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# Ending the Destructive Sino-U.S. Interaction Over Taiwan: A Call for Mutual Reassurance

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# Executive Summary

Recent years have witnessed steadily rising hostility and suspicion between the United States and China over each other's approach vis-à-vis Taiwan. The unprecedently aggressive Chinese military exercises in response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taipei this year indicated that the continued downward spiral in Sino-American relations over Taiwan would increasingly expose Washington and Beijing to risks of repeated crises with a potential of a dangerous armed conflict. This brief lays out the policy steps necessary to reverse this spiral of escalation.<sup>1</sup>

*Absent a sober recognition of the vital need for trust-building through credible mutual assurances, the United States and China could be on the path toward a major diplomatic crisis or military conflict over Taiwan.*

On the Taiwan issue, both Washington and Beijing have mostly pursued a policy of deterrence and escalation, engaging in a confrontational action-reaction cycle of hostile deterrence and resolve while showing minimal willingness to engage in credible policies of reassurance. This confrontational interactive dynamic feeds animosity and distrust between Washington and Beijing regarding each other's intentions toward Taiwan. Absent a sober recognition of the vital need for trust-building through credible mutual assurances, the United States and China could be on the path toward a major diplomatic crisis or military conflict over Taiwan.

In order to reestablish a credible level of mutual reassurance and prevent these outcomes, Washington and Beijing should adopt the following policies:

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<sup>1</sup> The author is deeply indebted to James Park for his vital assistance in preparing this brief and to Lisa Goldman for her superb editing.

- Washington should unambiguously reaffirm the original elements of its One China policy and place clear limits on the level and type of contact between American and Taiwanese military and civilian officials. Beijing should unambiguously reaffirm its commitment to uncoerced, peaceful unification as a top priority.
- Washington should state clearly that the United States does not regard Taiwan as a critical strategic node in its overall regional defense posture and remains open to any peaceful, uncoerced resolution of Taiwan's status. Beijing should also state clearly that it does not view control over Taiwan as essential to its military defense.
- Beijing should declare that it will significantly reduce military forays and exercises within the Taiwan Strait provided that Washington reduces its own extensive military activities along China's maritime coast.
- Washington should reconsider its prohibition under the Six Assurances against discussions with Beijing regarding military sales, activities, and deployments relevant to Taiwan. What, if any, types of reciprocal restraints might be possible regarding the military capabilities and actions of either side should be raised, at least initially, in Track Two or Track 1.5 dialogues.
- Washington should convey its strong support for cross-Strait talks without preconditions and strongly urge both Taipei and Beijing to adjust their stances to make the possibility of talks more likely.
- Washington should press for the development of an approach to China-Taiwan relations that explicitly lays out both the benefits for Taiwan of reaching reconciliation and the full extent of Taiwan's autonomy under unification.

## Introduction

As many analysts have observed, Washington and Beijing are steadily moving toward a serious diplomatic confrontation, and possibly a military conflict, over Taiwan. Either

outcome, especially a full-blown war, would be devastating for both countries. In a full-blown conflict, Taiwan would suffer untold losses in human life, property, and opportunities for continued economic growth. And a severe crisis or conflict would cause enormous damage to the global economy and could trigger a fundamental erosion of the global order.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, in highlighting this danger, both Washington and Beijing have adopted distorted, one-sided views of the issue, simply blaming each other for the downward slide. This interactive dynamic feeds animosity and distrust and impedes any serious effort to cope with the deepening crisis.

## *To stop the current slide toward disaster, Beijing and Washington must recognize their common responsibility and undertake actions to avoid conflict.*

Both sides are contributing to the possible crisis and conflict over Taiwan. While the tension between China and the United States over the Taiwan issue is rooted in divergent national interests and historical interpretations, it has in recent years been greatly exacerbated by exaggerated mutual fears, problematic assumptions and beliefs, and narrow domestic political motivations. These factors generate hostile deterrence behavior that each country views as confirmation of their worst suspicions about the other, thus creating an endless escalation spiral, with both sides increasingly seeing conflict as virtually inevitable.

To stop the current slide toward disaster, Beijing and Washington must recognize their common responsibility and undertake actions to avoid conflict. They must understand the most salient attitudes, actions, and assumptions that drive the crisis and the manner of their interaction; the unique dangers these dynamics pose; and the stakes and interests involved in obstructing or managing the crisis effectively. This brief

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<sup>2</sup> For one such assessment, see Li, Cheng. "Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan: Provoking the First AI War in History?" *China-US Focus*, August 26, 2022. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/pelosis-visit-to-taiwan-provoking-the-first-ai-war-in-history>.

addresses each of the above topics in turn. It then offers several recommendations designed to moderate or end the current vicious circle over Taiwan.

## The interactive drivers of the Taiwan crisis

Although triggered by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and China's strong, military-centered response, the current worsening of Sino-American relations over Taiwan is the latest, and arguably most serious, escalation in an ongoing bilateral interaction that has been evolving since at least 2010-12. That is when China became more assertive regarding sovereignty disputes in the South and East China Seas, while Washington began to focus greater attention on pushing back against Beijing's growing influence in Asia.<sup>3</sup> Many in China viewed U.S. pushback as evidence that the United States was increasingly anxious over the decline of its economic capacity (signified by the global financial crisis of 2008-9) and thus of its regional dominance in Asia.<sup>4</sup>

This confrontational Sino-U.S. dynamic has been occurring on two interconnected levels. It involves both broad strategic and political interests, attitudes, and misperceptions that influence the overall bilateral relationship, and narrower factors relating to the Taiwan issue in particular.

