



QUINCY INSTITUTE  
FOR RESPONSIBLE  
STATECRAFT

# Paths to Crisis and Conflict Over Taiwan

**JANUARY 2024 | QUINCY BRIEF NO. 51**

**Michael Swaine**

Senior Research Fellow

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

**James Park**

Junior Research Fellow

Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

# Executive Summary

Taiwan is the most likely flashpoint for a U.S.–China conflict, unmatched in its combustible mix of conflicting interests, high stakes, and eroding trust and assurances.

A full-blown war over Taiwan has become a startling possibility. Suspicion, threat inflation, zero-sum framing, and worst-casing are increasingly dominant factors in U.S.–China interactions over Taiwan, driven by preconceived ideas of the other's intentions based on history and ideology, and domestic pressures in each country to prioritize military deterrence and even aggression.

Amidst this emerging threat of direct conflict, numerous scholars, experts, and military strategists have focused on how to discourage China from invading Taiwan through military force alone — warfighting perspectives that typically share glaring and mutually reinforcing faults that, if overlooked, may only help to pave the path toward conflict.

Analysts' emphasis on military deterrence tends to obscure the utmost importance of political reassurances to avert conflict, particularly the United States reaffirming and recommitting to its original understanding of the One China Policy; this fixation on the military dimension feeds into the destabilization of the Taiwan issue, brought about by heightened suspicions of the other side's intentions. Policymakers and pundits, in turn, tend to underestimate the possibility of inadvertent escalation, driven by an environment of distrust, pressure in Washington and Beijing to appear tough on the other, and a lack of comprehensive crisis management mechanisms.

By examining the common analytical blindspots regarding a conflict over Taiwan, this report sheds new light on how the political and social dynamics fueling mutual hostility between Beijing and Washington could play a much more decisive role in a future crisis

over Taiwan, rather than factors that earn far more attention, such as calculations about military capability and resolve.

Averting a destructive crisis will require the United States and China to build off recent diplomatic progress to restore a deeper mutual understanding concerning Taiwan through policies and actions including:

- Mutual recognition of the interactive nature of the growing crisis over Taiwan, to which Beijing, Washington, and Taipei contribute.
- A clearer, more credible U.S. commitment to its successful, long-standing stance on Taiwan: the One China Policy and strategic ambiguity.
- Continued U.S. rejection of both unilateral Taiwan independence and any unambiguous commitment to Taiwan's defense.
- A credible Chinese affirmation of its continued commitment to peaceful unification without any specific deadline.
- The development of a broad-based crisis communication mechanism that includes both military and civilian dialogue.

## Introduction

The deepening rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has significantly complicated the management of a wide array of national, bilateral, and international issues, from climate change to the global economic order, human rights, and state security. The potential consequences of this disruption include lowered growth rates, social unrest, rising insecurity, and, most importantly, a heightened possibility of crises and conflict over major issues of contention between the two powers.

*The most dangerous topic of bilateral contention is the Taiwan issue, which presents an unrivaled combination of conflicting interests, high stakes, and eroding trust and assurances that could generate a full-blown, escalating conflict between Washington and Beijing.*

Several sources of Sino–American tensions exist, including bilateral differences over the handling of the decades–old confrontation on the Korean Peninsula and maritime territorial disputes between China and U.S. allies in the Western Pacific. Among such issues, the most dangerous topic of bilateral contention is the Taiwan issue, which presents an unrivaled combination of conflicting interests, high stakes, and eroding trust and assurances that could generate a full-blown, escalating conflict between Washington and Beijing.

Despite recent improvements in the overall Sino–American relationship and some reassuring statements by Beijing and Washington regarding Taiwan, expert observers, politicians, policymakers, and even significant segments of the general public in both countries have become increasingly wary of the possibility of a conflict over the island. Indeed, in recent years, as relations between Beijing and Washington have deteriorated, many scholars, experts, and military strategists have raised the specter of a potential Taiwan conflict and explored the mechanics of how to militarily deter Beijing from attacking Taiwan or how to defeat China in a war over the island. These assessments usually fail for three reasons.

They largely ignore the critical political dimensions of China’s calculus regarding the use of force and, hence, the importance of any political assurances given by the United States (and Taiwan) in averting conflict. Second, they underestimate the willingness of Beijing to employ force against even a militarily superior U.S. adversary if such political

assurances were ignored or jettisoned. Third, they largely fail to appreciate the extent to which a conflict over Taiwan could emerge accidentally as a result of actions by both sides intended to avert conflict or control and de-escalate a crisis.

*A myopic focus on increasing levels of military deterrence that ignores or downplays other factors is likely to increase the possibility of a severe, escalating crisis.*

This brief examines the many trends and variables behind these three sets of factors, and in doing so shows that they would likely play an even more decisive role in a future Sino-American conflict over Taiwan than any calculations regarding relative levels of military capability and expressions of resolve. Indeed, a myopic focus on increasing levels of military deterrence that ignores or downplays these factors is likely to increase the possibility of a severe, escalating crisis.

Some observers might argue that the U.S. government fully appreciates the dangers listed above and is pursuing moderate policies that effectively balance deterrence with credible levels of reassurance to maintain stability across the Taiwan Strait. But, as shown below, this is clearly not the case. Many factors operating in China, the United States, and Taiwan are greatly undermining such stability, drawing us closer to a future crisis.

The first section briefly describes the features and trends of the current Taiwan situation that are making it increasingly susceptible to a future crisis, to the escalation of any such crisis to a military conflict, and to the difficulty confronting de-escalation and crisis termination. The second section lays out several possible pathways to a severe Taiwan crisis and an escalating conflict, presented largely as a series of misperceptions, miscalculations, and deliberate and unintentional actions flowing from the preceding

features and trends. The conclusion offers an overall assessment of the implications of the preceding analysis and policy recommendations.

## **Growing risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait**

In recent years, the risk of a major crisis and conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan has grown markedly. The fundamental problem is that a longstanding, stabilizing political understanding between Beijing and Washington regarding the island, reached at the time of normalization, has weakened and eroded significantly in recent years, as the importance of Taiwan as a key source of strategic competition between the two powers has increased. A multitude of intertwined factors explain this situation.<sup>1</sup> Some are inherent to the conflict of interests between China and the United States around Taiwan. Some result from the deteriorating U.S.–China bilateral relationship driven by their intensifying rivalry. Others are derived from domestic trends in Taiwan, China, and the United States, as well as major deficiencies in the crisis management capabilities of both nations.

### **The development of the status quo**

Both China and the United States feel they have vital national interests in Taiwan. For Beijing, the reunification of Taiwan with mainland China is a crucial objective of Chinese nationalism closely linked with feelings of national pride (and resentment toward former imperialist powers) and, hence, the legitimacy of the Chinese state as the guarantor of China’s territorial integrity. Any Chinese government would employ force and risk war with the United States to prevent the permanent separation of Taiwan from China, the humiliation of the Chinese nation, and a consequent likely downfall of the Chinese leadership under nationalist pressure.

---

<sup>1</sup> Swaine, Michael D. “Ending the Destructive Sino-U.S. Interaction Over Taiwan: A Call for Mutual Reassurance.” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, October 2022, <https://quincyst.org/report/ending-the-destructive-sino-u-s-interaction-over-taiwan-a-call-for-mutual-reassurance/>; The Task Force on U.S.-China Policy. “Avoiding War Over Taiwan.” UC San Diego 21st Century China Center, October 12, 2022, <https://china.ucsd.edu/policy/task-force/policy-brief-taiwan.html>

For the United States, preserving peace in Asia and preventing Taiwan’s capitulation to China is closely linked to the credibility of American assurances to regional allies, the protection of democracy, and the integrity of America’s position as the leader of the free world and the dominant global power. Any U.S. leadership would almost certainly employ force and hence risk war with China to prevent Beijing from forcibly or coercively seizing Taiwan and humiliating the U.S. government, thus dealing a significant blow to its image and reputation as a security guarantor and protector of democratic values.

