

AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF TAIWAN IN US-CHINA RELATIONS

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Executive summary

Tensions in the Taiwan Strait are spiraling and have been since before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Communication channels for managing tensions have collapsed. Each of the main players — China, Taiwan, and the United States — believe it is acting prudently to protect its interests in the face of escalatory actions from the other side of the Strait. Officials and analysts increasingly are competing to forecast when conflict could break out, not whether it will occur.

Taiwan is one of a small number of issues that has the potential to spark conflict between the United States and China. Given the stakes, it is essential for American policymakers to return to first principles for evaluating events, understanding America's vital interests, and identifying the center of gravity for developments in the Taiwan Strait.

One should expect Beijing to remain bloody-minded in its determination to unify Taiwan with the mainland. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to achieve unification since its establishment

of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. There are no signs that Beijing will waver from this goal in the foreseeable future. Cross-Strait tensions likely will intensify in the coming years. This will reduce the margin of error for U.S. policy actions on Taiwan.

This paper argues that the future of Taiwan will turn on whether the people of Taiwan can maintain confidence in their future. Confidence is the essential ingredient to gird the Taiwan people to resist fatalistic conclusions that resistance is futile and instead protect their autonomy and democratic way of life until such time as peaceful, uncoerced solutions emerge to resolve cross-Strait differences. Since 2016, the PRC has intensified its campaign of coercion to undermine the Taiwan people's confidence in Taiwan's future autonomy and democratic way of life. For the United States to preserve its abiding interest in upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, it will need to visibly support efforts to enable Taiwan to enjoy dignity, security, and prosperity, even as it also maintains a credible military presence around Taiwan.

U.S. policymakers also will need to restore coherence to policy decisions and public messaging relating to Taiwan. It will be important for American policy to be guided by consistent precepts, including the principle that the United States supports Taiwan for its own sake and not as a tool for harming China. Washington can play an important role in managing tensions, but ultimately it will be up to Taipei and Beijing to resolve cross-Strait differences.

The path to the present

Taiwan's role in America's foreign policy and in U.S.-China relations has oscillated considerably over the past century.¹ Before World War II, Taiwan was not a focus of American policymakers. In the wake of World War II, President Harry S. Truman and his advisors expected that Chinese Communist Party forces would annex Taiwan and they did not plan to intervene to prevent that outcome. Following the onset of the Korean War, the Truman administration revised its posture to actively deter forces from the mainland from moving on Taiwan. This decision effectively froze in place the military dimension of the Chinese civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) and Mao Zedong's CCP, causing the contest to shift to other domains. During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States maintained a formal mutual defense pact with Taiwan. U.S. military planners saw Taiwan as a strategic node for projecting force in East Asia.

Driven by pursuit of strategic advantage in Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, President Richard M. Nixon and then-national security adviser Henry Kissinger shifted America's focus in 1972 toward establishing relations with the People's Republic of China. Seven years later, Washington broke diplomatic relations with the Republic of China in Taipei and established a formal relationship with Beijing.

During this period, Washington supported deepening cross-Strait economic integration, which it viewed as contributing to a relaxation of tensions in the Taiwan

Strait. Washington was focused on challenges from the Soviet Union and welcomed the reduction of tensions elsewhere that could distract from its foremost strategic concern.

As China began to replicate Taiwan's economic reforms in the late 1980s, Taiwan's leader, Chiang Ching-kuo, decided to set Taiwan on a path to democratization, in part as a way of differentiating Taiwan from the PRC in the eyes of U.S. policymakers and the U.S. public. Taiwan's political transition to a democracy provided a basis for the United States to strengthen its ties with Taiwan.

