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Taiwan

Between China's Isolation Efforts and US Strategic Ambiguity

Strategic Paper No. 26

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The Strategic Studies Unit

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Introduction

Taiwan lies between China's eastern seaboard and the Pacific Ocean, within a chain of islands commonly referred to as the First Island Chain, which extends from Japan in the north through Taiwan to the Philippines in the south. Taiwan occupies a strategically significant position at the junction of the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. It is also embedded within a broader US-led maritime security architecture in the Western Pacific, consisting of a network of alliances and military installations stretching from Japan and South Korea to Guam and Australia. In this context, Taiwan represents a structural constraint on China's maritime access to the Pacific Ocean in the event of a military confrontation with the United States. From the perspective of US strategy, the island functions as a forward position that supports American presence in the region and contributes to shaping China's operational environment in its adjacent seas. Accordingly, the Taiwan issue remains a central point of tension closely tied to broader Sino-American competition over the international order.

Examining tensions surrounding Taiwan has become ever more salient amid accelerating geopolitical developments in the region. In March 2025, renewed attention was directed to China's Anti-Secession Law on the twentieth anniversary of its enactment. Promulgated two decades earlier, the law authorizes the use of force to prevent Taiwan's formal declaration of independence. Its relevance has intensified in the context of sustained Chinese military activity, including large-scale exercises conducted over the past three years that have rehearsed scenarios involving a comprehensive blockade of the island, as well as drills held off Taiwan's southwestern coast in February 2025.¹ These activities were interpreted by authorities in Taipei as a significant escalation and a potential threat to regional stability.

In this context, China has continued to expand its military capabilities, including a 7.2 percent increase in its defence budget for 2025,² reflecting a sustained commitment to advancing its strategic objectives, particularly with respect to Taiwan. Despite this apparent level of preparation, considerable uncertainty remains regarding the timing and modalities of any potential use of force, especially in light of divergent assessments of China's capacity to undertake a large-scale military operation. Taiwanese authorities stated in 2021 that China might acquire the requisite capabilities for an invasion by 2025, whereas US assessments have estimated that such a possibility could occur by 2027, coinciding with the centenary of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the convening of the twenty-first National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, a moment at which President Xi Jinping could signal substantive progress on the Taiwan question.³

1 Yimou Lee et al., "Taiwan Condemns China for 'shooting' Drills off Taiwanese Coast," *Reuters*, 26/2/2025, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zR7q>

2 Laurie Chen & Greg Torode, "China Maintains Defence Spending Increase at 7.2% amid Roiling Geopolitical Tensions," *Reuters*, 5/3/2025, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQXB>

3 Gisela Grieger, "China's Assertive Foreign Policy and Taiwan Unification Ambitions," European Union, Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services, 26/7/2023, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3v37x2vy>

Although the US has formally adhered to a policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan, while providing unofficial political and military support, its posture under President Donald Trump has introduced additional uncertainty. When asked about the prospect of China using force to take control of Taiwan, Trump declined to comment directly, emphasizing instead the importance of maintaining a positive economic and political relationship with Beijing.⁴ Such statements have contributed to the ongoing debate regarding the likely contours of a US response and the extent of Washington's commitment to Taiwan's defence in the years ahead.

These developments call for a careful and multidimensional analytical approach to the Taiwan issue, which constitutes the central objective of this paper. The significance of a potential confrontation lies in its capacity to reshape key features of the contemporary international order. While recent years have witnessed a prominent example of geopolitical conflict in Ukraine, the Taiwan question presents a more complex and far-reaching challenge. This complexity derives from the US' characterization of China as a primary global competitor, the dense interdependence of economic and military interests, and the centrality of the US to the crisis, given its deep strategic involvement in the security of the Pacific region. As a result, any escalation in the Taiwan conflict would not be limited to the immediate parties but would carry broader implications for the global balance of power.

This paper analyses the Taiwan crisis as a central arena of geopolitical rivalry between China and the US, through a systematic examination of its historical, political, military, and economic dimensions, as well as the factors shaping regional and international power relations. It begins by outlining the historical origins of the dispute between Taiwan and mainland China, tracing the emergence of two competing political authorities advancing distinct claims to legitimacy and sovereignty. The analysis then turns to Chinese policies aimed at isolating Taiwan, focusing on the use of economic and diplomatic instruments to restrict its international space and limit its external engagement. The paper subsequently examines Taiwan's perspective and its strategies for managing and countering Chinese pressure, assessing its ability to maintain *de facto* independence amid mounting strategic constraints. These sections incorporate a comparative evaluation of the military capabilities of both sides, underscoring the asymmetry in their respective power positions. The analysis then shifts to US and broader Western involvement, exploring how Taiwan has come to occupy a central position in the geopolitical competition between Beijing and Washington, and assessing the implications of the US policy of strategic ambiguity for the trajectory of the crisis. The conclusion synthesizes the paper's principal findings and outlines the most plausible future scenarios, while identifying the factors that have thus far limited the likelihood of a direct Chinese military intervention against Taiwan.

Roots of the Crisis

The conflict between China and Taiwan is prolonged. Relations between the two parties have undergone successive periods of strain.⁵ In 1895, following the First Sino-Japanese War, the Qing

4 Trevor Hunnicutt, "Trump Declines to Answer Question about China and Taiwan," *Reuters*, 27/2/2025, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRK5>

5 The State Council the People's Republic of China, Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council PRC, "Basic Facts about Taiwan," 28/7/2020, accessed on 15/2/2025, at: <https://rb.gy/o0jxgj>



Dynasty was compelled to cede Taiwan to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki.⁶ Simultaneously, the collapse of the Qing Dynasty has led to the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen. This transformation introduced additional layers of complexity into cross-strait relations, particularly as Taiwan remained under Japanese colonial rule.⁷

Following the end of the Second World War, China regained control over Taiwan after the Cairo Declaration of 1943, in which the US, Britain, and China agreed that territories occupied by Japan would be returned to China.⁸ This arrangement was reaffirmed at the Potsdam Conference in 1945, thereby placing Taiwan formally under Chinese sovereignty.⁹ However, developments within China shortly altered the political landscape. In 1949, the Chinese Civil War between the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists led by Mao Zedong ended with the Communist victory and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Nationalists subsequently retreated to Taiwan, where they established the government of the Republic of China (ROC)¹⁰ with the support of the US. The latter viewed the island as a strategic ally in containing the spread of communism, particularly during the Korean War (1950-1953).¹¹ In contrast, the People's Republic of China considered Taiwan as an inseparable part of its territory and pledged to reunify it, even if this required the use of force.¹² Nevertheless, Beijing was unable to achieve this objective due to sustained US support for Taiwan, including the signing of the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty in 1954.¹³

By the late 1960s, Washington recognized the importance of improving bilateral relations with Beijing as part of its effort to extricate itself from the Vietnam War.¹⁴ In 1971, Beijing replaced Taipei as China's representative at the United Nations (UN).¹⁵ In 1979, the US formally recognized the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government of China.¹⁶ Accordingly, Washington ended its mutual defence treaty with Taiwan while sustaining unofficial relations.¹⁷

6 Susan M. Gordon, Michael G. Mullen & David Sacks, "US-Taiwan Relations in a New Era: Responding to a More Assertive China," Council on Foreign Relations, Independent Task Force Report no. 81 (June 2023), accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQLf>

7 Ibid.

8 Y. Frank Chiang, "One-China Policy and Taiwan," *Fordham International Law Journal*, vol. 28, no. 1 (January 2004), p. 14, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQjV>

9 Gordon, Mullen & Sacks, p. 11.

10 "The Chinese Civil War: Why did the Fighting between the Kuomintang and Chinese Communist Party happen?" The National Archives, accessed on 26/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQxm>

11 Qishi Huang, "The Outbreak of the Korean War and the Change in US-Taiwan Relations," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 8 (2023), pp. 363–364.