Despite such high stakes, Washington and Beijing have avoided a severe crisis and conflict over Taiwan for many decades thanks to a bilateral understanding that was part of the 1971 normalization of Sino–American relations. This understanding, and the general absence of strategic rivalry between the two powers, allowed them to place Taiwan “on the back burner” as a source of tension, while creating the conditions for the island to develop and prosper.

*Washington and Beijing have avoided a severe crisis and conflict over Taiwan for many decades thanks to a bilateral understanding that was part of the 1971 normalization of Sino–American relations.*

The United States committed to not seeking the permanent separation of Taiwan from China. Instead, it acknowledges (without formally recognizing) via its One China policy China’s position that Taiwan is part of China, while repeatedly affirming Washington’s non–support for any unilateral effort at Taiwan independence, and its commitment to maintaining only unofficial relations with Taipei.<sup>2</sup> It also has affirmed that it is open to any resolution of the Taiwan issue as long as it is arrived at peacefully and without coercion. Moreover, while sending strong deterrence signals against any use of force by Beijing and providing military assistance to Taiwan (as provided for in the Taiwan

---

<sup>2</sup> Bush, Richard. “A One-China Policy Primer,” Center for East Asia Policy Studies at Brookings Institution, March 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/one-china-policy-primer.pdf>

Relations Act), the United States has also avoided giving Taipei a possible *carte blanche* to provoke Beijing by adopting a stance of strategic ambiguity regarding whether, when, and how it might employ force in a Taiwan crisis.

In return for Washington's commitment to a One China policy and limited support for Taipei, China has stated that it will pursue a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue as a priority while retaining the sovereign right, if absolutely necessary, to employ force to prevent the permanent separation of the island from China or to achieve unification over what it regards as its territory. Beijing has repeatedly affirmed such a priority at the highest levels of the government and – as part of such a policy – engaged in economic, cultural, and political efforts to draw Taiwan toward China, all the while generally avoiding sending clear signals that it is preparing to seize Taiwan by force.<sup>3</sup>

## The destabilization of the status quo

Over the years, several developments in cross–Strait and U.S.–China relations, and within Beijing, Washington, and Taiwan, have come to undermine the credibility of the above assurances, and increase the importance of Taiwan as a source of strategic Sino–American competition, raising the stakes and suspicions on all sides, thereby destabilizing the situation greatly.

Under Xi Jinping, China has emerged as an economically and militarily stronger power and taken a more aggressive ideological and nationalist approach to advancing its interests, especially regarding sovereignty issues along its border. In particular, Beijing under Xi has intensified China's program of military modernization and expansion (especially in the Western Pacific) and attached greater importance, at least rhetorically, to making progress toward unification with Taiwan, linking the task of unification to China's rejuvenation from being a victim of Western imperialism.<sup>4</sup> While Beijing has

---

<sup>3</sup> Zhao, Suisheng, "Beijing's Wait-and-See Policy toward Taiwan: An Uncertain Future." *East Asia* 20, no. 3 (2003): 39–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-003-0004-5>

<sup>4</sup> "Highlights of Xi's speech at gathering marking 40th anniversary of Message to Compatriots in Taiwan," Xinhua, January 2, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/02/c\\_137715300.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/02/c_137715300.htm); The State Council of the People's Republic of China. "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," August 10, 2022, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content\\_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html)



avoided explicitly setting a deadline for unification with Taiwan, Xi's rhetorical linkage of "national rejuvenation" by 2049 with the resolution of the Taiwan issue has raised questions about whether Beijing is shifting from preventing the permanent separation of Taiwan from China to pursuing unification via some form of military force.<sup>5</sup>

The narrowing U.S.–China military balance in the Asia–Pacific, Beijing's assertiveness toward its neighbors, and increasing Chinese coercion of Taiwan have created greater skepticism in Washington about whether Beijing will forego coercive means to achieve unification, and if existing levels of deterrence are sufficient enough to prevent potential Chinese military attempts to subjugate Taiwan. Suspicions have grown in the U.S. policy community that Beijing under Xi Jinping is seeking substantial progress toward unification through coercion and possibly even preparing to use force to seize the island during the near–term.<sup>6</sup> And concerns about weakening U.S. deterrence signals have led to fears that efforts to reassure Beijing might signal weakness and thereby increase the chance of Chinese aggression.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Xi, Jinping. "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," (Speech, Beijing, October 18, 2017), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf); "Full text of resolution on 19th CPC Central Committee report," *Xinhua*, October 22, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20221022/e9f90843c675417da2753866407612d8/c.html>

<sup>6</sup> Shelbourne, Mallory. "Davidson: China Could Try to Take Control of Taiwan In 'Next Six Years,'" USNI News, March 9, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/03/09/davidson-china-could-try-to-take-control-of-taiwan-in-next-six-years>; Kube, Courtney and Mosheh Gains. "Air Force general predicts war with China in 2025, tells officers to prep by firing 'a clip' at a target, and 'aim for the head,'" NBC News, January 28, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-air-force-general-predicts-war-china-2025-memo-rcna67967>; Schuman, Michael. "Is Taiwan Next?" *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/02/vladimir-putin-ukraine-taiwan/622907/>; Beckley, Michael and Hal Brands, "The Coming War Over Taiwan." *The Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coming-war-over-taiwan-11659614417>; Pomfret, John and Matt Pottinger. "Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War." *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/xi-jinping-says-he-preparing-china-war>

<sup>7</sup> Mastro, Oriana Skylar. "The Taiwan Temptation: Why Beijing Might Resort to Force." *Foreign Affairs*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-03/china-taiwan-war-temptation>; Brands, Hal. "Deterrence in Taiwan Is Failing," *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/08/us-military-deterrence-china-taiwan-war-east-asia/>; Flournoy, Michèle and Michael Brown, "Time Is Running Out to Defend Taiwan." *Foreign Affairs*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/time-running-out-defend-taiwan>; Colby, Elbridge, "America Must Prepare for a War Over Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/america-must-prepare-war-over-taiwan>

## Concerns about weakening U.S. deterrence signals have led to fears that efforts to reassure Beijing might signal weakness and thereby increase the chance of Chinese aggression.

Consequently, a growing number of American policymakers, experts, and military personnel have come to suspect that Beijing could decide to attack and seize Taiwan without provocation, possibly in this decade, and the United States can only deter such Chinese ambition by amassing superior firepower in Asia and conveying a crystal-clear willingness to employ force.<sup>8</sup> A stronger version of this position suggests that given Taiwan's geostrategic value, and the difficulty of fully deterring China, the United States should focus on maximizing wartime capabilities and winning a coming war.<sup>9</sup>

Such pessimistic views have translated into calls for doubling down on deterrence signals, including accumulating far greater levels of military deterrent capability against China and drawing ever closer to Taiwan politically and militarily.<sup>10</sup> As this implies strategic clarity, voices have grown within Washington in favor of scrapping the One China policy and the stance of strategic ambiguity by adopting a policy that would create a clear military alliance between the United States and Taiwan. This shift would effectively abrogate the U.S. commitment to only pursuing an "unofficial" relationship

---

<sup>8</sup> Sacks, David and Ivan Kanapathy, "What It Will Take to Deter China in the Taiwan Strait." *Foreign Affairs*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/what-it-will-take-deter-china-taiwan-strait>; Gordon, Susan M., Michael G. Mullen, and David Sacks, "U.S.-Taiwan Relations in a New Era: Responding to a More Assertive China." CFR, June 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/us-taiwan-relations-in-a-new-era>

<sup>9</sup> Colby, Elbridge. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022; Sacks, David. "Why Is Taiwan Important to the United States?" CFR Asia Unbound, June 20, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-taiwan-important-united-states>

<sup>10</sup> Sacks, David and Richard Haass, "American Support for Taiwan Must Be Unambiguous." *Foreign Affairs*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/american-support-taiwan-must-be-unambiguous>; Yu, Miles, "America's Strategic Clarity in Defense of Taiwan: The Dangerous Illusion of Strategic Ambiguity." Hudson Institute, October 31, 2022, <https://www.hudson.org/defense-strategy/america-strategic-clarity-defense-taiwan-dangerous-illusion-strategic-ambiguity>; Kuo, Raymond, "Strategic Ambiguity' Has the U.S. and Taiwan Trapped." *Foreign Policy*, January 18, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/18/taiwan-us-china-strategic-ambiguity-military-strategy-asymmetric-defense-invasion/>

with Taiwan and revive the U.S. security alliance with the island, which was terminated in 1979 as a precondition to establishing diplomatic relations with Beijing.