Cross-Strait security tensions sharpened in 1995-96 during the run-up to Taiwan's first democratic election. During this period, Beijing perceived that Taiwan's leader, Lee Teng-hui, was pursuing independence and the United States was not restraining him. Beijing sought to intimidate Taiwan's voters through coercive diplomacy, ostensibly to protect its bottom line of deterring Taiwan independence. Washington responded by sending two carrier strike groups toward Taiwan. Although China's leaders backed down in that instance, they shortly thereafter determined to pour significant national resources into developing military capabilities so that they would not be pushed around by the United States on Taiwan matters in the future. The fruits of those investments are now on display in China's military force arrayed across the Taiwan Strait.

During the Chen Shui-bian presidency in Taiwan (2000-2008), Washington and Beijing each concluded that their vital interests were threatened, but for different reasons. Both sides sought to dissuade President Chen from precipitating steps toward Taiwan independence that could trigger conflict that might lead to a war between the United States and China. Even though Washington and Beijing did not coordinate their respective policy actions, they both sought in their own ways to urge Chen to exercise restraint and avoid provoking a conflict.

Taiwan voters next elected Ma Ying-jeou as president. In terms of temperament and orientation toward cross-Strait relations, Ma (2008-2016) was close to the opposite of his predecessor. During the Ma years, Beijing and Taipei made considerable progress in expanding cross-Strait links. Washington welcomed constructive dialogue and cross-Strait stability. During this period, Taiwan was an ever-present element of the U.S.-China relationship, but it was not a dominant issue that impeded U.S.-China cooperation on other issues or that dampened the overall trend of rising competition between Washington and Beijing.

In 2016, Taiwan voters chose Tsai Ing-wen as their next president. In a departure from her predecessor, Tsai did not recognize the “1992 Consensus,” an agreement between Beijing and Taipei in 1992 stipulating that each side upheld the “One China” principle and would strive for eventual unification.² Tsai presented herself as a steady, stable, predictable leader who would work to maintain the cross-Strait status quo. Beijing insisted that Tsai accept the “1992 Consensus” as a precondition for engaging with her or her administration. Tsai held firm and in response, Beijing froze direct communication with Taiwan’s leaders.

In the absence of anything more than sporadic communication between U.S. and Chinese officials on issues relating to Taiwan, Washington and Beijing relied upon public messaging and military signaling to register their views on developments in the Taiwan Strait.

During this same period, channels of communication between Washington and Beijing atrophied and became non-functioning. In the absence of anything more than sporadic communication between U.S. and Chinese officials on issues relating to

Taiwan, Washington and Beijing relied upon public messaging and military signaling to register their views on developments in the Taiwan Strait. Such tools send blunt messages that often err on the side of strength and resolve over nuance and precision.

This brief survey of developments in the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle over recent decades exposes three main takeaways:

First, this triangular relationship has not traveled on a linear trajectory. Just in the past three decades, the balance has shifted from Washington using military presence to push Beijing to stand down in its pressuring of Taiwan, to Washington and Beijing acting in a parallel fashion to deter Taiwan from pursuing independence, to deepening integration between Taipei and Beijing, to growing concerns in Washington and Taipei about China accelerating preparations to seize Taiwan by force.

Second, Taiwan voters have proven pragmatic. They have alternated between “blue” (Kuomintang) and “green” (Democratic Progressive Party) leaders over the past four presidencies, seeming to correct for the perceived excesses of one party by voting into power the other. This pattern is reflective of — and consistent with — public opinion polls in Taiwan, which show a strong and enduring preference for sustaining the status quo.³ Support for unification or independence exists on the margins, but the significant plurality of voters favor maintenance of Taiwan’s autonomy and democratic way of life.

Third, cross-Strait relations operate according to their own logic and must be managed according to each side’s view of its long-term interests. Cross-Strait relations are not derivative of U.S.-China relations. Trend lines of cross-Strait tensions do not automatically follow trend lines of U.S.-China tensions. Conversely, stable cross-Strait relations are not the magic key to unlocking improvements in U.S.-China relations. Nor would it be proper for Washington to sacrifice Taiwan’s interests in the hope of improving ties with Beijing. During the 2008-2016 period, cross-Strait relations improved markedly, but U.S.-China relations grew more tensely competitive.