12 Chiang, pp. 66–67.

13 Scott L. Kastner, "Is the Taiwan Strait Still a Flash Point? Rethinking the Prospects for Armed Conflict between China and Taiwan," *International Security*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2015), p. 56.

14 Laurent Borzillo, "Taiwan and the 'New Cold War,'" *Network for Strategic Analysis (NSA)*, 29/8/ 2022, p. 85, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://rb.gy/31c93r>

15 United Nations, General Assembly, "Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations," A/RES/2758, 25/10/1971, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://rb.gy/815iw8>

16 "Address by President Carter to the Nation," *Office of The Historian*, 15/12/1978, accessed on 11/1/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/y68ftdvn>

17 Winberg Chai, "Relations between the Chinese Mainland and Taiwan: Overview and Chronology," *Asian Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1999), p. 61.



China sought to reduce tensions by proposing a framework for reunification, in 1982, under the formula of "One Country, Two Systems," which was later implemented in Hong Kong and Macau. However, this proposal was met with strong opposition from Taiwan's leadership who perceived it as a threat to the island's democracy and its autonomy.¹⁸ During this period, China was primarily focused on achieving rapid economic growth through the reform policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping contributing to a relative stabilization of cross-strait relations.¹⁹ Tensions reemerged in the 1990s in the context of Taiwan's democratic transition. The island's first direct presidential election in 1996 prompted strong opposition from Beijing, which interpreted the move as a step toward the institutionalization of political separation from the mainland.²⁰ In response, China carried out large-scale military exercises around the Taiwan Strait, while the US deployed aircraft carriers to the region in an effort to deter further escalation.²¹

In 2016, the new Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen adopted more assertive and independence-leaning positions. She rejected the "One Country, Two Systems" framework and pointed to the failure of this system in Hong Kong. Beijing intensified its pressure on the island.²² On the other hand, Washington reinforced its support for Taiwan by reaffirming its commitment to the island's security and significantly increasing sales of advanced weaponry.

China's Policies toward Taiwan

China has accorded particular importance to its policy toward Taiwan by adopting several measures to achieve the island's integration with the mainland:

1. Considering Taiwan a Matter of National Dignity

China's approach to the Taiwan issue is based on two premises. Firstly, the concept of "national dignity" by which China perceives Taiwan as an inseparable part of its identity. Successive Chinese governments have indeed pursued a lot of efforts to entrench this perception domestically and internationally.²³ Secondly, Beijing has been adopting a very cautious and consistent strategy to recover Taiwan, considering its unification inevitable.²⁴ Moreover, China's stance has been translated into its political and economic relations worldwide, actively promoting the narrative that the Taiwan incorporation is a national issue rather than a regional dispute.

¹⁸ Ja Ian Chong, "The Many 'One Chinas': Multiple Approaches to Taiwan and China," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9/2/2023, accessed on 26/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2v2688jj>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Chai, pp. 74 - 75.

²¹ Heba Allah Mohsen Abu Al-Wafa Al-Bidaya, "Sino-Taiwan Relations in the Light of Democratic Peace Theory 1949-2023," *Journal of Financial and Commercial Research*, vol. 25, no. 2 (April 2024), pp. 146 - 182.

²² Ibid., pp. 160 - 161.

²³ Shiping Zheng, "Making Sense of the Conflict between Mainland China and Taiwan," in: Vendulka Kubalkova (ed.), *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 204.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 209-210, 218.



The policy of incorporating Taiwan emerged with the establishment of the PRC under Mao Zedong in 1949. The loss of Taiwan is regarded as a loss at the very core of communist ideology,²⁵ and as an "unresolved issue" from which China will not retreat, regardless of the cost.²⁶ Therefore, political and economic considerations are secondary to the goal of reunifying Taiwan with the mainland and may be sacrificed to achieve it. Considering this, China has demonstrated a willingness to support substantial economic costs to advance its national goal.²⁷

The concept of "national dignity" refers to territorial unity, which remains incomplete without full sovereignty over Taiwan and the consolidation of the One China policy. According to the Foreign Minister Wang Yi, this policy serves as the benchmark by which China determines its international partners.²⁸ The One China policy is rooted in the history of colonialism and foreign interventions from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, commonly described as the "Century of Humiliation".²⁹ This discourse has been adopted to reconstruct China's historical narrative and to entrench the idea that Taiwan was separated from China as a result of Western intervention,³⁰ with Japan contributing to the deprivation of China's sovereign rights over the island. With this framing, Taiwan's separation symbolizes the continuation of historical humiliation, thereby justifying the ongoing Chinese efforts toward reunification.³¹

China has consistently promoted a narrative centred on "national dignity" since assuming a seat at the UN. Thereafter, it has characterized the Taiwan issue as an internal Chinese matter to be resolved domestically and peacefully without any external intervention.³² It has adopted a pragmatic approach through diplomatic outreach and leveraging its industrial development to become a regional and global economic power. In addition, it advanced the One China policy in the international community to isolate Taiwan internationally. At the same time, it promoted the idea of "peaceful rise" as a diplomatic tool to improve its international image and build its credibility as a state that respects the sovereignty

²⁵ Robert A. Madsen, "The Struggle for Sovereignty between China and Taiwan," in: Stephen D. Krasner (ed.), *Problematic Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 150.

²⁶ Susan V. Lawrence & Wayne M. Morrison, "Taiwan: Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, 30/10/2017, p. 38, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mvc7pdbt>

²⁷ Balazs Szanto, "The Insecurity of Taiwan: The Dangers of a Coercive Campaign," *Defence & Security Analysis*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2025), p. 169.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Riding the Trend of the Times with a Strong Sense of Responsibility," 17/12/2024, accessed on 23/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQYZ>

²⁹ Ghazlan Mahmoud Abdel Aziz, "al-ṣu'ūd al-ṣīnī wa-l-āthār al-mutarattiba 'alā nizā'āt baḥr al-ṣīn al-janūbī," *Journal of the Faculty of Economics and Political Science*, vol. 21, no. 4 (October 2020).

³⁰ William A. Callahan, "National InUpdated December 17 Securities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives*, vol. 29, no. 2 (March 2004), pp. 204 - 205.

³¹ Alison A. Kaufman, "The Century of Humiliation and China's National Narratives," Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on China's Narratives Regarding National Security Policy (March 2011), pp. 5 - 6.

³² Taiwan Affairs Office & The Information Office of the State Council, "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," accessed on 24/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/5xnkeukr>

of others and opposes interference in their internal affairs.³³ This notion has been used to compel other states to respect China's own internal affairs, including non-interference in the Taiwan issue.