## *Voices have grown within Washington in favor of scrapping the One China policy and the stance of strategic ambiguity by adopting a policy that would create a clear military alliance between the United States and Taiwan.*

The rising skepticism toward China on the Taiwan issue across the U.S. policy community has been gradually reflected in the actions and rhetoric of the U.S. government.<sup>11</sup> Starting from the Trump administration and throughout the Biden administration, Washington's political support for and military assistance to Taiwan have steadily expanded in ever more explicit ways.<sup>12</sup> Rhetorically, Washington has at times given the impression that it is departing from the One China policy. For example, the Biden administration's Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner has publicly described Taiwan as a geostrategic "critical node" essential to the overall U.S. defense posture in Asia (thus implying that it must be kept separate from China), while President Biden has on multiple occasions publicly vowed to defend Taiwan and characterized the island as an already independent entity free to make its own decisions.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Swaine, Michael D, "The Worrisome Erosion of the One China Policy," *The National Interest*, February 27, 2023. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/worrisome-erosion-one-china-policy-206253>; Glaser, Bonnie S., Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen, "Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwan-china-true-sources-deterrence>.

<sup>12</sup> "Trump-Taiwan call breaks US policy stance." BBC News, December 3, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38191711>; Barnes, Julian E. and Amy Qin, "State Dept. Moves to Ease Restrictions on Meeting With Taiwan Officials." *The New York Times*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/politics/state-dept-taiwan-united-states-china.html>; Guyer, Jonathan. "Biden's promise to defend Taiwan says a lot about America's view of China." *Vox*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/world/2022/9/19/23320328/china-us-relations-policy-biden-trump>; Wingfield-Hayes, Rupert. "The US is quietly arming Taiwan to the teeth." BBC News, November 6, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67282107>.

<sup>13</sup> Swaine, Michael D. "US official signals stunning shift in the way we interpret 'One China' policy." *Responsible Statecraft*, December 10, 2021, <https://responsiblerestatecraft.org/2021/12/10/us-official-signals-stunning-shift-in-the-way-we-interpret-one-china-policy/>; Heer, Paul. "Has Washington's Policy Toward Taiwan Crossed the Rubicon?" *The National Interest*, December 10, 2021,

Worsening the negative interaction, Washington's seemingly shifting attitude and approach toward the Taiwan issue has further reduced China's confidence in U.S. commitment to the status quo. The increased U.S. rhetoric contravening the One China policy and the ever-growing U.S.–Taiwan bilateral ties together have raised questions in Beijing as to whether Washington is on a path toward a de facto – if not explicit – rejection of its One China policy in order to keep Taiwan permanently separated from the mainland.<sup>14</sup> And the primary intention behind the weakening U.S. commitment to the One China policy, in the eyes of many Chinese, is perceived to be the containment of China, as Chinese officials have repeatedly alleged in recent years.<sup>15</sup> Washington is increasingly seen as facilitating the redefinition of Taiwan as a strategic location vital to the overall U.S. defense posture in order to justify more forward deployments in Asia.<sup>16</sup>

---

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/has-washington%E2%80%99s-policy-toward-taiwan-crossed-rubicon-197877>; Hutzler, Charles, Joyu Wang, and James T. Areddy, "Biden's Pledge to Defend Taiwan Chips Away at Longstanding U.S. Policy," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2022,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/bidens-pledge-to-defend-taiwan-chips-away-at-longstanding-u-s-policy-11663962151>;

Liptak, Kevin, "Biden says Taiwan's independence is up to Taiwan after discussing matter with Xi." CNN, November 16, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/16/politics/biden-china-taiwan/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> "Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 2, 2022,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/202208/t20220802\\_10732293.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202208/t20220802_10732293.html); "Wang Yi Raises Four Questions about the United States' China Policy," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 23, 2023,

[https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb\\_663304/zzig\\_663340/qjs\\_665170/qjsxw\\_665172/202209/t20220924\\_10771021.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb_663304/zzig_663340/qjs_665170/qjsxw_665172/202209/t20220924_10771021.html)

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Wang Yi Elaborates on China's Position on the Taiwan Question at a Press Conference for Chinese and Foreign Media," August 6, 2022,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202208/t20220806\\_10736474.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220806_10736474.html); Ruwitch, John, "China accuses U.S. of containment and warns of potential conflict," NPR, March 7, 2023,

<https://www.npr.org/2023/03/07/1161570798/china-accuses-u-s-of-containment-warns-of-potential-conflict>

<sup>16</sup> Ng, Teddy, "Beijing berates US for 'trying to include Taiwan in strategy to contain China,'" *South China Morning Post*, February 22, 2022,

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3167977/beijing-berates-us-trying-include-taiwan-strategy-contain>; Zhi, Zhenfeng and Kaixin Zheng, "Washington ignores history, insists on playing 'Taiwan card' for its own hegemony," *Global Times*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296488.shtml>.

*The primary intention behind the weakening U.S. commitment to the One China policy, in the eyes of many Chinese, is perceived to be the containment of China.*

Such pessimistic Chinese perceptions of U.S. intentions regarding Taiwan have driven Beijing to rely more heavily on military signaling and other coercive tools to protest against what it sees as provocative American and Taiwanese moves that shape the status quo in their favorable terms, and hopefully to influence perceptions on Taiwan. While stressing the coercive functions of its economic and political influence vis-à-vis Taiwan, China has conducted increasingly expansive and threatening types of military displays in the vicinity of the island, apparently in an effort to create a “new normal” in cross-strait relations that confirms China’s dominance over the island and its growing ability to counter U.S. intervention in a possible conflict.<sup>17</sup>

The increased intensity of Chinese military activities around Taiwan witnessed throughout the past year and a half – including a blockade rehearsal surrounding Taiwan, first-ever missile strike drills targeting the island, and sending aircraft and warships to cross the Taiwan Strait median line – occurred largely in response to high-profile senior-level exchanges between Washington and Taipei, when the former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022 and when the Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen made a trip to California in April 2023 to meet Pelosi’s successor Kevin McCarthy.<sup>18</sup> By demonstrating stronger resolve, Beijing has intended to raise the cost of similar symbolic U.S.–Taiwan exchanges, though the

---

<sup>17</sup> Wuthnow, Joel and Bonny Lin, “Pushing Back Against China’s New Normal in the Taiwan Strait,” War On the Rocks, August 16, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/pushing-back-against-chinas-new-normal-in-the-taiwan-strait/>; Feng, Emily and Hanzhang Jin, “China is subtly increasing military pressure on Taiwan. Here’s how,” NPR, December 18, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/18/1216317476/china-military-taiwan-air-defense>.