At the same time, the U.S., China, and Taiwan each have their own respective interests and priorities. While there presently appears to be significantly more overlap in interests, values, and affection between Washington and Taipei than between Taipei and Beijing or Washington and Beijing, there is not perfect alignment of interests in any of these three dyads. At present, the only natural overlap between all three sides is that none of the parties describe conflict as their preferred means for achieving their desired ends.

In present circumstances, Beijing's declared objective is to achieve unification of Taiwan with the PRC. Taiwan's declared policy is that the Republic of China already is a sovereign country and that its elected leaders have a responsibility to preserve Taiwan's autonomy and democratic way of life. The United States' declared objective is to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait until such time as leaders on both sides of the Strait can arrive at a peaceful solution to tensions that accords with "the wishes and best interests of Taiwan's people."⁴

Evaluating the current moment

Cross-Strait tensions currently are at elevated levels. The triangular dynamic is stuck in an escalatory spiral in addition to a long-term security dilemma. The emergence of the spiral has coincided with the breakdown in all direct channels of communication between Beijing and Taipei as well as Beijing and Washington. This predates Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. If anything, the Ukraine war has clarified the real risks of conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

It likely is too soon to determine what lessons Beijing will draw from Russia's attack on Ukraine. At the time of this writing in July 2022, Russian and Ukrainian forces are engaged in intense combat operations and the outcome of the war is uncertain. It is not too soon, though, to conclude that Russia's nuclear arsenal has induced caution on the part of the United

States in intervening directly in combat operations in Ukraine. This fact has not escaped notice in Beijing and likely has fortified China's decision to advance its current nuclear build-up.⁵

The unfolding conflict in Ukraine also has laid bare the importance of prepositioning munitions, food, and fuel reserves in Taiwan. Allied options for sustaining a regular resupply to Ukraine may not be available in the event of a cross-Strait conflict, given Taiwan's island geography and Beijing's anti-access and area-denial capabilities. The Ukraine war also has highlighted the critical role that reserve and territorial defense forces can play in defending territory from attack.⁶

At the same time, while Russia's barbarism in Ukraine is reprehensible, it is not a foreshadowing of events in Taiwan. There is no automaticity between war in Ukraine and war in the Taiwan Strait. Tensions in the Taiwan Strait operate according to their own logic.

Many in the Washington policy community attribute elevated levels of cross-Strait tensions primarily to Beijing's growing assertiveness toward Taiwan. In this telling, President Tsai has been steady and predictable in her approach to cross-Strait relations. Even though she has not endorsed the "1992 Consensus" like her predecessor, she has pledged to handle cross-Strait affairs according to the Republic of China constitution, which reflects the principle that there is one China. She has not taken steps toward de jure independence, instead proposing to handle cross-Strait relations according to the principles of "peace, parity, democracy, and dialogue."⁷

Similarly, U.S. policymakers routinely assert that United States policy toward Taiwan remains long-standing and consistent. The United States upholds its "One China" policy, which is guided by the three U.S.-China joint communiques, the Taiwan Relations Act, and the six assurances that President Ronald Reagan offered to Taiwan in 1982.⁸ To the extent that there have been adjustments in America's overall approach and posture toward Taiwan in recent years, American policymakers assert, it has been

in response to visible Chinese efforts to ratchet up pressure on Taiwan. In other words, U.S. policy decisions have been reactive to Chinese actions.