2. Policy of Isolating Taiwan

The Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933) constitutes a key reference treaty in international law for determining how a political entity qualifies as a state. According to its first article, four criteria must be satisfied: a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the ability to engage in diplomatic relations with other states.³⁴ Therefore, Taiwan may be considered a sovereign state under the Declarative Theory, whereby any political entity becomes a state once it fulfils the Montevideo criteria, and recognition by other states is simply declaratory.³⁵ However, the contemporary international system is more complex. Under the Constitutive Theory, diplomatic recognition and membership in the UN are essential for an entity to achieve statehood.³⁶

Since its establishment, the PRC has sought to attract allies and secure diplomatic recognition to support its policy. It has relied on the "Anaconda Strategy," which aims to gradually eliminate diplomatic recognition of Taiwan by offering economic incentives to states that shift their stance in favour of China.³⁷ This approach has enabled China to put pressure on Taiwan and isolate it politically by preventing its participation in international institutions and pressuring other governments to close Taiwan's representative offices in their countries.³⁸ As a result, Taiwan is not a member of the UN, and the number of states that formally recognize it has declined to twelve, most of them relatively small states.

China has also applied various means to influence the political positions of states, relying on its economic leverage and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects,³⁹ which combined investments in land and maritime routes and associated infrastructure worldwide are estimated at around four trillion US dollars.⁴⁰ Through these projects, China offers economic incentives such as direct financial assistance, tax exemptions, technology transfer, and joint development projects. For instance, Nicaragua received

33 Zhengyi Zhang, "War of Narratives: A Concentric Dissection of China's Taiwan Policy," *Groundings Undergraduate Journal*, vol. 15 (2024), pp. 133–134.

34 Jan Klabbers, *International Law Documents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 2 - 4.

35 David J. Scheffer, "Does Taiwan Have the Right of Self-Defence?" Council on Foreign Relations, 23/11/2021, accessed on 24/11/2024, at: <https://rb.gy/ru1u4m>

36 Ibid.

37 Thomas J. Shattuck, "The Race to Zero? China's Poaching of Taiwan's Diplomatic Allies," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, vol. 64, no. 2 (January 2020), p. 334.

38 June Teufel Dreyer, "The Big Squeeze: Beijing's Anaconda Strategy to Force Taiwan to Surrender," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 13/8/2018, accessed on 26/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc4c4b3c>

39 Scott L. Kastner & Margaret M. Pearson, "Exploring the Parameters of China's Economic Influence," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March 2021), p. 18.

40 "The Belt and Road Initiative," *Silk Road Briefing*, accessed on 31/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3rCrfrj>



an interest-free loan of US\$10 million after establishing diplomatic relations with China.⁴¹ As part of its diplomatic framework, China expects states that recognize its reunification discourse to decline official visits from senior Taiwanese officials and to end formal relations with Taipei.⁴²

China's efforts to isolate Taiwan extend beyond mere external economic diplomacy. It has also opened channels for investment with Taiwan itself in order to deepen its influence indirectly. For instance, the "1992 Consensus" is a prerequisite for initiating cooperation protocols and achieving shared economic interests, drawing on the One China principle within the framework of "one China, different interpretations".⁴³ This led to the establishment of the Straits Exchange Foundation in 1990 and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits in 1991, as well as the expansion of trade, investment, and technological exchange between the two sides.⁴⁴ China has since become Taiwan's first trading partner with approximately 40 percent of its exportations,⁴⁵ in addition to expanded cultural exchanges, academic programs, and tourism agreements. Despite Taiwan's policy of "rebalancing trade relations" through diversification toward Southeast Asia, the US, and Europe, the island continues to struggle to identify substitutes that can replace the scale of the Chinese market. Consequently, China uses economic interdependence as a political instrument and a source of influence within Taiwan to mobilize public opinion in favour of reunification.

China also seeks to isolate Taiwan in practical terms. Taiwan's geographic location and the nature of its borders as an island render it vulnerable to isolation if China enables either blockade or quarantine. These differ in their military and legal implications. A blockade constitutes an illegal military intervention aimed at occupation, involving the encirclement of part or all of Taiwan by the PLA, including long-range strategic strikes within Taiwan and the deployment of naval mines in surrounding waters. A blockade aims to isolate Taiwan, obstructing the passage of supplies or assistance by land or sea. This approach weakens Taiwan's position and facilitates negotiations for its recovery, with the lifting of the blockade becoming a part of the negotiation process.⁴⁶

A quarantine, by contrast, would be led by law enforcement rather than the military, despite the risk of unintended escalation. Its purpose is the control of maritime or air navigation within a designated area. In Taiwan's case, a quarantine would aim to impose a system of oversight on its trade while allowing the continued flow of essential goods and preventing the inflow of weapons

⁴¹ Chien-Min Chao & Chih-Chia Hsu, "China Isolates Taiwan," in: Friedman Edward (ed.). *China's Rise, Taiwan's Dilemma's and International Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴² Ibid., p. 50.

⁴³ "The 1992 Consensus" refers to the implicit political formula agreed upon by both sides to express their insistence on "one China with different interpretations".

⁴⁴ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "Beijing's Policy towards President Tsai Ying-Wen and the Future of Cross-Strait Relations Asia Inquiry: A Continental Analysis," *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2017), p. 59.

⁴⁵ Billy Stampfl, "Diversifying Trade: Where Taiwan Stands Today, and Where It Should Go Tomorrow," Global Taiwan Institute, 7/2/2024, accessed on 16/3/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQk4>

⁴⁶ Szanto, pp. 169 - 170.

from abroad.⁴⁷ Such a measure could offer China several advantages, first, imposing political and administrative control over Taiwan by restricting air or maritime traffic, thereby enabling Beijing to assert its sovereignty claims. Second, demonstrating Taiwan's inability to control its borders, as a quarantine would undermine Taipei's capacity for self-governance by allowing Chinese intervention in its internal affairs and imposing economic costs. Third, if prolonged disturbances result from a quarantine, the Taipei government could lose popular support and confidence in the Taiwanese military, potentially pushing leaders toward negotiation or improved relations with Beijing. Last, a quarantine would reduce the likelihood of full-scale war between the two sides and complicate potential intervention by the US and others, whereas a blockade would provide a pretext for a large-scale conflict with severe and unpredictable consequences.⁴⁸

3. China's Military Power

China's military power is a central factor in understanding the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing has notably worked on the consolidation of its regional influence and enhancing both its defensive and offensive capabilities in order to achieve its strategic objectives. The display of China's military power is intended to highlight the gap between Chinese and Taiwanese forces, thereby underscoring the imbalance of power in their respective military capacities. In the context of existing tensions, an analysis of these capabilities will allow the assessment of the potential outcomes should China move toward an invasion of Taiwan and help to explain both past and future escalations.