<sup>18</sup> Blanchard, Ben and Yimou Lee, “China ends Taiwan drills after practising blockades, precision strikes.” Reuters, April 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-following-chinas-taiwan-drills-with-great-interest-2023-04-10/>; Arslan, Josh, Yimou Lee, and Ben Blanchard. “Chinese planes cross Taiwan Strait median line.” Reuters, April 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-announces-drills-around-taiwan-after-us-speaker-meeting-2023-04-08/>.

effectiveness of such an approach remains in question. So far, Beijing's hardened posture toward Taiwan appears to have reinforced U.S. suspicion of Chinese intentions and a sense of alarm in Washington to match the increasing Chinese aggression with countervailing signals of resolve.<sup>19</sup>

*Beijing's hardened posture toward Taiwan appears to have reinforced U.S. suspicion of Chinese intentions and a sense of alarm in Washington to match the increasing Chinese aggression with countervailing signals of resolve.*

Interactions between Washington and Beijing on the Taiwan issue have not been without efforts to supposedly reassure each other. Most recently, during their bilateral meeting at the San Francisco APEC summit held in November 2023, Biden and Xi reaffirmed their commitment to the supposed status quo, with Biden insisting that the United States remains committed to its One China policy and Xi stating that pursuing a peaceful reunification with Taiwan remains China's preferred policy.<sup>20</sup> Washington has also tried to reassure Beijing that it would oppose any disruptive, pro-independence political moves taken by Lai Ching-te, if he wins the presidency of Taiwan.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, such reaffirmations of mutual commitments to their bilateral understanding regarding Taiwan remain far from sufficient to reduce the deep

---

<sup>19</sup> Swaine. "Ending the Destructive Sino-U.S. Interaction Over Taiwan: A Call for Mutual Reassurance," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, <https://quincyinst.org/report/ending-the-destructive-sino-u-s-interaction-over-taiwan-a-call-for-mutual-reassurance/>; Weiss, Jessica Chen. "The China Trap." *Foreign Affairs*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition>; Glaser, Bonnie S., Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen. "Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence." *Foreign Affairs*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwan-china-true-sources-deterrence>.

<sup>20</sup> Mason, Jeff and Trevor Hunnicutt, "Xi told Biden Taiwan is biggest, most dangerous issue in bilateral ties." Reuters, November 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/xi-told-biden-taiwan-is-biggest-most-dangerous-issue-bilateral-ties-us-official-2023-11-16/>.

<sup>21</sup> Sevastopulo, Demetri and Kathrin Hille, "Washington presses Taiwan presidential frontrunner on White House comments," *The Financial Times*, July 20, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/ff4b4d70-0e81-4229-bd7f-3224ed538428>.

suspicious on both sides of one another's intentions and build the level of mutual trust necessary for mutual compromise and restraint.<sup>22</sup>

Such suspicions are exacerbated by the deepening tension between Taipei and Beijing in recent years, marked most notably by the growing unpopularity in Taiwan of unification with the PRC under any condition.<sup>23</sup> Despite significant increases in cross-strait contacts and business dealings over the past two decades, the evident failure of Beijing's "One Country, Two Systems" formula in Hong Kong has led most of Taiwan's citizens to reject it as a basis for unification with Beijing.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, a growing number of Taiwanese people now see themselves as solely Taiwanese and feel increasingly disassociated from the mainland.<sup>25</sup> And the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has become well-established as perhaps the major political party on the island.<sup>26</sup>

In the past, when tensions between Beijing and Taipei increased, U.S. opposition to Taiwanese moves toward independence often played a key role in reassuring Beijing and deterring Chinese actions that would endanger the status quo.<sup>27</sup> For example, when the former Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian took steps to promote de jure independence via the use of popular referenda, then-U.S. president George W. Bush clearly and publicly rejected such attempts to alter the status quo.<sup>28</sup> But the credibility of

---

<sup>22</sup> Swaine, Michael D. "The lost opportunity of the Biden-Xi meeting." *Responsible Statecraft*, November 16, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/biden-xi-meeting/>.

<sup>23</sup> Rigger, Shelley, et al., "Why is unification so unpopular in Taiwan? It's the PRC political system, not just culture." Brookings Institution, February 7, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-is-unification-so-unpopular-in-taiwan-its-the-prc-political-system-not-just-culture/>.

<sup>24</sup> Chen, Chih-Jou Jay, and Victor Zheng. "Changing Attitudes toward China in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the Xi Jinping Era." *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2021): 250–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1945738>.

<sup>25</sup> "Poll: Taiwanese distance themselves from Chinese identity." AP News, May 12, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-china-mao-zedong-international-news-asia-pacific-c8a1f7669442b2b86dfff1563c3bd0e9>.

<sup>26</sup> Chen, Fang-Yu, et al. "The Taiwanese see themselves as Taiwanese, not as Chinese" *Washington Post*, January 2, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/02/yes-taiwan-wants-one-china-but-which-china-does-it-want/>.

<sup>27</sup> Swaine, Michael D., *America's Challenge: Engaging a Rising China in the Twenty-First Century*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011, 85-86.

<sup>28</sup> Milbank, Dana and Glenn Kessler, "President Warns Taiwan On Independence Efforts." *Washington Post*, December 10, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/12/10/president-warns-taiwan-on-independence-efforts/374c46e0-6f94-4874-825a-d1a12bdc51b1/>; Graham, Bradley, "Taiwan's Leader Cancels Stopover U.S. Refused Chen an

any such actions today (e.g, with regard to Lai, as noted above) is undoubtedly much weaker.

*There are few reasons for each side to question such worst–case assumptions about the motives of the other, and many reasons to believe they have been confirmed by the other side’s provocative actions.*

Under current conditions, both Washington and Beijing remain inclined to miscalculate in assessing the threat posed by the other side through specific actions taken regarding Taiwan and the intended effect of its own response to such provocations. There are few reasons for each side to question such worst–case assumptions about the motives of the other, and many reasons to believe they have been confirmed by the other side’s provocative actions. Attempts to counter perceived extreme threats to each side’s vital interest could lead to extreme reactions regarded as necessary and prudent but viewed by the other as excessive and provocative. The propensity for an intense, escalatory spiral of threats and counter–threats to emerge is clear.

## Drivers of escalation on the Chinese side

The likelihood of a dangerous escalation between the United States and China over Taiwan is made worse by certain destabilizing characteristics evident in the public and elite belief system, intelligence–gathering system, domestic political structures and processes, and historical experience of both sides that can increase risk–taking and lower flexibility in a crisis over Taiwan. These features can reinforce tendencies on both sides to worst case any potential crisis and rely heavily on signals of resolve, eventually

---

Overnight Stay on Trip to Latin America,” *Washington Post*, May 4, 2006, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/05/04/taiwans-leader-cancels-stopover-span-classbankheadus-refused-chen-an-overnight-stay-on-trip-to-latin-america/3c95e33a-83e7-4379-bd53-a454f09e6e66/>; “Taiwan to push U.N. referendum despite China protest,” Reuters, August 10, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-idU5TP20891320070620/>.



...serving to reduce room for mutual restraint and accommodation necessary for de-escalation in a crisis.

Several existing characteristics, conditions, and habits on China's side could trigger an escalation in a high-tension situation in the Taiwan Strait.

First is China's deep-rooted insecurity toward U.S. intentions, derived from its experiences during the "century of humiliation" in the late 19th and early 20th century, when China suffered from sustained Western subjugation and was forced to cede territories and extraterritorial privileges to Western hegemonic powers.<sup>29</sup> This persistent insecurity about the loss of territorial control and national dignity from foreign intervention can incline Beijing to approach sovereignty-related crises in unyielding, moralistic, zero-sum terms and view Washington's behavior as fundamentally ill-intentioned.<sup>30</sup>

In a crisis over Taiwan, this historical insecurity factor, combined with the Chinese association of unification with Taiwan as a necessary step to national rejuvenation, will almost certainly come into play to intensify nationalist sentiments in China. Perceiving that the party state's legitimacy is at stake, Beijing will likely find the political cost of backing down in a serious Taiwan crisis unbearable. As a result, Beijing's flexibility in crisis interactions will be severely limited, increasing the chance of China overreacting to U.S. signals of resolve and making sharp escalation more likely.

---

<sup>29</sup> Kaufman, Alison Adcock, "The "Century of Humiliation," Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order," *Pacific Focus* 25 no.1 (April 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2010.01039.x>.

<sup>30</sup> These features are reinforced by a Chinese tendency to view a declining United States as seeking to maintain its hegemonic position in the world by (among other things) using the Taiwan issue as a "card" intended to keep China divided, distracted, under pressure, and contained. According to interviews, some Chinese believe that Washington is capable of precipitating or manipulating a Taiwan crisis to achieve such ends.