Examples of Chinese actions that American policy-makers often point to as justifying adjustments in America's visible support to Taiwan include:

- China's poaching of seven of Taiwan's diplomatic allies during Tsai's presidency;⁹
- China's persistent efforts to exclude Taiwan from participating in multilateral fora, including events that do not require statehood as a prerequisite for membership;
- China's obstruction of Taiwan public health officials from receiving information about COVID-19 and other public health concerns from the World Health Organization;¹⁰
- China's obstruction of Taiwan public security officials from receiving information from INTERPOL;
- China's obstruction of Taiwan civil aviation officials from receiving information from the International Civil Aviation Organization about safety issues relating to air transportation;
- China's use of fighter jets to deliberately cross the Taiwan Strait center line for the first time in 20 years in March 2019, and multiple times since;¹¹
- China's growing military presence around the south, east, west, and north sides of Taiwan and its public announcements of its rehearsals of simulated attacks on targets in Taiwan;¹²
- Chinese military incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone to protest visits by American officials to Taiwan, and other U.S.-Taiwan activities;¹³
- Growing Chinese economic pressure on Taiwan, including by obstructing Taiwan's ability to enter into trade agreements with other countries, working to induce a brain drain of top talent from

Taiwan to China, and using targeted measures – such as bans on group travel to Taiwan – to place pressure on specific constituencies and localities in Taiwan;

- Expanded use of cyber operations and disinformation campaigns to attempt to accentuate divisions within Taiwan.
- Public declarations by Chinese officials that the Taiwan Strait is not an international waterway.¹⁴

Many of these efforts appear designed to punish Taiwan and expose the limits of American capacity to protect Taiwan's security and prosperity. Given the public nature of these Chinese punitive actions, Washington has felt a need to push back visibly, in effect working to offset Chinese pressure through shows of public support for Taiwan.

Conversely, from Beijing's perspective, Washington has grown more active in its support for Taiwan. In Beijing's telling, this has forced China to ratchet up its responses, lest the United States conclude that it can establish more official relations with Taiwan with impunity and set an example for other countries to follow. Chinese officials and analysts often complain that the United States is weaponizing its support for Taiwan to counter China.¹⁵ During the Trump years, the U.S. government occasionally acknowledged that it was demonstrating support for Taiwan to register opposition to China, for example when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo linked American support for Taiwan to Washington's objection to Beijing's dismantling of Hong Kong's special status.¹⁶

Beijing evaluates elevated tensions as a function of Washington's and Taipei's efforts to erode the unofficial nature of U.S.-Taiwan relations, encourage Taiwan's greater autonomy from China, and promote Taiwan as an independent actor on the world stage. Specific examples of American actions to support Taiwan that Chinese officials have pointed to as triggering action-reaction dynamics include:

- Publicizing routine naval transits of the Taiwan Strait;¹⁷
- Publicizing the visit of Taiwan’s national security adviser to Washington;¹⁸
- Referring to Taiwan as a country in an official Defense Department report;¹⁹
- Secretary Pompeo sending a public congratulatory message for use at President Tsai’s 2020 inauguration;²⁰
- Inviting Taiwan’s Representative to the United States as an official guest at President Joe Biden’s inauguration;²¹
- Secretary of State Antony Blinken referring in public comments to Taiwan as a country on multiple occasions;²²
- President Biden referring to Taiwan as an ally and vowing publicly that the United States will defend Taiwan;²³
- Inviting Taiwan officials to participate in the Summit for Democracy;²⁴
- Including Taiwan in official readouts of G-7, Quad, and U.S.-EU senior official and leaders meetings;²⁵
- Disclosing publicly that U.S. military personnel are in Taiwan to train Taiwan forces;²⁶
- Sending U.S. military aircraft to Taiwan on three occasions in 2021;
- Sending high-level executive branch officials, including from the State Department, to visit Taiwan;
- Hosting Taiwan officials for meetings in the State Department and publicizing the meetings;²⁷
- Authorizing the sale of Standoff Land Attack Missile Expanded Response (SLAM-ER) and expanding the scope of sales beyond military capabilities that are clearly defensive or within a grey zone that plausibly could be described as defensive.²⁸
- Growing congressional activism to signal support for Taiwan, including through legislation and visits by members of Congress to Taiwan.²⁹

In other words, both Washington and Beijing accuse the other of saying one thing and doing another. Washington accuses Beijing of saying it is striving for peaceful unification but acting in ways that are coercive and aggressive toward Taiwan. Beijing accuses Washington of paying lip service to its “One China” policy, even as it hollows out the substance of the policy in practice.

