year Japanese colonial period. The Qing dynasty did not control all of Taiwan, incorporated it into its territory in the late 19th century, and Taiwan was not viewed as a particularly important possession.

Yet historically speaking, Taiwan fits squarely into the pattern of right-wing dictatorships backed by the US for the purposes of anti-communism. This is no longer the case; Taiwan is currently ruled by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a center-left party that emerged from the Taiwanese democracy movement. Current president Tsai Ing-wen is a socially progressive and competent if neoliberal technocrat, [having presided over a COVID response that never required Taiwan to undergo a full lockdown for the duration of the pandemic.](#)

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Taiwan is not acknowledged as a country by most of the world's two hundred or so nation-states, with only fifteen countries having formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Taiwan lost recognition from the international community due to the Republic of China government, which the KMT brought to Taiwan after its retreat, losing recognition in favor of the People's Republic of China government.

Nevertheless, the US has historically been Taiwan's security guarantor in the event of a Chinese invasion. The US's official position on Taiwan is that it does not have one, a position referred to as "strategic ambiguity" justified on the basis that this keeps China on its toes because it cannot predict the level of US support vis-à-vis Taiwan in the event of an invasion. The position also allows the US to avoid commitments to Taiwan beyond a certain point, while pushing Taiwan in a subordinate relation.

Either way, the US is Taiwan's provider of arms, and US military exercises in the region are intended to signal its relationship with Taiwan to China. Unlike other countries in the region that were built up as US client states after World War II, Taiwan does not have US military bases on its soil, given the lack of any official diplomatic relationship between Taiwan and the US, though overall its historical relationship with the US is like other Asian countries which host US bases on their soil, such as South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines.

China has stated that it would view the establishment of US bases in Taiwan as an act of war. More recently, [the US publicized that US special forces have been present in Taiwan training Taiwanese troops.](#) This is a fact that was already widely known in Taiwan and which China itself could not have been unaware of, but the US decided to publicize this fact after China's air incursions, as a warning.

At the same time, the US has made it clear that if Taiwan were to pursue formal independence, this would lead to the loss of US support. If so, the shoe would be on the other foot: Taiwan would be labeled the provocateur of cross-strait relations and, in this way, the US would not back Taiwan.

The US has seen fit to sabotage Taiwanese elections before, even very recent ones; [a phone call from the White House to the Financial Times sought to sabotage Tsai Ing-wen's 2012 presidential run](#) by expressing lack of faith in Tsai to maintain stable cross-strait relations.

Indeed, Tsai's DPP has historically been the party of Taiwanese independence, [but has backed away from this position for fear of upsetting the US.](#) Though the KMT came to Taiwan after its military defeat to the CCP, in the decades since, it has abandoned any ambitions of ousting the CCP, and instead aims for the unification of Taiwan and China, regardless of what the will of the Taiwanese people is. And, in the meantime, identity polls consistently show rising Taiwanese identity and declining Chinese identity, with only one percent of Taiwanese advocating immediate unification with China.

Invasion Fears Are Overstated, But Not Off the Table

Alarmist headlines in the wake of the Chinese air incursions sometimes make it seem as though these were incidents that could lead to sudden warfare. This is not so; though, again, that does not rule out the possibility of more limited conflict.

A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be difficult to manage. Though China would like to make it appear as though it could take Taiwan at any given time, something that can be categorized as a means of psychological warfare, this is not the case. Yet, behaving as though it could and attempting to project this is probably in the hopes of demoralizing Taiwan, limiting the possibility of resistance.

[The PLA has historically had to cope with its lack of “lift capacity” to mount an invasion, that is, the inability to transport sufficient numbers of troops to overcome Taiwan’s military defenses and conduct a long-term occupation.](#) Modern military science favors the defender, meaning that estimates for China’s military losses are in the tens of thousands to even hundreds of thousands. Some scenarios have invading Taiwan as the largest naval invasion since D-Day.

Taiwan’s military draft also means that, in theory, many male members of the population know how to use firearms. In the event of invasion, this could mean years of armed resistance. Combined with the number of troops lost on an invasion, it is to be questioned whether the CCP could shrug off the blow to its political legitimacy from an invasion. One thinks of domestic blowback in the US against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would necessarily be many orders of magnitude larger and would entail far greater loss of life.

Another deterrent to invasion is the deep integration of the Taiwanese and Chinese economies. Taiwan produces over half of the world’s semiconductors, meaning that China also relies on Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturing for its own supply chains. China would ideally hope to preserve Taiwanese infrastructure and prevent loss of life, given the sophisticated know-how required for semiconductor manufacturing.

An invasion would likely throw both economies into crisis, given how deeply interlinked they are. One notes that China’s economy was slowing before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This, too, would have global shockwaves affecting the world as a whole, beyond just the region.

Frankly, it is not in China’s interest to invade Taiwan, whether measured in terms of loss of life or economic impact. Yet nationalist considerations are what drive this pursuit onward. In particular, Chinese president Xi Jinping may view retaking Taiwan as a legacy accomplishment, hoping to have some accomplishment under his belt in the manner of Mao’s establishment of the PRC, or Deng’s economic reforms.