## *Perceiving that the party state's legitimacy is at stake, Beijing will likely find the political cost of backing down in a serious Taiwan crisis unbearable.*

Second, some operational concepts of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) might undermine the need for clear signaling, limited goals, and a restrained use of force in a crisis. These include the cultivation of uncertainty in an opponent through unclear signaling and other means, the use of escalatory leaps (including sudden demonstrations of force) to shake the confidence of the other side in its deterrence power, and reliance on cyberattacks early in a crisis, to signal deterrence and as a force multiplier.<sup>31</sup>

While these features are evident in some PLA writings on how to manage crises and armed conflicts, it is unclear to what extent they would influence China's behavior. PLA-connected Chinese scholars have downplayed the importance of such concepts overall while stressing that in some extreme instances of a high-stakes crisis over Taiwan, Chinese leaders could be forced to engage in sudden, rapid, asymmetrical escalations, ostensibly to force both Taipei and Washington to realize the seriousness of the situation.<sup>32</sup>

Third is the possibility that China will underestimate Washington's commitment to defending its interests in a severe crisis over Taiwan. Many Chinese assume the United States has less stake in the Taiwan issue than China does.<sup>33</sup> This is due not only to the close association of a Taiwan crisis with Chinese nationalism and the legitimacy of the

---

<sup>31</sup> Swaine, Michael D, "Crisis Management and the Taiwan Situation: Chinese Views and Conflict Avoidance," *China Leadership Monitor* 76, no. 5 (Summer 2023).

<https://www.prcleader.org/post/crisis-management-and-the-taiwan-situation-chinese-views-and-conflict-avoidance>; Johnston, Alastair Iain, "The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China," *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 1, Article 4 (Winter 2016).

[https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss1/4?utm\\_source=digital-commons.usnwc.edu%2Fnwc-review%2Fvol69%2Fiss1%2F4&utm\\_medium=PDF&utm\\_campaign=PDFCoverPages](https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss1/4?utm_source=digital-commons.usnwc.edu%2Fnwc-review%2Fvol69%2Fiss1%2F4&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages).

<sup>32</sup> Swaine. "Crisis Management and the Taiwan Situation: Chinese Views and Conflict Avoidance."; Johnston. "The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China."

<sup>33</sup> Swaine. "Crisis Management and the Taiwan Situation: Chinese Views and Conflict Avoidance."; Johnston. "The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China."

PRC regime, but also China's belief that the United States will prove averse to conducting a prolonged and costly conflict far from U.S. territory, likely without the overwhelming support of the American people. Such perceptions could reinforce Chinese arguments in favor of dangerous shows of resolve, including kinetic actions, designed to force Washington to back down in the face of a supposedly more determined Beijing.<sup>34</sup>

Fourth, China's tendency to engage in "tit-for-tat" retaliation moves in a diplomatic or military confrontation, viewed as conveying resolve in defending China's interests while avoiding excessively provocative actions, is a potential source of concern.<sup>35</sup> Although potentially stabilizing in some cases (if used sparingly), an overly rigid adherence to this approach could generate an escalating spiral toward conflict in the absence of diplomatic restraint.<sup>36</sup>

Fifth, Beijing has become more susceptible to domestic pressures and demands in China for tougher deterrence signals. In past crises, such as the 1999 accidental U.S. bombing of China's Belgrade Embassy, Chinese leaders could take measured responses in part because public pressure to reciprocate and escalate was relatively small. Today's domestic environment in China, however, looks far different. Mounting economic problems and associated anxiety about the eroding authority of the party-state, widespread Chinese nationalist sentiments, and Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy stances all combine to create incentives for political and military leaders in Beijing to opt for confrontational responses to perceived U.S. provocations. As one scholar has noted, Xi's assertive rhetoric, his apparent demand for absolute obedience, and

---

<sup>34</sup> Cunningham, Fiona S., and M. Taylor Fravel. "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 61–109. [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00359](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00359).

<sup>35</sup> Swaine. "Crisis Management and the Taiwan Situation: Chinese Views and Conflict Avoidance."; Johnston. "The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China."

<sup>36</sup> Swaine, Michael D., Tuosheng Zhang, and Cohen Danielle F S, *Managing Sino-American crises: Case studies and analysis*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006

nationalist Chinese public audiences have transformed the security apparatus in Beijing into a hawkish “echo chamber” with marginalized moderate voices.<sup>37</sup>

## *Xi’s assertive rhetoric, his apparent demand for absolute obedience, and nationalist Chinese public audiences have transformed the security apparatus in Beijing into a hawkish “echo chamber” with marginalized moderate voices.*

Sixth, China’s secretive, top–down yet, in some ways, fragmented decision–making process and stove–piped civilian and military intelligence structure have delayed reaction time and, at times, distorted both the Chinese assessment of information and clear signaling in past Sino-American crises.<sup>38</sup> In addition, as mentioned above, Xi Jinping’s dominance of the Chinese decision–making process today could suppress the past tendency of post–Mao leaders to make collective, consensual decisions, thus increasing the likelihood of impulsive, incautious moves.<sup>39</sup>

### Drivers of escalation on the U.S. side

There are also several existing characteristics, conditions, and habits on the American side that could trigger an escalation in a Taiwan crisis.

Most saliently, Washington has become increasingly susceptible to domestic political pressures and demands for decisive action against China. Domestic politics can cause politicians to seek political support, both in general and in a crisis, by manipulating and

---

<sup>37</sup> Zhao, Tong. “How China’s Echo Chamber Threatens Taiwan.” *Foreign Affairs*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/-china-echo-chamber-threatens-taiwan>; McCarthy, Simone. “Some nationalists felt China did too little to counter Pelosi. Beijing wants to change their minds,” CNN, August 5, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/05/china/china-public-opinion-military-response-pelosi-intl-hnk-mic/index.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Swaine, Michael D., Tuosheng Zhang, and Cohen Danielle F S, *Managing Sino-American crises: Case studies and analysis*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006: pg 48-57; Cabestan, Jean-Pierre. “China’s Foreign and Security Policy Institutions and Decision-Making under Xi Jinping.” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2020): 319–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120974881>.

<sup>39</sup> Zhao, Suisheng. “Xi Jinping’s Consolidation of Power at the 20th Party Congress: Implications for Chinese Foreign Policy.” *World Scientific* 59 no. 2 (June 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1013251123400052>.

stoking the fears and insecurities of the American public regarding real and imagined foreign threats.<sup>40</sup> Such political manipulation has become more attractive and arguably more effective as a result of growing domestic insecurity and political polarization in the United States.

*Tempted to take advantage of the widespread negative public sentiments toward China, U.S. politicians are now vying with one another to show their anti-China credentials by promoting ever greater American support for Taiwan.*

Tempted to take advantage of the widespread negative public sentiments toward China, U.S. politicians are now vying with one another to show their anti-China credentials by promoting ever greater American support for Taiwan.<sup>41</sup> Bipartisan bills aimed to elevate U.S.–Taiwan military and political ties well beyond the existing level are routinely introduced and passed.<sup>42</sup> An arguably growing number of politicians from both Republican and Democratic sides call for abrogating strategic ambiguity in favor of a formal U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Swanson, Ana, “A New Red Scare Is Reshaping Washington,” *The New York Times*, July 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/20/us/politics/china-red-scare-washington.html>

<sup>41</sup> Carpenter, Ted Galen, “The Bipartisan Race to be Tough on China,” *China-US Focus*, November 9, 2022, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/bipartisan-race-be-tough-china>; Silver, Laura, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, “China’s Approach to Foreign Policy Gets Largely Negative Reviews in 24-Country Survey, Pew Research Center, July 27, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/27/views-of-china/>; Kafura, Craig, “Americans Feel More Threat from China Now Than in past Three Decades,” *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, November 12, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-feel-more-threat-china-now-past-three-decades#:~:text=Key%20Findings,Surveys%20dating%20back%20to%201990>; Gramer, Robbie, “Why a Bipartisan House Committee Wants to Further Cut Ties With Beijing,” *Foreign Policy*, December 15, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/15/us-china-committee-new-report-beijing-competition/>; Gramer, Robbie, “The Masterminds,” *Foreign Policy*, November 27, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/27/masterminds-congress-china-committee-ccp-taiwan-gallagher-krishnamoorthi/>

<sup>42</sup> Malley, Blaise, “Congress and the 4 faces of China baiting bills in 2023,” *Responsible Statecraft*, December 27, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/china-congress-2023/>; Desiderio, Andrew, “U.S.-Taiwan bill sails through Senate panel despite White House misgivings,” *Politico*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/09/14/taiwan-bill-clears-senate-panel-00056769>.