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<sup>3</sup> Swaine, Michael D., and M. Taylor Fravel. "China's Assertive Behavior Part Two: The Maritime Periphery." *China Leadership Monitor*, June 2011. <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CLM35MS.pdf>; Lieberthal, Kenneth. "The American Pivot to Asia." *Foreign Policy*, December 21, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/21/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

<sup>4</sup> Drezner, Daniel W. "Perception, Misperception, and Sensitivity: Chinese Economic Power and Preferences after the 2008 Financial Crisis," in Robert S. Ross (ed.), *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501709180.003.0004>; Canrong, Jin. "How America's relationship with China changed under Obama." World Economic Forum, December 14, 2016. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/america-china-relationship/>; Yong, Wang, and Louis Pauly. "Chinese IPE Debates on (American) Hegemony." *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 6 (2013): 1165–88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24673023>; Changshuan, Huang 胡长栓. "Guoji jinrong weiji de weiji he jiyu 国际金融危机的危机和机遇" [The Crisis and Opportunity of the International Financial Crisis]. *Zhongguo gongchandang xinwenwang* 中国共产党新闻网, November 26, 2012. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2012/1126/c40531-19701097.html>.

## Deepening U.S.-China rivalry and conflicts of interest

On the U.S. side, fears that China's rise poses a threat to vital U.S. interests and influence drive the rivalry.<sup>5</sup> These interests, as seen by U.S. policymakers, include the stability, security, and openness of the Asia-Pacific, the continuation of U.S. economic and technological superiority, the major norms and values that sustain the global order and global democracy, and the well-being of American society.<sup>6</sup>

Exaggerated assumptions about Chinese motives and beliefs have made these fears particularly acute.<sup>7</sup> U.S. leaders and the bulk of the foreign policy establishment in Washington have come to see Beijing as an existential or near-existential threat, implacably committed to displacing the United States as the predominant regional and

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<sup>5</sup> 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>; Liru, Cui. "A Dangerous Imbalance." China-US Focus, September 14, 2022.

<https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/a-dangerous-imbalance>.

<sup>6</sup> Blinken, Antony. "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China." (Speech, Washington, D.C., May 26, 2022).

<https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>; Doshi, Rush, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford Academic, August 2021); <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197527917.001.0001>; Campbell, Kurt M., and Ely Ratner. "The China Reckoning." *Foreign Affairs*, February 13, 2018.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>; Harris, Jennifer. "It's time for a new strategy against China." *Politico*, August 10, 2017.

<https://www.politico.com/agenda/story/2017/08/10/its-time-for-a-new-strategy-against-china-000496/>; Chhabra, Tarun. "The China Challenge, democracy, and US grand strategy." Brookings Institution, February 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-china-challenge-democracy-and-u-s-grand-strategy/>; Rosenberger, Laura and Lindsay Gorman. "How Democracies Can Win the Information Contest." *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2020): 75-96, doi: [10.1080/0163660X.2020.1771045](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1771045); Harrell, Peter and Elizabeth Rosenberg. "Economic Dominance, Financial Technology, and the Future of U.S. Economic Coercion." Center for a New American Security, April 2019.

<https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/economic-dominance-financial-technology-and-the-future-of-u-s-economic-coercion>.

<sup>7</sup> Swaine, Michael D. "China Doesn't Pose an Existential Threat for America." *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/21/china-existential-threat-america/>; 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/>; Weiss, Jessica Chen. "The China Trap: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Perilous Logic of Zero-Sum Competition." *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition>; Weiss, Jessica Chen. "America and China Don't Need to Knock Each Other Out to Win." *The New York Times*, October 19, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/19/opinion/international-world/united-states-china-taiwan-xi-jinping.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>.

global power, creating a Sino-centric global order keyed to autocratic values, and undermining, if not destroying, U.S. society.<sup>8</sup>

*As with virtually any nation, the greater the sense of threat, the more likely Beijing is to adopt zero-sum approaches to policy issues and run greater risks in defending its interests.*

But China's view of the United States and the risks Beijing is prepared to run to protect its interests are largely contingent on U.S. behavior and Beijing's reading of the overall threats it faces both internally and externally. As with virtually any nation, the greater the sense of threat, the more likely Beijing is to adopt zero-sum approaches to policy issues and run greater risks in defending its interests.<sup>9</sup> This is not to deny the likely role of communist ideology in motivating adversarial Chinese thinking and behavior toward Washington.<sup>10</sup> But U.S. fears place inordinate stress on the role of that variable in determining Chinese actions while downplaying the more reactive, realist-oriented dimensions of Chinese behavior.

China's fears are driven by longstanding strategic, political, and ideological fears that the United States seeks to contain and weaken China and the Chinese Communist Party

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<sup>8</sup> Doshi, Rush. *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. (UK: Oxford University Press, 2021); Easton, Ian. *The Final Struggle: Inside China's Global Strategy* (UK: Camphor Press, 2022); Brands, Hal, and Jake Sullivan. "China Has Two Paths to Global Domination," *Foreign Policy*. May 22, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/22/china-superpower-two-paths-global-domination-cold-war/>; McMaster, H.R. "How China Sees the World and How We Should See China." *The Atlantic*, May 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/>; Pottinger, Matthew. "Beijing's American Hustle." *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-08-23/beijings-american-hustle>; Beckley, Michael, and Hal Brands. "Into the Danger Zone: The Coming Crisis in US-China Relations." American Enterprise Institute, 2021. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/into-the-danger-zone-the-coming-crisis-in-us-china-relations/>; Pompeo, Michael. "Communist China and the Free World's Future." Speech, Yorba Linda, Calif., July 23, 2020. U.S. Department of State. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> But even under the worst conditions, it is hard to see how China can pose a truly existential threat to the United States. Swaine. "China Doesn't Pose an Existential Threat for America."

<sup>10</sup> Blanchette, Jude. "Ideological Security as National Security." Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ideological-security-national-security>.

(CCP), thus threatening the nation's most vital interests.<sup>11</sup> These interests include the preservation of CCP rule, the (re)emergence of China as a prosperous, stable, and influential regional and global power, and the ability to counter challenges to that status from any quarter, over the indefinite future.<sup>12</sup>

China's fears have intensified in recent years due to a combination of growing domestic instability, driven by ethnic unrest and economic problems, and the deepening belief that the United States is implacably committed to preserving its dominant position in the world by containing and undermining China. Both sets of fears are exaggerated by China's historical experience at the hands of imperialist powers, the deeply rooted Chinese fear of chaos erupting yet again within a huge, complex society, and the tendency of communist ideology to view the capitalist United States and the West in general as predatory and hostile to socialist China.<sup>13</sup> These excessive fears have increased under the Xi Jinping regime, given Xi's deeply Leninist and nationalist views and a push to control Chinese society through greater stress on ideology and party control.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Reality Check: Falsehoods in US Perceptions of China." June 19, 2022. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619\\_10706059.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706059.html); "Full text of Hu's report at 18th Party Congress." China Daily, November 18, 2012. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2012-11/18/content\\_29578562.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2012-11/18/content_29578562.htm); "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress." Xinhua, November 3, 2017. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c\\_136725942.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm); Jisi, Wang. "The Plot Against China?" *Foreign Affairs*, June 22, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-22/plot-against-china>.