Looking ahead

There are a range of perspectives on the proper weighting of risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, *The Economist* ran a cover story in May 2021 describing Taiwan as “the most dangerous place on earth.”³⁰ Former U.S. national security officials piled on, making various predictions about the timeline of a Chinese military assault on Taiwan. Former INDOPACOM Commander Phil Davidson made headlines, for example, when he predicted in congressional testimony in 2021 that the threat of a PRC invasion of Taiwan could be “manifest during this decade, in fact in the next six years.”³¹ These views were later tempered by, among others, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, who publicly observed that while Beijing remains focused on achieving unification, “there are not indications that [Xi Jinping] is currently intending to take Taiwan by military force even as he is planning for the potential.”³²

To date, though, this heightened alertness to the risks has not induced any visible steps by Washington, Taipei, or Beijing to take steps to break the escalatory cycle or build risk management mechanisms. Such inaction has caused observers such as former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to warn of the potential risk of “sleepwalking into war.”³³

I am less alarmed than others about the imminence of conflict. I note, for example, that in its annual report to Congress on China’s military power, the Department of Defense observes that the People’s Liberation Army is prioritizing developing capabilities for global and regional expeditionary capabilities and is not investing substantially in landing craft that would be needed for a Taiwan invasion scenario.³⁴ I nevertheless acknowledge the real risk of conflict and believe that the risk should induce corrective actions by all parties to guard against war.

The current tensions in the Taiwan Strait are a product of a strategic dilemma with a military component, and not a military dilemma with a military solution.

The current tensions in the Taiwan Strait are a product of a strategic dilemma with a military component, and not a military dilemma with a military solution. If war arrives in the Taiwan Strait and involves PRC, Taiwan, and U.S. forces, it is difficult to image a scenario whereby any party could prevail and come out strengthened by conflict. More likely, all three sides would be devastated by a sprawling and violent conflict that produced no clear absolute victor.

There is no public enthusiasm in the United States or Taiwan for a military conflict. The Taiwan public recognizes any pursuit of independence would lead to war.³⁵ Beijing also has its own reasons for wanting to “win without fighting,” in other words, for compelling unification without resort to force. Chinese

planners must assume that any use of military force to occupy Taiwan would trigger a U.S. military response that would be difficult to limit from escalating or spreading beyond the Taiwan Strait. It would be irresponsible for Chinese planners to prepare for anything short of such a U.S. response.

In a full-spectrum conflict with the United States, China’s energy and food security vulnerabilities likely would be exposed, as would its dependence on foreign technology and know-how for its innovation agenda. China does not have domestic production capacity to feed its appetite for semiconductors and other components that run China’s industrial and military complex.

There has been some speculation that China could seek to occupy Taiwan for purpose of securing Taiwan’s semiconductor production capacity. Taiwan produces over 80% of the world’s highest-end chips.³⁶ This scenario is unlikely. Even if China were to gain control of Taiwan by force, China does not have its own capacity to operate Taiwan’s semiconductor fabrication plants and it would have difficulty forcing Taiwan engineers to produce chips for an invading force. Given the exquisite precision required for production, semiconductors are a difficult item to produce from the tip of a bayonet.

Perhaps recognizing these realities, China has been using a broad range of coercive tools below the threshold of military force to deter Taiwan’s permanent separation and gradually weaken the will of the people of Taiwan to resist integration with the mainland. On one hand, China’s leaders have sought to talk up the shared ethnic, social, and historical linkages between peoples on both sides of the Strait. On the other hand, China also has targeted Taiwan economically, sought to induce a brain drain to the mainland, isolated Taiwan on the world stage, fomented social divisions inside Taiwan, launched cyberattacks, and undertaken displays of military force in waters and airspace around Taiwan.