<sup>43</sup> Desiderio, Andrew, “Dem China hawks hope Biden’s Taiwan gaffe was no accident,” *Politico*, May 25, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/25/joe-biden-taiwan-china-comments-00034934>; Gallagher, Mike, “Battle Force 2025: A Plan to Defend Taiwan Within the Decade,” *Foundation for Defenses of Democracies*, February 17,

Domestic pressures in both the United States and China for aggressive signals of resolve and government responses to such pressures in the form of escalatory actions could easily be taken by the other side as deliberate attempts to justify conditions creating the permanent separation of Taiwan from China (from the Chinese perspective) or pave the way for the use of force or massive coercion to resolve the Taiwan issue (from the U.S. perspective).

Second, past historical (and some current) examples of U.S. crisis behavior toward China indicate a U.S. tendency to be heavily influenced by ideological mindsets and zero-sum thinking.<sup>44</sup> These have included exaggerated notions about communist aggression, an assumed Chinese lack of concern for human life and, hence, a lower threshold for the use of high levels of force, and the allegedly existential nature of the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. Such extreme ideas could cause U.S. leaders to adopt highly provocative policies and overreact to China's perceived provocations, especially in a high-stakes crisis over Taiwan. In addition, a tendency toward overreaction would be particularly likely if U.S. leaders felt a need to disabuse China of the commonly held belief that the United States is in decline as a great power.

## Another driver of escalation: A lack of bilateral crisis management mechanisms

Aside from various destabilizing features of Chinese and American thinking and behavior, a future bilateral crisis over Taiwan would also likely prove very difficult to manage as a result of certain specific deficiencies involving the crisis management perceptions and systems on both sides.<sup>45</sup>

---

2022, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/02/17/battle-force-2025/>; Blanchard, Ben, "U.S. should recognise Taiwan, former top diplomat Pompeo says," Reuters, March 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-should-recognise-taiwan-former-top-diplomat-pompeo-says-2022-03-04/>.

<sup>44</sup> Swaine, Michael D. "Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military." *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, June 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/report/threat-inflation-and-the-chinese-military/>

<sup>45</sup> Swaine, Michael D, "The Worsening Taiwan Imbroglio: An Urgent Need for Effective Crisis Management," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, November 28, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/report/the-worsening-taiwan-embroglio-an-urgent-need-for-effective-crisis-management/>; Swaine, Michael D, "How to Break the Impasse in U.S.-China Crisis Communication," United States Institute of Peace, July 26, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/how-break-impasse-us-china-crisis-communication>.

Specifically, although both governments have endorsed the need for crisis management dialogues, have established some crisis management procedures between the two militaries, and have held Track One military-to-military crisis communication dialogues in the past, Beijing and Washington currently have no substantive, broad-based crisis communication mechanisms that can serve to overcome or moderate the above negative mindsets and actions of both sides. The two sides have not agreed at the official level on any specific crisis management guidelines for minimizing the chance of inadvertent escalation and defusing a crisis.<sup>46</sup>

***Beijing and Washington currently have no substantive, broad-based crisis communication mechanisms that can serve to overcome the negative mindsets and actions of both sides.***

In Sino-American crises of the post-Mao era, obstacles to effective crisis management were to some extent overcome by the use of interlocutors who had worked together for years and – to some extent – trusted one another, such as former Chinese State Councillor Dai Bingguo and former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Hank Paulson.<sup>47</sup> Such individuals could provide credible assurances of intent and the meaning of specific signals sent in a crisis. Unfortunately, no such trusted interlocutors exist today at senior levels of the leadership in either government.

Historical experience also suggests that several problems relevant to the presence of a third party in a Sino-U.S. crisis (in this case, Taiwan) would also likely undermine effective crisis management. These include China's belief that Taipei's actions are either

---

<sup>46</sup> Swaine. "The Worsening Taiwan Imbroglio: An Urgent Need for Effective Crisis Management."; Swaine. "How to Break the Impasse in U.S.-China Crisis Communication."

<sup>47</sup> Rozen, Laura, "U.S.-China dialogue gets underway," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/07/27/u-s-china-dialogue-gets-underway/>.; "Backgrounder: China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue," *China Daily*, May 9, 2011, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina////////2011-05/09/content\\_12473364.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina////////2011-05/09/content_12473364.html).

directed by Washington or undertaken to force the United States to counter Chinese actions more aggressively.<sup>48</sup>

## Scenario paths to crisis and conflict

Occurring in an environment of deep mutual suspicion, threat inflation, the worst-casing of motives and intentions, and inadequate crisis management dialogue mechanisms, future political and military crises between the United States and China over Taiwan could easily lead to miscalculations and overreactions. These would likely take the form of military displays or even limited kinetic actions as part of a determined search by each side to dominate escalation and compel the other side to back down. The potential for such behavior to produce a prolonged, intensifying clash is clear.

### *A growing number of Chinese military sorties and exercises are confronting both U.S. and Taiwan forces in ever closer proximity around the island.*

Beijing and Washington are already in the early stages of such an escalatory process. Each side sees the other as undermining, presumably for political, ideological, and strategic reasons, what had been a relatively stable understanding regarding Taiwan. And each side is responding to such a perception by doubling down on various forms of deterrence signaling over credible forms of assurance, which simply reinforces mutual suspicion and worst-casing. As a result, today, a growing number of Chinese military sorties and exercises are confronting both U.S. and Taiwan forces in ever closer proximity around the island. The ongoing rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait could accelerate and produce a conflict in at least three ways.

---

<sup>48</sup> "Commentary: Washington's despicable manipulation of "Taiwan card" doomed to failure," *People's Daily*, April 7, 2023, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2023/0407/c90000-20002593.html>; Tang, Yonghong, "Washington should never cross Beijing's redline," *China Daily*, June 4, 2023. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202306/04/WS647be8d5a31033ad3f7ba457.html>.



## A seemingly unprovoked Chinese effort to resolve the issue

A variety of gradually emerging factors could compel Beijing to attempt to coerce Taiwan into submission or seize the island outright. These might include continued DPP successes, a continued reduction or even reversal of cross–Strait contacts of all kinds, a persistently turbulent, confrontational Sino–American relationship (with accompanying increases in military jockeying along China’s coast), and the resulting ongoing erosion of confidence in the One China/peaceful unification understanding. Although not highly likely, China’s leaders might also conclude that the window of opportunity to seize Taiwan is closing due to China’s declining economy, or develop a desire to divert the Chinese public’s attention away from domestic problems by creating a crisis over Taiwan.

These and other factors could cause China’s leaders to conclude that, in the words of the 2005 Anti–Secession Law, “the possibilities for a peaceful reunification [are] completely exhausted” or near exhaustion, without the occurrence of any specific proximate “provocation.”<sup>49</sup>

Under such conditions, and assuming continued increases in China’s military capabilities vis–à–vis Taiwan, Beijing might seek to compel Taipei to enter into political talks by issuing a firm deadline for doing so, backed by a range of carrots and sticks, including enhanced offers of economic benefits to Taipei and increased Chinese military deployments. Alternatively, Beijing might simply assume that the likelihood of political talks is virtually nil and launch an effort to compel political capitulation and/or seize the island by force. In both cases, Beijing would undoubtedly seek to deter the United States from intervening through various warnings and signals of resolve, militarily and otherwise.