<sup>12</sup> Fravel, M Taylor. "China's 'World-Class Military' Ambitions: Origins and Implications." *The Washington Quarterly* 43 no.1 (March 2020): 85-99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1735850>; Weiss, Jessica C. "Ch 4: An Ideological Contest in US-China Relations?: Assessing China's Defense of Autocracy." in DeLisle, Jacques and Avery Goldstein. *After Engagement: Dilemmas in US-China Security Relations*, 124-54. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3427181](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3427181); Goldstein, Avery. "China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance." *International Security* 45 no.1 (Summer 2020): 164-201. [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00383](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00383); Scobell, Andrew et al. "China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition." RAND Corporation, 2020. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2798.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2798.html).

<sup>13</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>14</sup> Zhao, Suisheng. "The Ideological Campaign in Xi's China: Rebuilding Regime Legitimacy." *Asian Survey* 56, no. 6 (2016): 1168-93. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26364408>.

In both countries, domestic politics reinforces these perceptions and misperceptions. Popular nationalist desires and fears regarding China or the United States and the general need to appear “tough” or “strong” to relevant domestic audiences are manipulated for political gain – or to prevent political losses.<sup>15</sup> Political leaders in both countries can demonize the other side because the deepening competition and hostility between the two powers have reduced both the size of those constituencies formerly dedicated to sustaining constructive Sino-U.S. relations and their willingness to speak out. Racism is also a factor that increasingly influences domestic politics on both sides.<sup>16</sup>

*Popular nationalist desires and fears regarding China or the United States and the general need to appear “tough” or “strong” to relevant domestic audiences are manipulated for political gain – or to prevent political losses.*

These fears and political factors influence policy with a growing tendency to securitize virtually all areas of Sino-American interactions. In most instances, policies are based on worst-case assessments of the other side’s intentions and zero-sum characterizations of their likely purposes and outcomes.<sup>17</sup> This dynamic is evident in

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<sup>15</sup> Boylan, Brandon M, Jerry McBeath, and Bo Wang. “US–China Relations: Nationalism, the Trade War, and COVID-19.” *Fudan J. Hum. Soc. Sci.* 14 no.1 (October 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-020-00302-6>.

<sup>16</sup> Drutman, Lee. “How race and identity became the central dividing line in American politics.” *Vox*, August 30, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2016/8/30/12697920/race-dividing-american-politics>; Leibold, James. “Planting the Seed: Ethnic Policy in Xi Jinping’s New Era of Cultural Nationalism.” The Jamestown Foundation, December 2019.

<https://jamestown.org/program/planting-the-seed-ethnic-policy-in-xi-jinpings-new-era-of-cultural-nationalism/>.

<sup>17</sup> The White House. “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.” March 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>; U.S. Department of Defense. “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy.”

<https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Reality Check: Falsehoods in US Perceptions of China.”; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Wang Yi: U.S. views on world, China, China-U.S. relations are seriously miscalibrated.” May 28, 2022.

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202205/t20220529\\_10694135.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220529_10694135.html); Jinping, Xi. “Speech by Xi Jinping at a ceremony marking the centenary of the CPC.” (Speech, Beijing, July 1, 2021). <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202107/ce62fd23a2f24be7bb96c30b56c0c111.shtml>.

many areas of the Sino-U.S. competition, from Asian security structures and exercises to trading networks; technology standard setting and the escalating battle over semiconductors; and norms of global political and human rights.<sup>18</sup>

## Changing Calculations vis-à-vis Taiwan

Changing calculations by both sides are also accelerating the U.S.-China confrontation on Taiwan. The general bilateral dynamic outlined above, combined with the Taiwan public's growing opposition to unification, increasing support for eventual independence, and the steady weakening of the more mainland-friendly Kuomintang (KMT)'s influence on the island, have caused both Beijing and Washington to view the other side as seeking to use or manipulate the Taiwan issue for political and strategic advantage.<sup>19</sup> Beijing perceives that Taipei is using this dynamic to move further toward independence, while Washington sees Taiwan as committed to maintaining its autonomous status.

Beijing thus views Washington as drawing ever closer to Taipei by expanding the level and type of contact with and assistance it provides. This is supposedly occurring in order to sustain the island's separation from the mainland and increase cross-Strait tensions, all in order to advance Washington's strategic goals vis-à-vis Taiwan. From Beijing's perspective, these U.S. goals include providing greater justification for strengthening the U.S. military posture in Asia, keeping Beijing focused on its Taiwan problem over other strategic challenges further afield, and preventing China from gaining control over what the United States increasingly seems to view as a vital

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<sup>18</sup> Goldstein, Avery and Jacques DeLisle. "Ch 1: Rivalry and Security in a New Era for US-China Relations" in DeLisle, Jacques and Avery Goldstein. *After Engagement: Dilemmas in US-China Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 1-49. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83272>; Glaser, Charles L. "Ch 2: Assessing the Dangers of Conflict: The Sources and Consequences of Deepening US-China Competition" in DeLisle, Jacques and Avery Goldstein. *After Engagement: Dilemmas in US-China Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 50-77. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83272>.

