

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 005/2022 dated 10 February 2022

A Taipei Moment Next?

Linbin Wang and Jonghyuk Lee



US Navy and Coast Guard vessels in routine transit through the Taiwan Straits. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

SYNOPSIS

A strategic balance has prevailed across the Taiwan Strait thus far owing to the

respective interests of the United States, China and Taiwan. Washington aims to use the Taiwan card to prop up the hub-and-spokes security order it has established in the Indo-Pacific region and thereby curb China's rise. Beijing needs to show the world its ability to avoid a war across the strait in achieving reunification. Taipei knows well that its interests are best served through its "salami slicing" approach to de facto independence rather than through an outright declaration. The biggest threat to this equilibrium is Xi Jinping's personal aspiration to establish his historical legacy through the "motherland's reunification."

COMMENTARY

The present is not simply a mirror of the past, but there are always similarities between them. This observation that Henry Kissinger drew from the ancient Greek historian Thucydides implies that the state of relations between the United States and China today is not simply a duplication of the Cold War. But the recent Chinese narrative on "a rising East and a declining West" has ignited another round of debates on whether China's momentum will result in confrontation with the United States. Now that China has eroded Hong Kong's freedoms by imposing its sham election system onto the territory, the world is wondering whether Taiwan will be its next target.

One thing is certain though. As the focal point of the Beijing-Taipei-Washington three-way game, Taiwan, the 36,000-square-kilometre island inhabited by 24 million people, is the most vulnerable flashpoint that could bring the United States and China to the brink of war. The incursions of Chinese warplanes into Taiwanese airspace and massive amphibious landing exercises conducted by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have been "normalised" since 2016. In response, the United States has sent warships and frigates through the Taiwan Strait to signal its opposition to Beijing's efforts to [unilaterally change the status quo](#). Consequently, a new wave of apprehension concerning the future of what *The Economist* calls "[the most dangerous place on Earth](#)" has sprung up both inside and outside the island.

At present, there are several projected timelines for Taiwan's possible reunification with China. [According to Chiu Kuo-cheng, Taiwan's defence minister, China will be "fully capable" of invading Taiwan in 2025.](#) The Pentagon in its [Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021](#) projected that China might resort to force to "compel Taiwanese leaders to the negotiation table" when the [PLA's integrated modernisation is achieved by 2027](#). There are more obscure projections by other stakeholders. For example, [China's national transportation network plan](#) for 2021 to 2035 has on its agenda the construction of a high-speed train line from Fuzhou to Taipei. Moreover, 2049 is the deadline for the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" set by the Communist Party of China (CPC) at its 19th party congress, the prerequisite of which is the achievement of "[the motherland's reunification](#)".

Upgraded and Updated "Strategic Ambiguity"

When asked twice whether the United States would come to Taiwan's defence in case of a Chinese offensive against Taiwan, US President Joe Biden on 21 October last year promised to defend the self-governing island by remarking, "[Yes, we have a commitment to do that.](#)" But soon afterwards, the White House urgently clarified that

there would be no change to [Washington's one-China policy](#). It is believed that America's long-standing policy of "strategic ambiguity" will continue, but Washington will display a higher profile in responding to Beijing's assertive actions against Taiwan.

Strategic ambiguity is the one stone that Washington utilises to kill two birds. In other words, it is a "[dual deterrence](#)" directed both at Beijing and Taipei. By opposing both a Chinese offensive against Taiwan and an official declaration of independence by Taiwan, the US has managed to sustain peace across the Taiwan Strait and keep its relations with both sides on an even keel without being dragged into war. Such a strategy best serves US national interests. As noted earlier, "upgrading" and "updating" of Washington's strategic ambiguity policy is already under way. Shortly after President Biden's blunder, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken blatantly [urged](#) all UN member states to support Taiwan's participation within the UN system. Besides, the US Congress has approved 12 different arms sales requests to Taiwan, and several batches of US high-level officials have visited Taiwan since 2016.