In such a situation, it is extremely likely that the United States would intervene both militarily and diplomatically to compel Beijing to relent and step back from its coercive

---

<sup>49</sup> “Anti–Secession Law adopted by NPC (full text),” *China Daily*, March 14, 2005, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/14/content\\_424643.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-03/14/content_424643.htm)

moves, or to prevent Beijing from attempting to seize Taiwan. In either case, the many adverse features outlined above would come into play, virtually guarantee an intensifying crisis and quite possibly an eventual conflict. For example, domestic political pressures to “push back” against the adversary, compounded by ideological and moral posturing, would likely be strong, with hostility and suspicion undoubtedly running high, causing both sides to double down on military, political, and other signals of resolve.

Also, escalation would likely be encouraged further by China’s belief that the United States would be the first to blink in a standoff (for reasons given above), China’s possible reliance on escalatory leaps in conveying Beijing’s supposed greater level of resolve, and a possible U.S. tendency toward overreaction, motivated by a desire to disabuse Beijing of its above “misperceptions” regarding U.S. resolve.

The possibility of this scenario might become more likely if Lai Ching-te, the current DPP vice president and front-runner in the upcoming January 2024 presidential election, is elected the president of Taiwan, with the potential to serve until 2032. Having cast himself as a “political worker for Taiwanese independence” since the early days of his political career, Lai has long been known for his strident pro-independence views.<sup>50</sup>

*Since the early days of his political career, Lai has long been known for his strident pro-independence views.*

Although Lai has toned down his past pro-independence rhetoric in the runup to the Taiwan election, his extreme views have almost certainly not changed appreciably. Indeed, Lai has pledged to upgrade Taiwan’s relationship with the United States to an unprecedented level if he is elected, vowing to become the first Taiwanese president to

---

<sup>50</sup> “Lai explains approach to independence,” *Taipei Times*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/04/16/2003691399>.

visit the White House.<sup>51</sup> Beijing might conclude that Lai was elected because the United States was unwilling to dissuade Taipei from moving toward greater independence, and might even be encouraging it.<sup>52</sup> This could cause Beijing to become even more willing to take the risks associated with this scenario.

In addition, if crisis management mechanisms, understandings, and personal ties between U.S and Chinese leaders were to remain weak (as at present), the risk of misreading signals and other types of misunderstandings in a crisis would be high, increasing the likelihood of an actual conflict.

Some observers speculate that Beijing has already decided to use force against Taiwan, and a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is only a matter of time.<sup>53</sup> For example, U.S. Air Force General Mike Minihan has predicted that China might attack Taiwan as soon as 2025.<sup>54</sup> Former U.S. Indo–Pacific Commander Philip Davidson has drawn a similar assessment, virtually predicting a Chinese invasion by 2027.<sup>55</sup> Other observers undoubtedly believe that Beijing has accepted that it must resort to political and military coercion to compel unification talks and will initiate such a process as soon as possible.

While the possibility of an unprovoked Chinese invasion of Taiwan or an unprovoked, high–risk gambit to coerce the island into submission cannot be dismissed, this

---

<sup>51</sup> Wang, Cindy, “Taiwan Candidate Says Its Presidents Should Visit White House,” *Bloomberg*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-07-11/taiwan-candidate-says-its-presidents-should-visit-white-house>

<sup>52</sup> Yang, Sheng and Yuqing Zhang, “Lai walks dangerous tightrope in pushing Taiwan separatism with US connivance,” *The Global Times*, August 16, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296417.shtml>; Liu, Xuanzun, “Latest US plan to fund arms to Taiwan island, military aid further endanger peace in the Taiwan Straits,” *The Global Times*, July 30, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1295300.shtml>.

<sup>53</sup> Such argument would posit that a combination of factors — including the CCP leadership’s sense of urgency that the window of opportunity to seize Taiwan is closing soon due to China’s declining economy, a motivation to divert the Chinese public’s attention away from domestic problems, and Xi Jinping’s political ambition to consolidate a fourth presidential term — may drive irrational calculations, leading to an abrupt decision to invade Taiwan.

<sup>54</sup> Nakamura, Ryo, “U.S. general predicts China conflict over Taiwan in 2025,” *Nikkei Asia*, January 29, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Taiwan-tensions/U.S.-general-predicts-China-conflict-over-Taiwan-in-2025>.

<sup>55</sup> Tanaka, Miya, “Ex-U.S. Indo-Pacific commander sticks to 2027 window on Taiwan attack,” *Kyodo News*, January 23, 2023, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/01/018a26a02962-ex-us-indo-pacific-commander-sticks-to-2027-window-on-taiwan-attack.html>.

scenario is probably the least likely of the three considered here, at least over the next several years, for at least three reasons.

First, as many Taiwan war simulations have shown, the Chinese military has yet to attain the level of capability that would offer a high level of confidence in successfully seizing or coercing Taiwan and deterring U.S. intervention.<sup>56</sup>

*The Chinese military has yet to attain the level of capability that would offer a high level of confidence in successfully seizing or coercing Taiwan and deterring U.S. intervention.*

Second, absent a clear, major, unprecedented provocation by the United States and Taiwan that essentially served to back Beijing into a corner, China's leaders would be hard-pressed to conclude that the risks involved in attempting to seize or compel Taiwan by force were less than those resulting from continued efforts to build up China's capabilities and pull Taiwan closer to the mainland through economic and other means.

Third, global reaction to an unprovoked, bloody attack on Taiwan or a determined effort to force Taiwan into submission (given the fact that such an action would also likely result in conflict) would be very significant, severely damaging Beijing's international reputation and economic vitality. If Beijing has drawn a lesson from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has likely been reminded of the extremely high political, military, and economic costs incurred by invading Taiwan.

---

<sup>56</sup> Heginbotham, Eric, Mark F. Cancian, and Matthew Cancian, "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 9, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>; Odell, Rachel Esplin et al., "Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, June 22, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/#executive-summary>.

## U.S. abrogation of the One China policy

The breakdown of the existing political framework in the Taiwan Strait – and a consequent conflict – could also occur due to a strategically and politically motivated U.S. decision to discard its long-standing One China Policy explicitly or implicitly in favor of an unambiguous commitment to Taiwan as a de facto or formal security ally.

Such a course of action could occur in light of worsening U.S.–China bilateral relations and strategic rivalry, and further deterioration in cross–Strait relations accompanying increased Chinese pressure and military coercion on Taiwan.

A continued intensification of the U.S.–China strategic competition could reinforce the perception among U.S. policymakers that Taiwan is a crucial partner that must be kept separated from China – for its supposedly geographically critical location within the first island chain essential to U.S. military posture in the Asia–Pacific and also for its top-notch semiconductor industry; if that industry were absorbed by China, the argument goes, U.S. technological competitiveness would be severely undermined.<sup>57</sup> In addition, continued Chinese military, political, and economic coercion of Taiwan could motivate Washington to elevate ties with Taipei and demonstrate stronger resolve against Beijing.

Meanwhile, in the upcoming 2024 U.S. presidential election, most – if not all – the candidates will almost certainly strike hyper-hawkish stances toward China to build domestic support and defend against accusations of weakness in conducting foreign policy, with some likely calling for strategic clarity and a heavy emphasis on deterrence over reassurance toward Beijing regarding the Taiwan issue. The most recent Republican presidential debate showed a glimpse of this.<sup>58</sup>

Growing strategic and domestic political appeals for anti-China policies, combined with the underlying U.S. tendencies in crisis interactions outlined in the “drivers of escalation”

---

<sup>57</sup> Colby. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*.

<sup>58</sup> Sinha, Urja, “How would GOP candidates respond if China invaded Taiwan?” *NewsNation*, December 7, 2023, <https://www.newsnationnow.com/politics/debates/gop-candidates-china-taiwan/>.

section above (e.g., taking a deeply ideological, zero-sum approach in assessing threats, etc.), could eventually drive a future U.S. administration toward scrapping the One China policy. Given the high stakes involved in the Taiwan issue, deepening worst-case suspicions between Washington and Beijing could prompt a future U.S. president to decide that Washington must replace the One China policy with an unambiguous defense commitment to Taiwan that removes any doubt as to the level of resolve and capability of the United States in deterring China from using force against the island.