<sup>19</sup> Taiwanese public opinion on reunification has become more negative in recent years, in large part driven by what is seen as increasingly threatening and repressive Chinese actions, especially in light of developments in Hong Kong. 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/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/07/why-is-unification-so-unpopular-in-taiwan-its-the-prc-political-system-not-just-culture/>.

strategic location key to its defense posture in Asia.<sup>20</sup> These presumptive U.S. objectives are all part of the so-called “Taiwan card” that Washington is allegedly playing in its competition with Beijing.<sup>21</sup>

Such fears are based on a distorted view of U.S. intentions. Although many in Washington increasingly tend to view Taiwan in strategic terms, U.S. policymakers’ stated concerns are avoiding conflict and preserving Taiwan’s democratic freedom, not with sustaining the Taiwan imbroglio as a way of containing China. Most would probably still accept a peaceful, uncoerced resolution of the Taiwan crisis involving either independence or unification if such an outcome were to become possible over time.<sup>22</sup>

Beijing sees Taiwan as increasingly coming under the influence of pro-independence “splittists” who reject any conceivable formula for reunification and are encouraging the United States, with some success, to back their aims.<sup>23</sup> Beijing views House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s recent trip to Taiwan as a deliberate escalation of U.S.-Taiwan relations.

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<sup>20</sup> 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.htm](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.htm); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “Yang Jiechi Meets with U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.” June 14, 2022.

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202206/t20220614\\_10702808.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202206/t20220614_10702808.html); 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); 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>; “Jincanrong: Ruguo meijun guojie, zhongguo zenme yingdui? 金灿荣：如果美军过界，中国怎么应对？” [Jin Canrong: If the US military crosses the border, how will China respond?], Guanchazhe wang 观察者网, August 1, 2022.

<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1739914164835038261&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

<sup>21</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.”

<sup>22</sup> This view is reflected in the author’s numerous discussions held with scholars and former U.S. officials over many years.

<sup>23</sup> Kuo, Lily. “Tsai Ing-wen says China must ‘face reality’ of Taiwan’s independence.” *The Guardian*, January 15, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/tsai-ing-wen-says-china-must-face-reality-of-taiwans-independence>; Chung, Lawrence. “Taiwan won’t give in to Beijing as it seeks UN membership, island’s President Tsai Ing-wen says.” *South China Morning Post*, July 12, 2019.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3018363/taiwan-wont-give-beijing-it-seeks-un-membership-islands>.

China saw evidence of strong, unprecedented encouragement of the pro-independence sentiments of Taiwan's leader Tsai Ing-wen, a further weakening of Washington's One China policy, and a test or challenge to China's resolve in preventing the permanent separation of the island.<sup>24</sup>

Washington sees Beijing as increasingly relying on the military, economic, and political coercion of Taiwan and the amassing of greater military power against the United States over any effort at persuasion or enticement.<sup>25</sup> China's behavior, they believe, is intended to convince the Taiwanese public that unification is inevitable and deter the United States from frustrating Beijing's unification campaign or coming to the assistance of Taiwan in a possible future cross-Strait conflict.

More ominously, Washington suspects that Beijing's increasing attempts to constrain Taiwan with military, diplomatic, economic, and cyber tools is evidence of an intention to pursue unification by force.<sup>26</sup> And in some U.S. quarters, this suspicion has led to a belief that Beijing will indeed attack Taiwan in the near future.<sup>27</sup> But there is no conclusive proof that Beijing has rejected peaceful unification as a top priority nor resigned itself to employing coercion to attain that objective, even though the growing

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<sup>24</sup> Gang, Qin. "Chinese ambassador: Why China objects to Pelosi's visit to Taiwan." *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/08/04/china-ambassador-op-ed-pelosi-taiwan-visit/>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China." August 2, 2022.

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202208/t20220802\\_10732293.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220802_10732293.html); The State Council of the People's Republic of China. "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era."; 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."

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202208/t20220806\\_10736474.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220806_10736474.html).

<sup>25</sup> Lin, Bonnie. "Enabling 'Patriots' to Be Masters of the Island: Evolution of Xi's Policy on Taiwan Since 2013." *China Leadership Monitor*, September 1, 2022. <https://www.prleader.org/lin-september-2022>.

<sup>26</sup> Haass, Richard and David Sacks. "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>; U.S. Department of Defense. "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021." <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>27</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>; Davidson, Philip S., Adm. "Statement of Admiral Philip S. Davidson, U.S. Navy Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture." Senate Armed Services Committee, March 9, 2021.

[https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson\\_03-09-21.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson_03-09-21.pdf).

Sino-U.S. hostility suggests possible movement in the latter direction. More importantly, despite the repeated assertions of some observers, there is no clear evidence to suggest that Beijing is about to attack Taiwan.<sup>28</sup>

## *Washington and Beijing prefer to blame the other side rather than recognize their own contributions to the erosion of the U.S. One China policy and China's commitment to peaceful unification.*

Nor does China currently possess the capability to ensure a successful attack, while the economic and diplomatic costs of invading Taiwan remain extremely high.<sup>29</sup>

Washington has not (yet) backed Beijing into a corner and compelled its use of force by providing it with clear evidence of an intention to support Taiwan's formal and permanent independence.

Nonetheless, the deepening fears, beliefs, and misperceptions in Washington and Beijing have created a dangerous dynamic that leaves little room for compromise and fosters ever greater levels of distrust.<sup>30</sup> Despite the volatility of this situation,

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<sup>28</sup> Culver, John. "How We Would Know When China Is Preparing to Invade Taiwan." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 3, 2022.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/29/how-we-would-know-when-china-is-preparing-to-invade-taiwan-pub-88053>.

<sup>29</sup> Swaine. "Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military"; Quincy Institute. "Active Denial: A Roadmap to a More Effective, Stabilizing, and Sustainable U.S. Defense Strategy in Asia." Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, June 2022.

<https://quincyinst.org/report/active-denial-a-roadmap-to-a-more-effective-stabilizing-and-sustainable-u-s-defense-strategy-in-asia/>; Taylor, Brendan. "Enhancing Taiwan's Security and Reducing the Possibility of Conflict" in *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2022* (Berlin: International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 2022).

[https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/asia-pacific-regional-security-assessment-2022/apr\\_sa-chapter-3](https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/asia-pacific-regional-security-assessment-2022/apr_sa-chapter-3); Ullman, Harlan. "Reality Check #10: China will not invade Taiwan." Atlantic Council, February 18, 2022.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/reality-check/reality-check-10-china-will-not-invade-taiwan/>; Nathan, Andrew J. "Beijing Is Still Playing the Long Game on Taiwan." *Foreign Affairs*, June 23, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-06-23/beijing-still-playing-long-game-taiwan>; Bush, Richard, Bonnie Glaser, and Ryan Hass. "Don't Help China By Hyping Risk Of War Over Taiwan." NPR, April 8, 2021.