These efforts seek to constantly remind Taiwan’s people of China’s growing power, induce pessimism about Taiwan’s future, deepen splits within the

island's political system, and show that outside powers are impotent to counter Beijing's steady ratcheting of pressure. Chinese scholars invoke the aphorism, "once ripe, the melon will drop from its stem" to explain the logic of their approach. They acknowledge that the strategy may require more time and patience but believe it would come at less cost and risk to Beijing.³⁷

Seen through this vantage, the will of Taiwan's people is the center of gravity of China's campaign of coercion without violence against Taiwan.³⁸ It likely will remain so unless Chinese forces conclude that they can seize Taiwan by force at manageable cost and risk, or that they have no other alternative for obstructing Taiwan's permanent separation or independence than through use of force.

This conclusion about the center of gravity for Taiwan carries several implications for U.S. policymakers as they work to protect America's abiding interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

First, Washington and Taipei must ensure credible deterrence, but do so in a manner that limits risk of precipitating attack on Taiwan. This requires steadily and discreetly strengthening defensive capabilities, as opposed to flashily and publicly attempting to integrate Taiwan into a U.S. defense perimeter against the PRC. Any public declaration of a shift in American policy to offer "strategic clarity" about American military intervention in a cross-Strait conflict irrespective of the circumstances could invite the very outcome that America's strategy is designed to prevent.³⁹ Similarly, invoking support for Taiwan in the name of a global struggle between democracies and autocracies adds kindling to the fire without offering any offsetting benefits to American capacity to manage cross-Strait tensions. Rather than take steps that have the effect of accelerating the current escalatory spiral, the United States should seek to dampen tensions and slow the spiral. Even if such a goal proves unattainable, then at least policymakers in the rest of the world would be able to more readily identify the source of the problem.

The security objective of America's military engagement with Taiwan is to enhance Taiwan's capacity to defend itself by investing in capabilities that build upon Taiwan's geographic advantages. It is not to present Taiwan as a strategic asset or power projection platform for preserving American dominance in Asia. Friends do not treat friends as tools or proxies, especially when Taiwan will bear the brunt of any Chinese response to such efforts.

Second, Washington and Taipei will need to settle upon a mutually agreed posture for responding to PRC military provocations. Washington and Taipei will benefit by comparison to Beijing if they are able to maintain a principled, steady, and reliable military posture around Taiwan, as opposed to a perpetually reactive military posture. Not every PRC air incursion into Taiwan's air defense identification zone requires a Taiwan response, for example. Not every Chinese naval movement around Taiwan requires the U.S. Navy to publicize a routine transit of the Taiwan Strait. Both Washington and Taipei would benefit by playing their own games well, i.e., operating in a manner that lends confidence to the Taiwan public that Washington and Taipei have a shared theory of the case for defending Taiwan and are regularly exercising and improving capabilities in support of that approach.

Third, U.S. policymakers will need to restore coherence and discipline to policy and rhetoric on Taiwan. The U.S. harms its own interests and those of its friends in Taiwan when it treats Taiwan as a strategic tool to weaken China. The objective of American strategy since the 1950s has been to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Every American action or statement relating to Taiwan must be reinforcing of this objective. So, in instances when it is in the U.S. interest to enhance America's level of engagement with Taiwan, such changes should be made in ways that achieve that objective, and not in ways that are designed to create a public challenge to Beijing.

Perhaps nowhere in the world do words carry more weight than in American official statements over Taiwan. Senior officials in the Trump administration, and occasionally also in the Biden administration, have failed to offer a consistent articulation of

American policy toward Taiwan. They need to get it right going forward. This means abiding by America's "One China" policy, not taking a position on formulas for resolving cross-Strait disputes, not prejudging peacefully agreed outcomes that are acceptable to the people of Taiwan, and continuing to urge Beijing and Taipei to conduct cross-Strait relations with flexibility, patience, creativity, and restraint.⁴⁰ Rhetorical precision and consistency offers reassurance about America's intentions.