Lack of solidarity from the international left regarding issues about Taiwan’s sovereignty broadly proves an obstacle toward developing a more robust left.

Likewise, another matter of concern is the fact that Xi has undone the term limits that a Chinese president can serve. This seems intended to pave the path for him to grab lifetime rule, again, as the first Chinese leader to have such unchecked power since Mao and Deng. Nevertheless, Xi is not there yet; a way to expand power could be to manufacture a crisis that would result in a state of emergency that could allow for this power grab.

One means of doing so would be to mount an invasion of Taiwan, never mind the human costs, though others view Xi as having made such a large issue over Hong Kong and Xinjiang in order to

widen his powers. Certainly, part of why an invasion of Taiwan is a risk for Xi is because it could result in significant blowback against his rule.

But, in the meantime, it is also the case that military leaders in both the US and China have warned of the need for imminent action. For US military leaders, [such as Admiral Philip Davidson, the commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, or his successor Admiral John Aquilino](#), this is the claim that China will imminently invade Taiwan. For Chinese counterparts, this is the view that Taiwan will be lost forever without quick action, [or the claim that the US's military presence in the Asia Pacific is simply a paper tiger](#). Namely, the military-industrial complexes of both countries seek to justify their existence along with their increasing budgets, never mind what the stakes for the world could be.

Intervening in a Debate Defined by the Right

Where Taiwan is concerned, it proves difficult for the Left to intervene in a debate that has already been defined by the political right. The Trump administration often called for strengthening support of Taiwan as a way to stick it to China, including carrying out actions that put Taiwan in an uncomfortable position, [such as last-minute diplomatic visits that Taiwan may not have had knowledge of beforehand and would have required special exceptions to COVID protocol](#), but which Taiwan had to simply accept for the purposes of maintaining US-Taiwan relations.

Although some in Taiwan have welcomed these actions, the fact that the Trump administration was quick to announce actions in support of Taiwan in response to Chinese actions directed against the US is illustrative of how Taiwan can be used as a wedge issue by the US against China. This is the corollary of how Taiwan sometimes sees military threats by China though the US may be the true target, with China aiming to illustrate military capacities that would be directed against the US if a war were to break out between the two superpowers.

At the same time, this has proven an obstacle for the Left to make inroads in Taiwan, in that it is often right-wing hawks who have most frequently been publicly vocal in support of Taiwan. This is the case not only with the US, but also with Japan, [the other major power in the Asia Pacific. In Japan, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party](#), a right-wing party, despite its name, has also strengthened relations with Taiwan due to caution regarding China.

While support of Taiwan has become bipartisan consensus among US policymakers, this is not always the perception in Taiwan. In particular, the memory of Democrats prioritizing relations with China under Clinton and Obama, viewing Taiwan as an international “troublemaker,” continues to color how Democrats are perceived in Taiwan.

More broadly, beyond simply electoral politics, the Left is perceived in Taiwan as historically having been soft on China or even idealizing it. This largely returns to historical reasons. For example, it is true that many of the Taiwanese leftists killed by the KMT during the White Terror did, in fact, advocate political unification between Taiwan and China, viewing Maoist China as a socialist motherland that Taiwan should return to.

Pro-unification views were not universal among Taiwanese leftists. [Su Beng, the so-called “grandfather of Taiwanese independence”, who died in 2019 at age 100, was a lifelong leftist](#). Su’s four-volume magnum opus was among the first histories of Taiwan written from a pro-independence perspective. Su’s storied life involving previously worked in Shanghai as a spy and later military commander for the CCP before breaking from them and returning to Taiwan, where he tried and failed to assassinate Chiang Kai-shek before fleeing to Japan, where he authored his history of Taiwan.

Leftist social theory, along the lines of David Harvey, Naomi Klein, and others, is influential among activists and in academia. Nevertheless, the contemporary idealization of China by some western leftist theorists continues to prove an obstacle for leftism in Taiwan. This colors the perception of the international left.

Indeed, lack of solidarity from the international left regarding issues about Taiwan's sovereignty broadly proves an obstacle toward developing a more robust left. There have been efforts at articulating what a pro-independence left perspective would consist of after the 2014 Sunflower Movement, which involved the month-long occupation of the Taiwanese legislature by student activists.

But it has proven difficult to escape electoral politics when the KMT continues to be an active force in Taiwanese politics that can win elections and would try and steer Taiwan in the direction of political unification with China, even if this means undermining democratic institutions. This threat has forced efforts to form independent political parties beyond the straitjacket of two-party politics into a "United Front" with the DPP, which may have emerged from the Taiwanese democracy movement and is currently led by the comparatively progressive Tsai, but has become more conservative as the years have gone by.

And it continues to be an obstacle as to how to push for a political direction for Taiwan that is beyond counter-balancing between the two superpowers, the US and China. US-China tensions look like they are here to stay and, even if the recent air incursions are far from the onset of hostilities, one only expects tensions in the region to continue to worsen.

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P.S.

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