<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/08/984524521/opinion-dont-help-china-by-hyping-risk-of-war-over-taiwan>.

<sup>30</sup> Scobell, Andrew et al. "US-China Signaling, Action- Reaction Dynamics, and Taiwan: A Preliminary Examination." United States Institute of Peace, September 2022.

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/us-china-signaling-action-reaction-dynamics-and-taiwan-preli>

Washington and Beijing prefer to blame the other side rather than recognize their own contributions to the erosion of the U.S. One China policy and China's commitment to peaceful unification.<sup>31</sup> Responses from both the United States and China to Pelosi's Taiwan trip have greatly intensified this finger-pointing and exacerbated the negative interactive dynamic.<sup>32</sup>

President Biden further undermined Sino-American relations by stating, for the fourth time, that the United States will intervene militarily if China attacks Taiwan.

Administration officials have backtracked each of these statements by reaffirming the U.S. commitment to its One China policy (albeit with declining levels of credibility).<sup>33</sup> But an unreservedly hawkish future administration could dispense with even these or other

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military-examination; Alice Miller (Hoover Institution), "Beijing's Taiwan Policy after the 19th Party Congress, remarks delivered at the conference "Taiwan's Place in the Evolving Security Environment in East Asia," held by Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, March 5-6, 2018. Miller's unpublished remarks are available upon request to the author.

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Ambassador Zheng Zeguang: US betrays its words and creates tension, should bear full responsibility for the consequences." August 2, 2022. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbd\\_665378/202208/t20220803\\_10732687.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/202208/t20220803_10732687.html); The U.S. Department of State. "Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Press Availability."

<sup>32</sup> Culver, John. "When serious, careful US management of China– Taiwan policies ... isn't." *The Interpreter*, August 9, 2022.

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/when-serious-careful-us-management-china-taiwan-policies-isnt>; Culver, John and Kaiser Kuo. "Are we facing another crisis in the Taiwan Strait?" *The China Project*, August 4, 2022.

<https://thechinaproject.com/2022/08/04/are-we-facing-another-crisis-in-the-taiwan-strait/>; Haenle, Paul and Nathaniel Sher. "How Pelosi's Taiwan Visit Has Set a New Status Quo for U.S-China Tensions." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 17, 2022.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/08/17/how-pelosi-s-taiwan-visit-has-set-new-status-quo-for-u.s-china-tensions-pub-87696>; CBS News. "Former senior CIA analysts discuss China's reaction to Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan trip – "Intelligence Matters."" CBS News, August 17, 2022.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/former-senior-cia-analysts-chris-johnson-and-john-culver-weigh-in-on-china-intelligence-matters/>; Lin, Bonnie and Joel Wuthnow. "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/>.

<sup>33</sup> Wertheim, Stephen. "On Taiwan, President Biden Should Listen to Senator Biden." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 20, 2022.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/20/on-taiwan-president-biden-should-listen-to-senator-biden-pub-87962>; Malloy Allie and Maegan Vazquez. "White House says Biden was answering a hypothetical, not announcing a policy change on Taiwan." CNN, September 20, 2022.

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/20/politics/biden-taiwan-60-minutes-response/index.html>; Liptak, Kevin, Donald Judd and Nectar Gan. "Biden says US would respond 'militarily' if China attacked Taiwan, but White House insists there's no policy change." CNN, May 23, 2022.

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/23/politics/biden-taiwan-china-japan-intl-hnk/index.html>; Mason, Jeff and David Brunnstrom. "White House repeats no Taiwan policy change; experts see Biden gaffe." Reuters, October 22, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/white-house-repeats-no-taiwan-policy-change-experts-see-biden-gaffe-2021-10-22/>.

restraints, especially if Beijing were to continue its efforts to create a new, more assertive “normal” regarding Taiwan.<sup>34</sup>

## The obstacles to ending the dangerous dynamic: High stakes and vital interests

Neither Washington nor Beijing seems inclined toward mutual accommodation as a means of reassuring each other and reducing tensions over Taiwan. The interests and stakes operating on both sides, reinforced by the perceptions and misperceptions described above, place a premium on signaling resolve over accommodation.

### Chinese stakes and interests

For China, the Taiwan issue is inextricably bound up with the nationalist legitimacy of the CCP (and hence probably the political survival of top Chinese leaders) as the entity responsible for advancing the sacred task of national reunification. Both popular and elite attitudes and party propaganda make it clear that this task is unalterable and justifies using military force to achieve it. It also means that China would use force to prevent permanent separation of the island from the mainland.

But China knows that a conflict with the United States would severely damage its global political reputation and developmental interests. Seizing and holding Taiwan by force or compelling it to enter unification talks would be an enormous roll of the dice, given the many obstacles it would face in trying to achieve either goal.<sup>35</sup> That is why Beijing repeatedly says that peaceful unification is China’s priority.<sup>36</sup> And Russia’s failure to

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<sup>34</sup> Blanchard, Ben. “U.S. should recognise Taiwan, former top diplomat Pompeo says.” *Reuters*, March 4, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-should-recognise-taiwan-former-top-diplomat-pompeo-says-2022-03-04/>; Bolton, John. “Let Pelosi Go to Taiwan.” *The Washington Examiner*, July 24, 2022. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/courage-strength-optimism/let-pelosi-go-to-taiwan>.

<sup>35</sup> Culver. “How We Would Know When China Is Preparing to Invade Taiwan.”

<sup>36</sup> The State Council of the People’s Republic of China. “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era.”; Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China. “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference.” August 11, 2022.

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202208/t20220811\\_10741637.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202208/t20220811_10741637.html); Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China. “Wang Yi Meets with Former Secretary of

subdue Ukraine has probably contributed to Beijing's uncertainties regarding the viability of attempted unification by force.