China is currently ranked as the world's third-largest military power, with a power index of 0.0706.⁴⁹ The PLA is globally the largest standing military force, comprising approximately 2.2 million personnel.⁵⁰ These capabilities reflect the modernization efforts of China's national strategy of achieving the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049.⁵¹ The PLA is recognized as a multidomain force capable of addressing threats across land, sea, air, space, cyberspace, and the nuclear domain. Besides, Chinese military planning places particular emphasis on achieving self-sufficiency in weapons production and integrating advanced technologies into defence systems.⁵²

As tensions over Taiwan escalate, China has taken accelerated steps to enhance its military readiness and acquire the necessary capabilities to face any potential military action. According to President Xi Jinping's strategic orientations, China's armed forces are expected to be prepared for the "incorporation

47 Bonny Lin et al., "How China Could Quarantine Taiwan: Mapping Out Two Possible Scenarios," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 5/6/2024, accessed on 16/3/2025, pp. 2–3, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc5v935k>

48 Ibid., p. 3.

49 "2025 China Military Strength," *Global Firepower*, 9/9/2025, accessed on 30/12/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRk8>

50 Tomasz Smura. "Modernization of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and Its Impact on the Security of the Indo-Pacific Region.," Strategic Paper No. 14, Strategic Studies Unit, Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, Vol. 21, No. 4 (February 2020), pp: 6, accessed on 25/5/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yka7zpj1>

51 Dane Egli & Kyle Amonson, "The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing's Calculus for Invading Taiwan by 2030," *Journal of Indo Pacific Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2023), pp. 38–39

52 Mike Gallagher, "Taiwan Can't Wait," *Foreign Affairs*, 1/2/2022, accessed on 16/3/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQTi>

of Taiwan" by 2027. This strategy relies on advanced naval and ground forces, along with modern missile systems, to impose a blockade or conduct an invasion, while deterring external intervention.⁵³

China owns the world's largest navy in terms of fleet size, with more than 370 vessels, including over 140 principal combat ships. Its naval assets include amphibious assault ships of the Yushen class and the aircraft carrier *Shandong* (CV-17). Nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) form a core component of China's maritime deterrence strategy, enhancing its ability to threaten international sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and to implement anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) measures, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁴

China's air force's capabilities include advanced fighter aircraft, unmanned aerial systems, and integrated air defence systems. The transfer of coastal combat aviation units to the air force has improved command and control over air defence operations, thereby strengthening the protection of strategically vital areas such as the Taiwan Strait.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the Rocket Force plays a crucial role in strategic deterrence through the expansion of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and long-range conventional missile systems. These capabilities provide China with the capacity to threaten far-flung targets, including US territory,⁵⁶ in the event of direct American involvement in a potential conflict over Taiwan.

Regarding the ground forces, China has adopted a combined-arms structure that integrates infantry, armoured units, artillery, and aviation elements. These forces have undergone extensive modernization, including the introduction of next-generation weapons systems.⁵⁷ Ground units are categorized into heavy formations, such as main battle tanks and PLZ-07 122 mm self-propelled artillery; medium units, including infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers such as the ZTL-11; and lighter assets, such as the GJ-2 unmanned aerial vehicle.⁵⁸ The PLA continues to modernize its arsenal, which includes more than 5,400 main battle tanks, 7,200 armoured fighting vehicles, and approximately 300 attack helicopters such as the Z-20. It also operates advanced unmanned aerial systems, including the WZ-7, along with self-propelled artillery, multiple rocket launchers, anti-tank missile platforms, SS-UAV systems, and infantry support weapons. In terms of firepower, the PLA's inventory includes approximately 4,100 artillery pieces and 1,700 multiple rocket launchers.⁵⁹ While these figures appear impressive, they mask variations in modernization levels across combined-arms brigades within the PLA.

53 Egli & Amonson, pp. 38–39.

54 US Department of Defence, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 18/12/2024, accessed on 16/3/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQMF>

55 *Ibid.*, 59 - 60.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

57 Adam Meszaros, "The PLAGF: Force Reduction, Mechanization, and Informationization," *BCE Consulting*, 22/3/2024, accessed on 17/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/ru7hw2z2>

58 Kartik Bommakanti, "China's Military Modernisation: Recent Trends," Observer Research Foundation, no. 398 (April 2023), p. 710, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4zm7vede>

59 Meszaros.

Overall, China's active armed forces number approximately 2.035 million personnel, including 965,000 in the ground forces, 260,000 in the navy, and 395,000 in the air force, in addition to a reserve force of around 510,000. Its military equipment includes roughly 4,800 tanks, 3,348 aircraft, 59 submarines, 86 major naval vessels, and 9,550 artillery systems.⁶⁰ Self-sufficiency in weapons production constitutes a cornerstone of China's strategic autonomy, as reflected in domestically produced systems such as the QBZ-95 rifle, ZBD-04 combat vehicles, and PLZ-07 artillery, which demonstrate Beijing's commitment to reducing reliance on foreign suppliers.⁶¹

The modernization of China's military capabilities forms part of a broader strategy aimed at strengthening its position as a global power. At the same time, this process takes into account the implications for regional security, rendering the Taiwan crisis a genuine test of China's growing power. Beijing has intensified military exercises as a means of exerting pressure on the Taiwanese government. In 2024, the Chinese Coast Guard participated for the first time in the "Joint Sword A-2024" exercises, highlighting the increasing coordination among China's military branches⁶² and signalling Beijing's intent to test its operational readiness for any potential crisis.

Taiwan's Dilemma: Between Isolation and the Consolidation of Independence

Taiwan faces a fundamental dilemma regarding its status as a state. Indeed, China has worked systematically to deprive it of diplomatic recognition from the majority of its allies and seeks to undermine any prospects of maintaining even a limited form of independence. In response, Taiwan has adopted a multi-layered strategy. First, it has sought to reaffirm, both officially and domestically, its position regarding the dispute and its relationship with China. Second, it has worked to preserve what remains of its formal bilateral relations with the small number of states that continue to recognize it diplomatically. Third, it has focused on expanding informal commercial and technological relations while strengthening its economic and military capabilities. Last, it has been aimed to form alliances with major powers, and most notably the US

1. Taiwan's Approach to the China Dispute

The legal and political status of Taiwan is one of the most complex issues in the contemporary international system. In fact, its current constitution affirms its status as a sovereign state,⁶³ yet it does not mention any explicit declaration of independence. Although Taiwan considers itself an

⁶⁰ Madzli, p. 138.

⁶¹ Bommakanti, p. 6.

⁶² Cathy Fang, "Taiwan Has a 'Do-Say' Gap Problem," *Global Taiwan Institute*, vol. 9, no. 19 (2024), p. 6, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yjhuywhv>

⁶³ "Constitution of the Republic of China (Taiwan)," *Laws & Regulations Database of the Republic of China (Taiwan)*, 1/1/1947, accessed on 17/4/2025, at: <https://bit.ly/417Lb4l>

independent state exercising effective authority under the name "Republic of China",⁶⁴ it has refrained from issuing a formal declaration of independence. Accordingly, all of its successive governments have adhered to this approach as Beijing considers it as a red line.⁶⁵ Thus, Taiwan does not officially recognize the People's Republic of China,⁶⁶ reflecting the complexities in their relations.

It is important to note that there have been two main political parties in Taiwan since the early 1990s. First, the Kuomintang (KMT), founded in 1912, supports the maintenance of strong relations with China and opposes any move toward a formal declaration of Taiwanese independence. Second, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which is the current ruling party, was established in 1986 as a movement advocating Taiwan's independence. However, DPP has shifted its position under the leadership of Tsai Ing-wen and is no longer calling for a formal declaration of independence. Instead, it has adopted a discourse emphasizing that Taiwan is functionally independent,⁶⁷ meaning that it already exercises sovereignty as an independent state, in both domestic governance and external relations under its official title of the Republic of China.⁶⁸ This position was reaffirmed in the speech of the current Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te on the occasion of the National Day on 10 October 2024, when he stated that the PRC "has no right to represent Taiwan".⁶⁹

The ruling party also rejects the "One Country, Two Systems" proposal and considers it a direct threat to Taiwan's sovereignty, particularly in light of the repressive measures by China in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, President Lai Ching-te has emphasized the importance of dialogue, while reaffirming Taiwan's commitment to preserving its independent identity.⁷⁰

In conclusion, Taiwan functions as a sovereign state with its own government, military, and constitution. However, it refrains from explicitly declaring formal independence; instead, it aims to preserve the status quo to ensure its security and regional stability. In parallel, it continues to develop informal alliances with many countries, despite the limited diplomatic recognition challenge.