Fourth, bipartisan political leadership will be needed to forge an understanding in both the executive and legislative branches that Taiwan will not become a profitable issue for point-scoring, either domestically or in relation to China. This will require political leaders to enforce an expectation in both parties that Taiwan will not become a vehicle for officials to seek to burnish their strength or demonstrate their toughness on China. Given the war and peace stakes involved, political leaders will need to exercise their leverage to impose discipline against opportunistic expressions of support for Taiwan in pursuit of partisan advantage.

Presidential leadership also will be necessary to reinforce that the United States is invested in the process for managing and resolving cross-Strait differences, not the outcome. The United States must be prepared to welcome any evolution in relations between Taipei and Beijing that is mutually agreed upon and peacefully reached by both sides.

Of course, from America's perspective, Beijing's actions are more troubling and threatening to cross-Strait stability than American officials' words. As an American, I am sympathetic to this perspective. At the same time, I acknowledge that there is a relationship between America's policy drift and China's rising assertiveness. I would like to see the United States do more and say less in its efforts to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. This would help focus global attention on where the sources of rising cross-Strait tensions originate. At present, many countries in Asia and elsewhere do not embrace America's argument that China is the principle driver of spiraling tensions.

Fifth, it would serve America's interests to reestablish reliable channels with Beijing for addressing differences over Taiwan. From the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis through the end of the Obama administration in 2016, there were active diplomatic channels for each side privately to register concerns about the other's actions and request clarification of the intentions underlying specific actions. In the period since, such channels have largely gone into disuse.

In the coming years, there very likely will be further intensification of cross-Strait tensions. This could partly be a function of Beijing's confidence that its growing economic leverage and military superiority vis-à-vis Taiwan should compel Taipei to become more attentive to Beijing's top concerns and priorities. It could result from a change of identity among Taiwan people, who increasingly have less attachment to China. It also could be informed by the latent security dilemma and resulting efforts by each side to bolster deterrence against perceived military advances by the other.

Beijing will not be immediately receptive to efforts that it perceives as emboldening Washington to assume greater involvement and acceptance of risk in operating near Taiwan, just as Washington will be resistant to any efforts that it perceives as limiting American forces' freedom of navigation and overflight in international waters and airspace.

In addition to managing day-to-day differences, such channels between Washington and Beijing could be used to explore whether there is any possibility of establishing risk management mechanisms. These could include updating deconfliction protocols for surface and air encounters, updating protocols for notifications of major military activities, and exer-

cising real-time crisis management hotlines. For such efforts to achieve progress, officials in Washington and Beijing will need to employ creativity and flexibility. Beijing will not be immediately receptive to efforts that it perceives as emboldening Washington to assume greater involvement and acceptance of risk in operating near Taiwan, just as Washington will be resistant to any efforts that it perceives as limiting American forces' freedom of navigation and overflight in international waters and airspace.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Taiwan is one of a small number of issues that has the potential to serve as a catalyst for conflict between the United States and China. To forestall such a scenario, American policymakers will need to be clear on their role in the Taiwan Strait. The United States is not capable of mediating differences between Taiwan and China, which are vestiges of the unresolved civil war between the Republic of

China and the People's Republic of China. The best America can do is to foster enabling conditions for peaceful solutions to be found. The more the United States becomes partisan in favor of any specific outcome, the less influence it will wield over cross-Strait developments.

Even as a reliable American military presence near Taiwan remains vital, it is the minimum necessary ingredient for sustaining stability, not the essential variable for doing so. As important, if not more so, will be American efforts in the coming years to support Taiwan's ability to enjoy dignity and respect by contributing meaningfully on the world stage, to deepen trade and economic integration with Taiwan, and to strengthen Taiwan's capacity to safeguard the health of its people. The more that American officials can advance such efforts, the better they will be able to protect America's objectives – preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and keeping open a path for an eventual peaceful solution to cross-Strait tensions.

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