Yet, as noted above, Beijing is expanding its military capabilities and engaging in more expansive military exercises near Taiwan. This is presumably in part a reflection of China's desire to become a "world-class military" by mid-century. But China is also responding to its perception that Washington is shifting away from its One China policy, and to Taiwan's movement away from the future option of unification, by preparing for the possible use of force.<sup>37</sup>

*China knows that a conflict with the United States would severely damage its global political reputation and developmental interests. Seizing and holding Taiwan by force or compelling it to enter unification talks would be an enormous roll of the dice.*

Beijing's steadfast opposition to pro-independence "splittist" forces on Taiwan has led to a refusal to engage the current Tsai Ing-wen government in Taipei in any kind of meaningful talks. This is apparently because: her political party (the Democratic Progressive Party) espouses the eventual independence of Taiwan; she has refused to uphold the so-called 92 Consensus between Beijing and the previous KMT-led Ma Ying-jiou government that vaguely endorsed a One China concept; and Tsai's government is viewed in Beijing as working on many fronts to consolidate a pro-independence mindset on the island.<sup>38</sup> The rigid Chinese rejection of cross-Strait

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State Henry Kissinger of the United States." September 20, 2022.

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202209/t20220920\\_10768474.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220920_10768474.html); Jinping, Xi.

"Speech at a meeting marking the 110th Anniversary of the Revolution of 1911." (Speech, Beijing, October 9, 2021). <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202110/13/WS6166e9afa310cdd39bc6ebcd.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China. "China's National Defense in the New Era," July 24, 2019. [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content\\_4846452.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content_4846452.htm).

<sup>38</sup> Bush, Richard. "From Persuasion to Coercion: Beijing's Approach to Taiwan and Taiwan's Response." Brookings Institution, November 2019.

[https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FP\\_20191120\\_beijing\\_taiwan\\_bush.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FP_20191120_beijing_taiwan_bush.pdf).

dialogue casts doubt on Beijing's willingness to accept a high level of autonomy for Taiwan under any future type of unification.<sup>39</sup>

For some observers, Beijing's stance toward Taiwan also reflects a core strategic interest: to ensure eventual Chinese control over the island, and prevent the United States from achieving control, because of its strategic location and valuable technological resources.

According to this argument, which has only emerged in recent years as the Sino-U.S. strategic competition has intensified, control over Taiwan would give Beijing easy access to the entire Western Pacific, thus defeating any effort to contain it militarily within the first island chain that extends along China's maritime periphery from Japan to Southeast Asia.<sup>40</sup> In addition, control over the island would presumably give Beijing access to one of the world's major computer chip fabrication facilities, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC).<sup>41</sup> Although there is little hard evidence that either strategic interest actually drives Beijing's stance toward Taiwan, one cannot discount such a possibility.

Some observers believe that Beijing has shifted from focusing on preventing Taiwan's permanent separation to coercing unification and accelerating a timetable to achieve that goal. Xi Jinping's explicit association of unification with national rejuvenation, and his stated desire to achieve the latter goal by mid-century, have made this view particularly salient.<sup>42</sup> This implies but does not confirm that Beijing has a timeline for

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<sup>39</sup> Bush. "From Persuasion to Coercion: Beijing's Approach to Taiwan and Taiwan's Response"; Miller, Alice. "Beijing's Taiwan Policy after the 19th Party Congress" (panel discussion, Taiwan's Place in the Evolving Security Environment of East Asia, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, March 5, 2022). <https://fsi.stanford.edu/events/taiwans-place-evolving-security-environment-east-asia>.

<sup>40</sup> Talmadge, Caitlin and Brendan Rittenhouse Green. "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan." *International Security* 47 no.1 (Summer 2022): 7–45, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00437](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00437); Colby, Elbridge A. "The United States Should Defend Taiwan." *The National Review*, December 20, 2021. <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-united-states-should-defend-taiwan/>.

<sup>41</sup> Wasser, Becca, Martijn Rasser and Hannah Kelley. "When the Chips Are Down: Gaming the Global Semiconductor Competition." Center for a New American Security, January 2022. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/when-the-chips-are-down/>; Lee, John and Jan-Peter Kleinhans. "Would China Invade Taiwan for TSMC?" *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/would-china-invade-taiwan-for-tsmc/>.

<sup>42</sup> Jinping, Xi. "Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China's Peaceful Reunification." (Speech, Beijing, January 2, 2019).

unification – which underlines U.S. concerns that China plans to use force at some point.

## U.S. stakes and interests

Like China, the United States values resolve over assurance and has been unwilling to show flexibility or admit responsibility for the downward spiral in Sino-U.S. relations. The bulk of the U.S. policy community and government want to maintain Washington's commitments to Taiwan's security and, by implication, to the security of regional allies; to preserve America's status as a global and regional superpower that protects peace and stability by wielding preeminent military and economic influence; and to defend a faithful friend and fellow democracy.<sup>43</sup>

*Washington refuses to recognize that its policies and actions signal an extreme interpretation of Taiwan's value to the United States and reinforce Beijing's heavy emphasis on deterrence.*

These interests place a high priority for U.S. decision-makers on deterring any Chinese resort to coercion or outright force and, if deterrence fails, defeating a Chinese attack or preventing the successful application of a Chinese coercive strategy toward Taiwan. This naturally means that it is in the interest of the United States to encourage, through its own actions, China's commitment to peaceful resolution and to dissuade Beijing from choosing a coerced form of peaceful unification. Unfortunately, this is not

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[http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201904/t20190412\\_12155687.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201904/t20190412_12155687.htm); Swaine, Michael D. "Recent Chinese Views on the Taiwan Issue." *China Leadership Monitor*, December 1, 2021.