*The shift from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity and the adoption of a de facto One China, One Taiwan policy would virtually ensure a severe escalatory response from Beijing.*

The shift from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity and the adoption of a de facto – if not explicit – One China, One Taiwan policy would virtually ensure a severe escalatory response from Beijing, given the deep connection between the Taiwan issue and the legitimacy and stability of the Chinese government. Beijing would likely conclude that such U.S. actions constituted an unambiguous confirmation of Washington’s suspected intention to permanently separate Taiwan from China for strategic and political reasons. No Chinese government could accept such an outcome and would use whatever means necessary to attempt to prevent it. Hence, Beijing would almost certainly send clear signals of military, economic, and political resolve, including the threat of war, to compel Washington to reverse course or might simply attempt to seize Taiwan outright. In such a situation, many of the adverse domestic features, mindsets, and assumptions on both sides would come into play, guaranteeing severe escalation.

## Excessive deterrence and inadvertent escalation

Another path to a crisis and conflict over Taiwan could result from a major escalation of deterrence signaling on both sides that was viewed as the crossing of an unacceptable red line, leading to an escalatory spiral.<sup>59</sup> The initial inciting incident could take many forms on the U.S. and Taiwan sides – including Taiwan’s president making an official visit to Washington; an attempt by a Taiwan president to alter the ROC constitution or pass a referendum legally confirming Taiwan’s independence; repeated visits to Taiwan by U.S. warships; large-scale joint U.S.–Taiwan military exercises, or the deployment of U.S. combat forces to the island.

On China’s side, major escalation of deterrence signaling could be the seizure of a small, inhabited, or uninhabited offshore island under Taiwan’s control; missile strikes on uninhabited Taiwan territory; shooting down or sinking Taiwan aircraft or ships; or an effort at a limited, symbolic blockade intended to intimidate commercial shipping companies and the Taiwan public.

Any of these actions, or even a threat to undertake them, could produce an extreme response from the other side, with little effort taken to clearly convey a willingness to limit escalation, offer an offramp, or otherwise compromise and back down in response to any signal of restraint from the other side. Such a crisis could easily result in an escalatory tit-for-tat effort to show a solid refusal to compromise or relent, eventually producing a “commitment trap” of public shows of resolve from which it is virtually impossible politically to retreat, thereby preventing any effort to defuse the situation. In this process, as in the previous two scenarios, domestic and other pressures and characteristics on both sides could thus reinforce inflexibility and undermine any efforts to reach mutual understandings that could defuse the intensifying crisis.

---

<sup>59</sup> Goldstein, Avery, “First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.–China Relations,” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 49–89, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00114](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00114).

*Domestic and other pressures and characteristics on both sides could reinforce inflexibility and undermine any efforts to reach mutual understandings that could defuse the intensifying crisis.*

Moreover, the level of danger involved in such an interaction would increase even more if any loss of life were to occur due to ships colliding or other accidents. Any such deaths would significantly raise the stakes for the side experiencing the loss, doubtless increasing domestic pressure to mete out some form of punishment to the opponent or, at the very least, not relent in achieving the nation's stated goals. Such a situation, combined with a commitment trap, could make it extremely difficult to reach any compromise-based resolution of the deepening crisis.

## **Conclusion**

Existing dynamics and features across a wide range of variables currently operating in the United States, China, and Taiwan indicate the significant possibility of a severe U.S.–China crisis over Taiwan, and, under some circumstances, an eventual military conflict. Moreover, as seen above, in some instances, such a disaster could occur under conditions in which each side believed it was taking actions intended to stabilize the situation or prevent escalation through intensifying signals of resolve while giving little attention to credible signals of reassurance.

Averting such an outcome will require dedicated efforts to better understand the many complex factors driving toward a Taiwan crisis and the specific actions that could remove or ameliorate them. Both sides must recognize that they hold beliefs and attitudes and are undertaking actions that make crisis and conflict more likely. Leaders on both sides need to be educated about these factors and the adversely interactive nature of their behavior and beliefs. Simply having “open lines of communication” and a



mutual desire to avert conflict, or a rote repetition of support for One China and peaceful unification, will not resolve or even appreciably moderate the dangers faced.

*There is no viable alternative to the original Sino–American understanding reached at the time of normalization regarding One China and peaceful unification that can maintain peace across the Taiwan Strait.*

Stepping back from the current set of mutually reinforcing, destabilizing beliefs and practices will require restoring a deeper mutual understanding concerning the Taiwan issue. Such an understanding should include a clear recognition that there is no viable alternative to the original Sino–American understanding reached at the time of normalization regarding One China and peaceful unification that can maintain peace across the Taiwan Strait. Both sides need to do more to increase the credibility of their policies supporting this understanding.

In addition, as a first step toward averting and, if necessary, successfully managing a Taiwan crisis, the two leaderships in Washington and Beijing must put in place an expanded and deepened set of crisis dialogues and mechanisms. Such an effort must extend well beyond a simple “hotline” for military to military communication concerning the handling of various possible types of military incidents at sea or in the air, which the United States and China agreed to resume at their November 2023 San Francisco summit.<sup>60</sup> Sufficient U.S.–China crisis management mechanisms should involve not only the two militaries, but also civilian officials that should be well–integrated with a set of dialogues at the Track Two level.

---

<sup>60</sup> Baldor, Lolita C, “Biden and Xi agree to restore some military-to-military communications between the US and China.” AP News, November 16, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/us-china-military-relations-339980a0d494bcde92905411838808a4>; Stewart, Phil and Doina Chiacu, “US, China top military officials speak for first time in over a year,” Reuters, December 22, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-china-top-military-officials-spoke-thursday-pentagon-statement-2023-12-21/>.

Moreover, such interactions should address both national level issues relating to the strategy and policy aspects of crisis prevention and management, and primarily defense establishment prerogatives and responsibilities, but with some civilian input. The latter would focus mainly on crisis management mechanisms, and the former on risk reduction and policy solutions.

*Sufficient U.S.–China crisis management mechanisms should involve not only the two militaries, but also civilian officials that should be well–integrated with a set of dialogues at the Track Two level.*

Future Quincy Institute work will focus on laying out the nature of such in–depth crisis management negotiations in detail.

## About the Authors

**Michael Swaine** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Quincy Institute and one of the most prominent American scholars of Chinese security studies. He comes to QI from Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he worked for nearly twenty years as a senior fellow specializing in Chinese defense and foreign policy, U.S.-China relations, and East Asian international relations. Swaine served as a senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation.

Swaine has authored and edited more than a dozen books and monographs, including *Remaining Aligned on the Challenges Facing Taiwan* (with Ryo Sahashi; 2019), *Conflict and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Strategic Net Assessment* (with Nicholas Eberstadt et al; 2015) and many journal articles and book chapters.

**James Park** is a Junior Research Fellow at the Quincy Institute's East Asia Program. His research interests include South Korean foreign policy and domestic politics, Chinese security issues, and U.S. policy vis-à-vis East Asia. He has written for *The Diplomat*, *The National Interest*, *Responsible Statecraft*, and *Geopolitical Monitor* on various Korean and Chinese affairs. Park received a master's in Asian Studies at George Washington University, as well a master's in International Politics and Chinese Studies at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center, and a B.A. in Global Studies with a minor in Mandarin Chinese from Arizona State University.

## About the Quincy Institute

QUINCY BRIEFS are produced by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a nonpartisan, action-oriented think tank founded in 2019 to promote ideas to move U.S. foreign policy away from endless war and toward vigorous diplomacy in the pursuit of international peace. © 2022 by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. All rights reserved.

QI is committed to improving the standards for think tank transparency and potential conflict-of-interest avoidance. QI's conflict-of-interest policy can be viewed at [quincyinst.org/coi](https://quincyinst.org/coi) and its list of donors is at [quincyinst.org/about](https://quincyinst.org/about).

CONTACT: Jessica Rosenblum  
Director of Communications  
Email: [rosenblum@quincyinst.org](mailto:rosenblum@quincyinst.org)  
Tel: 202 800 4662