2. The Challenge of Diplomatic Recognition and Informal Alliances

Taiwan faces a significant challenge as the majority of states have withdrawn their formal diplomatic recognition over the years. In response, the country has been trying to coordinate closely with its informal allies in order to mobilize support and strengthen its international presence. At the same

⁶⁴ "Tensions in Taiwan.. The Latest Escalation's Background and Consequences", International Center for Strategic Studies, 13/4/2023, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Bac4>

⁶⁵ Chong, p. 5.

⁶⁶ John Curtis & Winnie King, "Taiwan: Relations with China," United Kingdom: Commons Library Research Briefing, 14/8/2023, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/y5fvsbby>

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.6.

⁶⁸ Chong, p. 6.

⁶⁹ "China Has 'no Right to Represent Taiwan,' Lai Says," *Taipei Times*, 11/12/2024, accessed on 16/3/2025, at: <https://bit.ly/3Qbxvis>

⁷⁰ Lindsay Maizland & Clara Fong, "Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense," Council on Foreign Relations, 15/1/2025, accessed on 16/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2k4c6uk4>

time, Taiwan has adopted new approaches to engage with international organizations, with the aim of avoiding complete marginalization from the global institutional system.⁷¹

To date, only twelve small states continue to officially recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state, none of which has meaningful influence in the regional or international system. The following table outlines the countries that recognize Taiwan.

Countries that recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state

Country	Date of Establishment of Diplomatic Relations
Guatemala	1933
Vatican City	1942
Haiti	1956
Paraguay	1957
Eswatini	1968
Tuvalu	1979
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1981
Saint Kitts and Nevis	1983
Belize	1989
Marshall Islands	1998
Palau	1999

Source: Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Diplomatic Allies," accessed on 23/12/2024, at: <https://shorturl.at/XVoS1>

It is important to note that there are many other states that previously recognized Taiwan as an independent state but withdrew their recognition over time.⁷² For example, the US maintained diplomatic recognition of the Taiwanese government until 1978, before shifting its position in favour of the government of the PRC.⁷³ Other countries subsequently followed suit, most recently Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019, Nicaragua in 2021, and Nauru in 2024.⁷⁴ The UN recognized the Taiwanese government as the legitimate government of China from 1949 until 1971, when Taiwan lost its membership in the organization following the adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution 2758.⁷⁵

Therefore, Taipei has increasingly relied on a network of informal alliances with a number of countries. These partnerships were primarily focused on three key domains: trade and economic relations;

⁷¹ Yi-Chieh Chen & Kurt Abalos, "Taiwan's Diplomatic Allies and the Struggle for Global Inclusion," Institute for Security and Development Policy, 14/9/2024, accessed on 21/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/ydmyb8km>

⁷² "Countries That Recognize Taiwan 2025," *World Population Review* (January 2025), accessed on 16/3/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQHW>

⁷³ Susan V. Lawrence, "Taiwan: The Origins of the US One-China Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, 28/9/2023, p. 2, accessed on 14/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQYR>

⁷⁴ "Countries That Recognize Taiwan 2025."

⁷⁵ Ibid.



international advocacy for Taiwan's status, including within the UN system; and reinforcing its legitimacy as a state with official diplomatic relations.⁷⁶ By developing these informal ties, Taiwan seeks to remain active on the international stage, as these allies always support its participation in international organizations. For instance, the US Congress has issued directives to the State Department to prepare reports assessing progress in advancing Taiwan's international participation. Moreover, the foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (G7) issued a joint statement in April 2019 calling for Taiwan's participation in the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Similar steps have been taken by members of the European Parliament, as well as by Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and others.⁷⁷ In the same year, twelve of Taiwan's diplomatic allies sent letters to the President of the ICAO to allow Taiwan to participate in the organization. These states have also frequently called for Taiwan's participation in UN General Assembly meetings⁷⁸.

Furthermore, Taiwan also seeks to engage with international political and economic bodies and to interact with external actors through civil society channels. This strategy aims to secure support for its sovereignty claims, contribute to and benefit from global policy debates, and gain access to trade agreements and economic blocs.⁷⁹ As of 2024, Taiwan has maintained membership in more than seventy international organizations, most of which are related to economic and industrial cooperation, as well as scientific and environmental institutions. Prominent examples include the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).⁸⁰

Taiwan operates according to the "As If" strategy, whereby it acts within the international system as if it were a fully recognized state and member of the international community. It actively seeks full membership or observer status in key international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the ICAO, and International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol).⁸¹ It also continues to strengthen its economic and technological capabilities and to diversify its trade partnerships.

3. Strengthening Economic Capabilities

Taiwan ranked 14th globally in GDP per capita in 2024⁸² and was among the world's twenty largest economies in terms of overall GDP.⁸³ Its economic growth is mainly linked to the success of its semiconductor industry, particularly the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company

⁷⁶ Shattuck, p. 343.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 342.

⁷⁹ Andrea Ratiu, "Taiwan's Engagement with the World: Evaluating Past Hurdles, Present Complications, and Future Prospects," *Atlantic Council*, 20/12/2022, p. 1, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/WaHso>

⁸⁰ Chen & Abalos, p. 3.

⁸¹ "How Does Taiwan Employ Diplomacy in its Conflict with China?," *APA International Association of Experts and Political Analysts*, 1/11/2022, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQQ4>

⁸² Billy Stampfl, "Economic Freedom: An Unheralded Driver of Taiwanese Property," *Global Taiwan Institute*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2025), p. 16.

⁸³ "Taiwan GDP and Economic Data," *Global Finance Magazine*, accessed on 29/12/2024, <https://tinyurl.com/bd94zu7n>



(TSMC).⁸⁴ Indeed, TSMC accounts for approximately 92 percent of global production of advanced semiconductors at process nodes below 10 nanometres.⁸⁵ Moreover, in recent years, Taiwan has also produced more than 60 percent of the world's most advanced chips (below 7 nanometres). These chips constitute a critical enabling technology for artificial intelligence, 5G networks, and advanced military systems and missile technologies, which could help Taiwan to excel in the military field in the coming decades.⁸⁶

Taiwan's economy remains closely intertwined with that of China⁸⁷. Indeed, following the "1992 Consensus," Taipei has expanded investment in China and promoted cross-strait economic exchanges⁸⁸ as a means of transforming political hostility into mutual interests. In this context, the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) was signed with China to enhance and institutionalize economic, trade, and investment relations.⁸⁹

In parallel, Taiwan has developed a range of strategies to strengthen its economy and enhance its independence. For instance, it has concluded Free Trade Agreements with Panama, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, despite the absence of diplomatic relations. It has also successfully concluded Economic Cooperation Agreements with New Zealand, Eswatini, Paraguay, Singapore, the Marshall Islands, and Belize.⁹⁰ It joined the Central American Bank for Economic Integration in 1992 and the WTO in 2002 under the designation of a "territory" rather than a state.⁹¹

Since the 1950s, Taiwan has also developed a foreign aid policy, targeting a wide range of developing countries, particularly in Africa and Latin America. This policy has served as a tool to build partnerships, enhance Taiwan's international legitimacy, and counter China's diplomatic isolation.⁹² Initially, most of its funding for foreign aid programs came from surplus agricultural products imported from the US. Later on, Taiwan's foreign aid programs became more comprehensive from the late 1980s onward as its financial resources expanded and its economic influence increased. These programs included technical and agricultural assistance, financial loans, grants, and contributions to international organizations.⁹³ Recently, Taiwan has been participating in a wide range of development projects as part of its foreign aid policy to achieve economic and social development in partner countries. In

84 S. R. Long, "Taiwan's Economy and the Big Chip on Its Shoulder," *Rising Asia Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2021), p. 415.