<https://www.prleader.org/swaine-3>.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor. "Enhancing Taiwan's Security and Reducing the Possibility of Conflict."; Walt, Stephen. "America Has an Unhealthy Obsession With Credibility." *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/29/us-credibility-ukraine-russia-grand-strategy/>; Wong, Edward and Damien Cave. "U.S. Seeks to Reassure Asian Allies as China's Military Grows Bolder." *The New York Times*, August 5, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/05/world/asia/taiwan-china-united-states-allies.html>; McBride, Courtney. "U.S. Invitation to Taiwan for Democracy Summit Tests Ties With China." *The Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2021.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-invitation-to-taiwan-for-democracy-summit-tests-ties-with-china-11637783402>.

being done. Washington refuses to recognize that its policies and actions signal an extreme interpretation of Taiwan's value to the United States and reinforce Beijing's heavy emphasis on deterrence. In a mirror image of China, most U.S. politicians and officials lean heavily on military and political deterrence over any substantive forms of reassurance.

Some U.S. leaders might also see a strategic interest in preventing China from achieving any substantive control over Taiwan. They see this as essential to the defense of Japan and keeping China contained within the first island chain, as well as preventing it from accessing key technologies in Taiwan. These are all related to the desire to prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon. In fact, a few current and former U.S. officials and military officers have hinted that Taiwan policy should be predicated on preventing China from unifying with Taiwan, but the current U.S. administration has not made this an official position, which would destroy the One China policy.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Congress seems to be moving in this direction, as evidenced by the Taiwan Policy Act, and many Chinese see growing support for this stance as a major factor in U.S. policy.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ratner, Ely. "The Future of U.S. Policy on Taiwan." Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 8, 2021.

[https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821\\_Ratner\\_Testimony1.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821_Ratner_Testimony1.pdf); Swaine, Michael D. "US official signals stunning shift in the way we interpret 'One China' policy." Responsible Statecraft, December 10, 2021.

<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/10/us-official-signals-stunning-shift-in-the-way-we-interpret-on-e-china-policy/>; Heer, Paul. "Has Washington's Policy Toward Taiwan Crossed the Rubicon?" *The National Interest*, December 10, 2021.

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/has-washington%E2%80%99s-policy-toward-taiwan-crossed-rubicon-197877>.

<sup>45</sup> "Senate Foreign Relations Committee Overwhelmingly Approves Taiwan Policy Act of 2022." Senate Foreign Relations Committee, September 14, 2022.

<https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/dem/release/senate-foreign-relations-committee-overwhelmingly-approves-taiwan-policy-act-of-2022>; U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022."

[https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SBS%20Taiwan%20Policy%20Act%20FINAL%20(1).pdf); Gao, Victor Zhikai. "TPA and Its Consequences." China-US Focus, September 16, 2022.

<https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/tpa-and-its-consequences>; Minghao, Zhao. "Pelosi Syndrome Escalates Dangers." China-US Focus, August 29, 2022.

<https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/pelosi-syndrome-escalates-dangers>; Yan, Li. "What Happens After Pelosi?" China-US Focus, August 18, 2022.

<https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/what-happens-after-pelosi>.

## Conclusion and recommendations

For both China and the United States, the issue of credibility regarding Taiwan is central to their interests. The CCP's nationalist credentials are predicated on its image as the defender of China's territorial integrity, capable of reuniting the nation and ending the era of imperialist predation; the U.S. government, for its part, feels compelled to stand by its (limited) security assurances to Taipei while maintaining its position as a competent superpower. Taiwan might also come to play a critical role in ensuring the continued credibility of U.S. primacy in the world, if U.S. leaders come to view the island as an indispensable strategic node in its efforts to contain a global rival. The management of the Taiwan issue has thus become the most critical indicator of the capacity of each country to defend and advance its most vital national interests in the larger intensifying competition between them.

In this worsening situation, the Chinese side has little interest in reducing its signals of resolve and working to defuse or end the current crisis in the absence of credible signs from the United States that it stands by its One China policy and does not support Taiwan in seeking full independence. The United States, meanwhile, sees little reason to reconsider its rhetoric in the face of what it sees as unjustified Chinese provocations toward Taiwan. In other words, both sides believe that the other is preventing or refusing to take actions that would stabilize the Taiwan situation, and neither admits that its own actions are contributing to the crisis.<sup>46</sup>

To prevent a severe crisis and possible conflict over Taiwan, both nations must recognize their own contribution to the dilemma and show a willingness to undertake reassurance initiatives designed to test the goodwill and restraint of the other side. Such initiatives should focus on revitalizing the political understanding that has preserved stability in the Taiwan Strait, involving credible assurances of Washington's

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<sup>46</sup> Weiss, Jessica Chen. "The China Trap." *Foreign Affairs*, August 18, 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-trap-us-foreign-policy-zero-sum-competition/>; Haenle, Paul. "Breaking the US-China cycle of escalation over Taiwan." *The Straits Times*, September 6, 2022. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/breaking-the-us-china-cycle-of-escalation-over-taiwan>; Scobell. "US-China Signaling, Action- Reaction Dynamics, and Taiwan: A Preliminary Examination."

continued commitment to its One China policy and Beijing's commitment to peaceful unification. At root, Taiwan is a political issue to be kept stable or resolved primarily via credible political and diplomatic actions, including both reassurances and deterrence signals.

To reestablish a credible level of reassurance, Washington should clearly and unambiguously reaffirm the original elements of its One China policy regarding Taiwan. President Biden should state clearly that the United States does not regard Taiwan as a critical strategic node in its overall defense of the Pacific, much less the defense of U.S. territory. This reckless idea, reflected in a statement by a senior U.S. defense official, directly contradicts long-standing U.S. policy and provides ammunition to those in China who argue for using force to resolve the Taiwan issue.<sup>47</sup> Washington needs to explicitly reject this idea.

Washington should reassert that it remains entirely open to any uncoerced, peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue that is acceptable to both sides of the Taiwan Strait. U.S. officials no longer state this even-handed and fundamental stance basic to the One China policy. President Biden has even said that Taiwan will determine whether or not it will become independent, suggesting that the United States would not play a decisive role in any such decision, despite its importance to U.S. interests and regional stability.<sup>48</sup> This is inconceivable. Washington should convey unambiguously that it would oppose any unilateral move by Taiwan to achieve formal independence and make it very clear to Taipei that U.S. interests are deeply engaged in this issue.