Washington is not alone in signalling its willingness to stand up for Taiwan. "[A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-US alliance](#)", said former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last December. Similarly, a month earlier, Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton commented that for Canberra not to join the United States in defending Taiwan was "[inconceivable](#)". These statements sound as if the West has shifted to strategic clarity, but since they are merely oral statements, they are precisely the manifestation of an upgraded version of strategic ambiguity. Washington's adjustment of strategic ambiguity is driven by heightened Chinese assertiveness in the region.

China's Approach

"National reunification by peaceful means best serves the interests of the Chinese nation as a whole, including our compatriots in Taiwan", said President Xi Jinping in his [address](#) commemorating the 110th anniversary of the 1911 Revolution last October. This declaration echoed the attitude conveyed in his [speech](#) on 2 January 2019 marking the 40th anniversary of the *Message to Compatriots in Taiwan*, issued by the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress. In that speech, Xi had offered five proposals for cross-strait integration, mostly in the economic arena. Consequently, China has implemented [26 new incentives](#) to induce the Taiwanese to do business on the mainland.

On the flip side, China has continued wielding the stick. Apart from military deterrence, China has constrained Taiwan's international involvement and deprived it of eight diplomatic allies since 2016.

Beijing's drumbeat against Taiwan has stirred nationalistic sentiments among the Chinese public. Public opinion supporting aggression against Taiwan has largely soared, encouraged by the authorities' acquiescence. In a 2018 poll by the Chinese internet forum BBS-Tianya, 96% of the netizens polled agreed that the re-election of Tsai Ing-wen as president of Taiwan would expedite [China's use of force](#).

Xi's Whims: The Key Variable?

By incorporating “Xi Jinping Thought” into China’s constitution and abolishing term limits on the presidency, strongman politics has been revived in the country lately. The just-concluded sixth plenum of the CPC validates this assessment. According to the [communiqué](#) issued at the end of the plenum, China has ushered in a great leap from “standing up under Mao, getting rich under Deng and becoming strong under Xi”. Aside from repeating the clichéd “1992 consensus” and “opposing Taiwan independence”, the communiqué carries for the first time a reference to “opposing foreign interference” and “maintaining the initiative and ability of cross-straits relations” — language included at Xi’s behest.

However, a strongman regime means there is only one person to blame if things should go wrong. If Xi decides to go to war to cater to the popular will, not only could 40 years of China’s progress under its reform and opening policies be undone, but the CPC’s promise on its 100th anniversary in 2021 to strive for China’s stability, prosperity and growing status in the world could also turn out to be a castle in the air. In such a scenario, Xi’s legitimacy will undoubtedly be questioned. Xi could choose to wait until the odds are very much in China’s favour. But how long will it take before such a “strategic opportunity” emerges? As a [commentary in *The New Zurich Times* indicates](#), in a system tailored around Xi, his willingness to venture into warfare is the key variable in the Taiwan issue from now on.

In fact, the respective intentions of all three players are clear in this strategic triangle. Washington aims to maximise the “Taiwan card” to contain China’s rise without being dragged into a war with Beijing by Taipei and experiencing a “domino effect” on its hub-and-spokes security order in the Indo-Pacific. As for Taipei, it wishes to avoid provoking Beijing into launching a retaliatory strike and risking “betrayal” by Washington at a time when its “salami slicing tactic” towards *de jure* independence seems to be going well. Beijing, for its part, wishes to convince the world that it is capable of avoiding war across the Taiwan Strait before the “real rejuvenation”.

However, an unexpected total war caused by an accidental chain of incidents is likely to transform the three parties’ preferred approaches into wishful thinking and force them to seek victory at all costs. But can the three afford the political cost of warfare, that is, will their nationals continue to support such a war if it becomes prolonged? What form will Taiwan’s reunification take then? Will the US and other regional countries intervene in a likely war? Or will the status quo across the strait remain? Only time will tell.

Jonghyuk LEE is an Assistant Professor in the China Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), RSIS. Linbin WANG is a student in the Master of Science (Asian Studies) programme at RSIS.