85 Lubna Jassas, "The Electronic Chips War Between the United States of America and China and the Politicization of Technology," *Al Mideyar*, vol. 15, no. 2 (December 2022).

86 Jiann-Chyuan Wang, "The US-China Technology War and Taiwan's Semiconductor Role in Geopolitics," The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (October 2023), pp. 5-6, accessed on 16/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/58vmzunt>

87 Pochih Chen, "Lessons from Taiwan's Economic Development," *Orbis*, vol. 60, no. 4 (2016), p. 1.

88 Hyunwook Cheng, "Targeted Sanctions with Chinese Characteristics and 'Green Taishang'," *Pacific Focus*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2021), p. 489.

89 "Cross-Straits Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement," *World Trade Organization* (2010), accessed on 15/3/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRkO>

90 "Taiwan - Trade Agreements," *International Trade Administration*, 10/1/2024, accessed on 19/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/5dzjf2y3>

91 Pasha L. HSIEH, "Facing China: Taiwan's Status as a Separate Customs Territory in the World Trade Organization," *Journal of World Trade*, vol. 39, no. 6 (2005), pp. 1220-1221.

92 Wei-Chin Lee, "Taiwan's Foreign Aid Policy," *Asian Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1993), pp. 43-44.

93 *Ibid.*, 44-48.



2023, it allocated approximately US\$ 468 million from its international cooperation and development budget to finance development projects worldwide.⁹⁴

4. Military Capability Development

Taiwan continues to develop its military capabilities in response to growing threats. As the likelihood of a Chinese attack increases, military strength has become a cornerstone of Taiwan's strategy for ensuring its survival. Despite the significant imbalance in size and power, Taiwan has built an innovative defence system that combines asymmetric warfare tactics, self-reliance, and strong international partnerships. Its armed forces currently rank 22nd globally, with a power index score of 0.3988.⁹⁵

The Ministry of National Defence follows a comprehensive strategy that integrates military strength with civil mobilization. Strategic planning is led by the General Staff Headquarters, through specialized divisions such as intelligence and logistics. Operational duties are carried out by the central commands of the army, navy, and air force. Additional bodies, including the Information, Communications, and Electronic Force Command and the All-Out Defence Mobilization Agency, further enhance the system's flexibility and resilience.⁹⁶

Taiwan's defence strategies focus on strengthening its defence autonomy and maximizing the efficiency of its limited resources. The active military force numbers approximately 169,000 personnel: 94,000 in the army, 40,000 in the navy, and 35,000 in the air force. In addition, Taiwan relies on a substantial reserve force of around 1,657,000 individuals, boosting its ability to mobilize in emergencies.⁹⁷ The military possesses 650 tanks, 691 aircraft, 4 submarines, 26 major naval ships, and 2,093 artillery pieces. While these numbers are modest compared to China's capabilities, Taiwan's strategy emphasizes reserve strength and international support.⁹⁸

Defence spending has steadily increased, reaching 2.5% of GDP, with an annual growth rate of about 5% between 2019 and 2023. In 2024, the defence budget rose to \$19.7 billion, a 6% increase over 2023.⁹⁹ Priority areas for enhancement include the development of the C4ISR system (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) as well as missile defence, air command, and naval command capabilities.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Official Development Assistance," (November 2023), accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/36adrrxp>

⁹⁵ "2025 Taiwan Military Strength," *Global Fire Power*, 9/9/2025, accessed on 12/2/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQxr>

⁹⁶ Naiyu Kuo & Andrew Scobell, "Taiwan Stronger: Ramping Up Defence Resilience to Counter China," United States Institute of Peace, 10/3/2025, accessed 17/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3c8z7j3c>

⁹⁷ Merrow Will & Masters Jonathan, "US Military Support for Taiwan in Five Charts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 25/9/2024, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQRv>

⁹⁸ Madzli, p. 138.

⁹⁹ Campbell Caitlin, "Taiwan: Defence and Military Issues," *Congressional Research Service*, 15/8/2024, p. 1, accessed on 15/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/musc383a>

¹⁰⁰ Ministry of National Defence Republic of China. "Ministry of National Defence Organization," accessed on 15/4/2025, 1/1/2022, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRln>

Taiwan is also advancing its domestic defence industry through the National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology, which leads in developing advanced missiles, drones, and small missile boats.¹⁰¹ These initiatives aim to enhance defence self-sufficiency by integrating the private sector into military production, thereby expanding national expertise and domestic manufacturing capacity.

However, historical, political, and bureaucratic factors have created tensions between civilian and military institutions, which sometimes hinder coordination.¹⁰² Additionally, Taiwan's critical infrastructure, such as energy, food, water, and internet systems, remains vulnerable and would likely be targeted in the event of conflict. Some assessments suggest that civil defence preparedness is still insufficient.¹⁰³

Internationally, strategic alignment with the US remains a central pillar of Taiwan's defence enhancement. This partnership includes the supply of advanced weapons and joint training programs. In December 2024, Taiwan acquired the NASAMS missile defence system and F-16V fighter jets¹⁰⁴ and is seeking diesel-electric submarines and PAC-3 missile systems.¹⁰⁵ Despite these efforts, Taiwan continues to face challenges, such as delays in foreign arms deliveries and the need to balance conventional and asymmetric defence strategies. Ongoing geopolitical tensions also require constant strategic adaptation to maintain a strong defence posture.

Taiwan Between US Strategy and the Chinese Challenge in the Contest for Hegemony

The Taiwan issue figures prominently in the strategic competition between the US and China, as its ramifications extend across the international system. In particular, the US considers Taiwan a crucial component in its strategy to undermine the expanding influence of China. In this context, this section examines how Washington helps Taipei to keep the balance of power in the region and the international sphere. It also explores the implications of such support on US-Chinese relations.

The US and Taiwan have maintained their relationship since the 1940s. The US supported the Nationalist government led by the Kuomintang against the Communist forces during the Chinese Civil War. Eventually, the US recognized the importance of Taiwan after the victory of the Communists and the retreat of the Nationalists to this island.¹⁰⁶ In 1954, the Mutual Defence Treaty between

101 "National Chung Shan Institute of Science and Technology (NCSIST)", accessed on 29/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3ewn5hyy>

102 Caitlin, p. 1.

103 J. Michael Cole, "Critical Infrastructure Remains a Blind Spot in Taiwan's Defence Preparedness," *Global Taiwan Institute*, 2/6/2021, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zR7L>

104 "Taiwan, U. S. Sign US\$345 Million Deal for F-16V Tracking Systems", *Focus Taiwan - CNA English News*, 7/12/2024, accessed on 9/12/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2v83pf3z>

105 "Ministry of National Defence Organization."