President Biden should clarify that, while the United States is committed to aiding Taiwan's deterrence efforts and strengthening its ability to support Taiwan in its defense, any decision to deploy U.S. forces directly in a China – Taiwan conflict will be made on the basis of U.S. interests and in accordance with the procedure outlined in the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). Biden's repeated assertion of a commitment to intervene

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<sup>47</sup> Ratner. "The Future of U.S. Policy on Taiwan."; Swaine. "US official signals stunning shift in the way we interpret 'One China' policy."; Heer. "Has Washington's Policy Toward Taiwan Crossed the Rubicon?."

<sup>48</sup> Liptak, Kevin. "Biden says Taiwan's independence is up to Taiwan after discussing matter with Xi." CNN, November 16, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/16/politics/biden-china-taiwan/index.html>.

militarily in such a conflict contradicts the TRA and heightens the possibility of war by treating Taiwan as a formal security ally, which it is not.

The U.S. government should place clear limits on the level and type of contact between American and Taiwanese military and civilian officials. The core of the One China policy is a U.S. commitment to maintain only unofficial relations with Taiwan. Washington has repeatedly eaten away at this commitment by allowing ever more senior executive branch civilian and military officials to visit the island and Taiwanese officials to visit the United States.<sup>49</sup> It has also altered its physical presence in Taiwan to approximate the appearance and personnel of an official embassy.<sup>50</sup> This political salami-slicing should stop, and Washington should reaffirm explicitly that it maintains only unofficial relations with Taipei. It should also avoid expanding its unit-to-unit military exercises with Taiwan.

Washington should reconsider its prohibition under the Six Assurances against discussions with Beijing regarding military sales, activities, and deployments relevant to Taiwan. Although politically sensitive in both Taiwan and the United States, the possibility of direct Sino-American discussions over what, if any, types of reciprocal restraints might be possible regarding the military capabilities and actions of either side should be raised, at least initially, in Track Two or Track 1.5 dialogues. Given the nearly singular focus on military deterrence by both sides, it makes little sense for the United States and China to refuse to engage in discussions of what sorts of military confidence-building measures might be possible. Of course, this type of dialogue should also involve prior U.S. consultations with Taiwan. But Taipei's preferences should not dictate U.S. behavior.

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<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, the administration does not exercise the same level of control over Members of Congress, as evidenced by the recent Pelosi trip to Taiwan, which Biden officials did not support. But the administration arguably could and should exert greater efforts to discourage such destabilizing Congressional behavior.

<sup>50</sup> Tan, Rebecca. "The U.S. government has opened a huge new facility in Taiwan, and China isn't happy." *The Washington Post*, June 18, 2018.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/06/18/the-u-s-government-has-opened-ahuge-new-facility-in-taiwan-and-china-isnt-happy/>; Chung, Lawrence. "US prepares to open new de facto embassy in Taipei amid 'policy shift' on Taiwan." *The South China Morning Post*, April 6, 2019.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3004910/us-prepares-open-new-de-facto-embassy-taipei-amid-policy-shift>.

Washington should convey its strong support for cross-Strait talks without preconditions and urge both Taipei and Beijing to adjust their stances to make the possibility of talks more likely. For Taipei, this would mean finding some language that does not preclude the possibility of an eventual One China outcome. Tsai Ying-wen has rejected the 92 Consensus as one example of such language, thereby implying an unwillingness to consider a possible future One China solution of any kind.

## *For both China and the United States, the issue of credibility regarding Taiwan is central to their interests.*

For Beijing, Washington should press for the development of an approach to China – Taiwan relations that explicitly lays out both the benefits for Taiwan of reaching reconciliation and the full extent of Taiwan's autonomy under unification.

The United States cannot undertake these actions unless Beijing takes credible steps of its own to reaffirm its commitment to uncoerced, peaceful unification. These should include a clear, unambiguous statement by Xi Jinping that China remains fully committed to that objective and has no timetable for its eventual completion.

Beijing should declare that it will significantly reduce military forays and exercises within the Taiwan Strait or in the vicinity of Taiwan as a goodwill gesture, taken in anticipation of a significant reduction in U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities and military exercises along China's maritime coast, or at least in the vicinity of Taiwan. Although reversible, such reciprocal gestures could open the door to further confidence-building measures by both sides, including some of the other reassuring statements mentioned above.

Beijing should signal a clear willingness to discuss credible, verifiable limits on the production numbers and deployments on Chinese soil of weapons systems most relevant to Taiwan, including offensive ballistic missiles, amphibious platforms, and minelayers, possibly as part of a U.S. agreement to forgo or reduce the sale to Taipei

certain types of U.S. weapons systems. Although impossible to achieve under current conditions, this type of reciprocal agreement could become viable as a consequence of most of the above actions by both sides, and an overall improvement in bilateral relations. Beijing (and Washington) should at some point in the reassurance process signal a willingness to discuss such possible trade-offs.

Beijing should clearly declare that under the condition of an improved Sino-American relationship, it would not regard Taiwan as a strategic location essential to its security posture that must be brought under Chinese control as soon as possible. A growing number of U.S. analysts suspect that Beijing holds this view, although it is not China's official policy. This lends support to those who argue that Taiwan is a critical U.S. strategic asset, which in turn increases Chinese suspicion of U.S. motives. It is in Beijing's interest to weaken this dynamic by reciprocating an American stance denying the strategic value of Taiwan.

The dangerous, interactive dynamic that is driving the United States and China toward confrontation and possible war over Taiwan must be defused. The stakes are simply too high for both nations to continue to blindly ignore their own responsibility in driving this dynamic and hence their mutual responsibility to alleviate it. Both sides must reject the self-righteous hubris that permeates their current positions, along with the opportunistic motives dictated by domestic politics and the worst-case assumptions of doomsday strategists. This will involve some risk-taking, but the risks involved in continuing to pursue their current course are far greater.

Finally, one must consider the very real possibility that Beijing and Washington fail to undertake the above reciprocal actions and a major Taiwan crisis with the potential for conflict erupts at some point over the next several years. This possibility suggests the urgent need for both nations to increase their understanding of the dangerous views and misperceptions each holds regarding crisis behavior, correct those problems, and put in place a set of effective crisis management mechanisms and procedures to avert conflict. This topic will be discussed in a follow-up brief.

## About the Author

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