106 Lawrence & Morrison.



Taiwan and the US established the basis for Taiwan's military protection against the People's Republic of China, thereby further formalizing their relationship.¹⁰⁷ This alliance was part of the broader US policy of containing communism in Asia during the Cold War. Accordingly, the strategic importance of Taiwan was illustrated when the US deployed nuclear weapons on the island¹⁰⁸ in anticipation of a potential confrontation with the Soviet Union and China.¹⁰⁹

However, the US approach to Taiwan shifted following the visit of President Richard Nixon to China in 1972,¹¹⁰ leading to the normalization of bilateral relations in 1978.¹¹¹ Alongside the reorientation of US policy in favour of Beijing, Washington enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) to maintain commercial, cultural, and other non-official ties with Taipei in 1979.¹¹² This Act provided a legal framework for supplying defensive weaponry to Taiwan.¹¹³

The strategic position of Taiwan is at the convergence of key maritime lanes linking the South China Sea and the East China Sea. This position enhances the importance of the island to the US as these routes facilitate an estimated annual trade volume of approximately US\$586 billion. Furthermore, this location is significant since it allows the US to track the Chinese naval activities as well as those of its regional allies. In this context, Taiwan is key to US alliances in the Indo-Pacific region ranging from Japan to the Philippines, India, and the Arab Gulf. In the event of an unfavourable shift in Taiwan, the equilibrium in East Asia may deteriorate as well as the credibility of US security assurances to its regional allies.¹¹⁴

The US support of Taiwan is part of a broader geopolitical framework to counteract Chinese aspirations and prevent its expansion over commercial sea routes and the regional security environment.¹¹⁵ The longevity of Washington's backing is heavily linked to its willingness to restrain China, as well as maintain a growing power within limits that do not threaten the current security and economic arrangements.

The US supports Taiwan in many forms through political pledges, economic relations, and military aid. This article examines selected cases due to constraints on the scope of the paper, rather than offering a comprehensive overview.

107 David W. Mabon & Harriet D. Schwar, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, China and Japan," John P. Glennon (ed.), *Office of the Historian*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1985).

108 Robert S. Norris, William M. Arkin & William Burr, "United States Secretly Deployed Nuclear Bombs in 27 Countries and Territories During Cold War," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 55, no. 6 (November 1999), pp. 26–35.

109 In 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower was prepared to attack China with nuclear weapons to protect Taiwan during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis. The United States denied placing nuclear weapons in Taiwan at the time, but a series of classified reports proved otherwise. See: Gregory Kulacki, "Nuclear Weapons in the Taiwan Strait," *Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition* (July 2020), p. 4.

110 Vincent Wei-Cheng Wang, "Rethinking US-Taiwan Relations after the Cold War: Creative Ambiguity vs. Assertive Democratization," *American Asian Review*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1996), pp. 156 - 157.

111 "Taiwan Relations Act: Celebrating Strong US - Taiwan Relations," *The American Chamber of Commerce in Taiwan*, accessed on 12/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQlh>

112 "H.R.2479 - 96th Congress (1979-1980): Taiwan Relations Act," *CONGRESS.GOV*, 4/10/1979, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2fcr672p>

113 *Ibid.*

114 Matthew P. Funaiolo et al., "Crossroads of Commerce: How the Taiwan Strait Propels the Global Economy," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 10/10/2024, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQlh>

115 Matthew Gallagher, "A New US Balancing Act: Rejecting War & Protecting Taiwan," *Marcellus Policy Analysis* (July 2022), p. 2.

At the political level, the TRA is widely regarded as the primary legal foundation of the relationship between Taiwan and the US. Following the 1982 joint communiqué with China concerning US arms sales to Taiwan, Washington conveyed the Six Assurances to Taipei within the framework of the TRA.¹¹⁶ These include Washington's refusal to terminate arms deliveries to Taiwan, its dismissal of any mediation role between Taiwan and China, and its pledge not to pressure Taipei to engage in negotiations with Beijing. In addition, they assert that the US will not change its stance on Taiwanese sovereignty and that it does not intend to pursue modifications to the TRA. Accordingly, senior US officials expressed political support through high-level visits, including the visit of the House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in 2022.¹¹⁷

Economically, the US support of Taiwan is predominant through trade relations given the island's heavy dependence on global trade, with exports accounting for approximately 70% of its gross domestic product.¹¹⁸ In particular, bilateral trade in goods and services is estimated at US\$160 billion in 2022.¹¹⁹ The Taiwanese primary exports to the US are semi-conductors that are utilized across 169 sectors. These semi-conductors are pivotal in the US-China technological competition, especially after the considerable losses of US corporations during the global semi-conductor shortage in 2021. In addition to trade flows, both parties consolidated their economic cooperation particularly through the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade. This Initiative encompasses digital trade and anti-corruption efforts,¹²⁰ as well as the Partnership for Prosperity Dialogue which is an annual forum dedicated to trade facilitation and addressing economic pressure from China.¹²¹

Militarily, the US provided Taiwan with almost US\$50 billion in defensive weaponry from 1950 until 2022.¹²² In recent years, arms agreements incorporated systems designed for offensive operations, including F-16 fighter jets and HIMARS missile systems with a range of up to 300 kilometres.¹²³ The US offered Taiwan military training alongside the enhancement of modern defence capabilities. For instance, Washington approved over US\$571 million for defence equipment, services, and military cooperation with Taipei in 2024.¹²⁴

116 "H.Con.Res.88 - 114th Congress (2015-2016): Reaffirming the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances as Cornerstones of United States-Taiwan Relations," *CONGRESS.GOV*, 17/5/2016, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zR8v>

117 "US-China Summit: Truce or Strategic Understandings?," *Situation Assessment*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 24/11/2022, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRQ7>

118 "US - Taiwan Trade and Economic Relations," *Congressional Research Service*, 6/12/2024, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://rebrand.ly/a46chww>

119 Office of the United States Trade Representative - Executive Office of the President, "Taiwan," 1/6/2023, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQlo>

120 Karen M. Sutter, "US-Taiwan Trade and Economic Relations," *Congressional Research Service*, 25/2/2025, accessed on 17/3/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRIC>

121 *Ibid.*

122 Jonathan Masters & Will Mellow, "US Military Support for Taiwan in Five Charts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24/9/2024, accessed on 21/12/2024, at: <https://rebrand.ly/yimgztbv>

123 "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States – F-16 Munitions," *Defence Security Cooperation Agency*, 1/3/2023, accessed on 17/3/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/49aahrc7>

124 "Taiwan Targeted with More than \$836 Million in US Defence Spending," *Indo-Pacific Defence Forum*, 28/12/2024, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQP0>



The US endorses Taiwan in the regional context through the Indo-Pacific Strategy, founded on the principles of freedom, connectivity, prosperity, security, and resilience. This Strategy was established during the first term of President Donald Trump and further strengthened under President Joe Biden's administration. As such, it was intended to reinforce the US principles alongside key regional allies: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India.¹²⁵ The 2017 US National Security Strategy stated: "We will maintain our strong ties with Taiwan in accordance with our "One China" policy, including our commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act to provide for Taiwan's legitimate defence needs and deter coercion."¹²⁶ The 2022 National Defence Strategy also noted that: "The PRC's increasingly provocative rhetoric and coercive activity towards Taiwan are destabilizing, risk miscalculation, and threaten the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait [...] The Department (of Defence) will support Taiwan's asymmetric self-defence commensurate with the evolving PRC threat and consistent with our One China policy".¹²⁷ Again, Trump's new administration has reaffirmed in the 2025 National Defence Strategy that "detering a conflict over Taiwan, ideally by preserving military overmatch, is a priority [...] But the American military cannot, and should not have to, do this alone. Our allies must step up and spend—and more importantly do—much more for collective defence".¹²⁸ Consequently, Washington aims to incorporate Taiwan into a regional security complex and prevents its isolation through bilateral relations.¹²⁹

Nonetheless, the US approach to Taiwan remains deliberately ambiguous regarding its political future. Indeed, the TRA allows the supply of defensive arms and the maintenance of economic and cultural relations. However, it refrains from formally acknowledging the sovereignty of Taiwan. The US, hence, avoids direct confrontation with China through such ambiguity while preserving diplomatic flexibility amid the rising geopolitical tensions in the region.

It seems the US has adopted a new containment policy towards the PRC, which includes military, economic, and political aspects. Rivalry between the two powers has escalated throughout the Indo-Pacific region. On one hand, Washington has launched the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Japan, India, and Australia, as well as the AUKUS partnership with the United Kingdom and Australia.¹³⁰ Its aim is to strengthen its regional presence and to balance China's growing power. On the other hand, China continues to expand its BRI to link Asia with Europe, Africa, and South America through an extensive network of infrastructure projects and investments.¹³¹ In this context of heightened tensions and rivalry, Taiwan is seen as a pivotal asset based on its strategic geography

¹²⁵ "The Indo-Pacific Strategy," *United States Department of State*, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/y5spzjx2>

¹²⁶ The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," *National Archives* (December 2017), p. 47.

¹²⁷ US Department of Defence, "2022 National Defence Strategy of the United States of America," (2022), pp. 4-15, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQu4>

¹²⁸ The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," November 2005, pp. 23 - 24.

¹²⁹ Kuo-Cheng Chang, "The Role of Taiwan in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Taiwan Strategists*, vol. 18 (2023), p. 33.

¹³⁰ Ali Imran Atta, Mustansar Abbas & Taimoor Akbar Chaudhury, "Understanding the Strategic Consequences of AUKUS on the Belt and Road Consortium as Beijing's 'Grand Strategy' Tool," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, vol. 7, no. 3 (September 2023), p. 883.

¹³¹ Emad Kaddorah, "The Position of the GCC States in the Belt and Road Initiative," *Research Paper*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 27/5/2024, accessed on 1/2/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2Ba>

and technological capacity. The US aims to integrate Taiwan into its growing economic and security alliances, which China sees as a threat to its interests and hence relies on the BRI to prevent its own containment, enhance its influence, and limit Western presence in the region. Accordingly, the PRC has demonstrated military exercises frequently in the Taiwan Strait, particularly in 2024. As a response, the US has conducted the so-called freedom of navigation operations in the strait, including naval exercises and aircraft carrier deployments,¹³² while increasing its naval presence in the region and enhancing defence collaboration with its allies.¹³³

Conclusion

The complexity of the Taiwan crisis stems from the deep interdependence of political, military, and economic interests among the parties involved. China views the "reunification" of Taiwan as a matter of national dignity and a core component of achieving what it describes as the "Chinese Dream" by 2049. Accordingly, Beijing has relied on what are commonly referred to as Salami-slicing Tactics, which include diplomatic isolation, economic pressure, and military intimidation through repeated exercises near the Taiwan Strait, while stopping short of actions that would provoke a decisive response from the US.¹³⁴

By contrast, Taiwan has sought to consolidate its position as a de facto independent entity through multiple avenues. It has focused on expanding its network of informal international partnerships, particularly with Western states, leveraging its comparative advantage in advanced technology sectors, most notably semiconductors. At the same time, it has developed what is known as the Porcupine Strategy to counter the prospect of a Chinese invasion. This strategy refers to a relatively weaker actor adopting a robust defensive posture designed to raise the costs of aggression to a level that deters a stronger adversary. In this sense, it constitutes a deterrence-oriented approach centred on fortification and the enhancement of Taiwan's defensive capabilities, rendering any Chinese military action costly and uncertain. Nevertheless, Taiwan remains in a relatively vulnerable position, as its capacity to withstand military pressure from China continues to depend heavily on sustained US support, particularly in the military and technological domains. As a result, its de facto independence remains contingent upon shifting regional and international power balances.¹³⁵

From the perspective of the US, relations with Taiwan are not confined to a bilateral framework but are embedded within a broader strategic calculus aimed at managing the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Washington's multidimensional support for Taiwan is intended not only to strengthen

132 Raul Pedrozo & James Kraska, "US Freedom of Navigation and Forward Presence Operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, October 2015 to July 2024," *International Law Studies*, vol. 103, no. 1 (2024).

133 Ben Levine, "Wasted Ammunition in the Fight against Chinese Disinformation," *Global Taiwan Institute*, vol. 9, no. 19 (2024), pp. 10–11.

134 Donald Clarke, "China's Anti-Secession Law: Background, Legal Significance, and Recent Developments," George Washington University - Law School, 11/7/2024, accessed on 15/4/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQut>

135 James Timbie, Adm. James O. Ellie Jr., "A Large Number of Small Things: A Porcupine Strategy for Taiwan", *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, (Winter 2021/2022), pp 84 and 85.

its defensive capacity, but also to constrain China and prevent it from reshaping the regional and ultimately global order in line with its own interests. US strategy can therefore be understood as one centred on deterring China while avoiding escalation and direct military confrontation that could undermine international stability.

Taiwan's future thus remains governed by a complex equation involving intensifying Chinese pressure, Taiwan's ongoing efforts to reinforce its autonomy, and continued US backing. Under these conditions, the crisis retains the potential to deepen and become more intricate at any moment, particularly in light of China's strategy of enhancing its military capabilities to achieve unification by 2027, while relying on gradual isolation and incremental coercion rather than open warfare. In the near term, the most plausible scenario appears to be the imposition of a maritime blockade designed to coerce Taiwan without incurring the risks associated with a direct military confrontation, given the high costs such a conflict would entail and the likelihood of US intervention. This scenario appears more likely, as it would allow China to impose a new strategic reality on Taiwan while retaining the option of military force as a measure of last resort.

A blockade strategy could encompass a range of measures, beginning with intensified military exercises around the island that disrupt maritime trade routes, which are vital to Taiwan's economy. This could evolve into a form of maritime quarantine aimed at controlling commercial shipping under the pretext of ensuring maritime security, thereby enabling China to inspect vessels bound for Taiwan. Beijing might also resort to grey-zone tactics, including large-scale cyberattacks against critical Taiwanese infrastructure, such as energy and communications networks. In response, the US and its allies would likely seek to intervene by deploying naval forces to escort commercial shipping, potentially resulting in limited military friction without escalating into a full-scale war, the risks of which are well understood by both sides. Time also constitutes a critical factor, as China appears to be pursuing a cautious strategy premised on the assumption that sustained economic and psychological pressure could generate internal divisions within Taiwan over the costs of prolonged confrontation, potentially opening the door to negotiations with Beijing.



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