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Stabilizing the Growing Taiwan Crisis: New Messaging and Understandings are Urgently Needed

MARCH 2024 | QUINCY BRIEF NO. 53

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Executive Summary

The U.S.–China relationship appears to have stabilized since the November 2023 meeting between U.S. president Joe Biden and China’s president Xi Jinping in San Francisco. The reality, however, is that the features and trends pushing both countries toward a confrontation over Taiwan persist, fueling a dangerous, interactive dynamic that could quickly overcome any diplomatic thaw between the world’s foremost powers.

These underlying forces – increased levels of domestic threat inflation in both the United States and China, the worst-casing of the other side’s motives and intentions, and the resulting erosion in the confidence of the original understanding over Taiwan reached in the 1970s – threaten to push Beijing and Washington into a crisis over Taiwan that both sides say they want to avoid.

To defuse this worrying dynamic, both the United States and China must reaffirm long standing policy on Taiwan, while also undertaking a set of specific actions to further stabilize the relationship between the two countries.

The Biden administration should explicitly reject extreme rhetoric towards China and deviations from longstanding policy on Taiwan, such as the framing of Sino–American competition as a titanic struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, and the contention that an independent Taiwan is strategically crucial to overall Asian security. The administration can further inject stability into U.S.–China interactions over Taiwan by re-affirming and clarifying the One China policy through a series of statements, including:

- The United States opposes any Chinese effort to coerce Taiwan or compel unification through force. However, the United States would accept any resolution

of the cross–Strait issue that is reached without coercion and that is endorsed by the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

- The United States recognizes that the defense of Taiwan is primarily the responsibility of the people of Taiwan. Relatedly, and in accordance with the U.S.–China normalization agreement, Washington is committed to maintaining only unofficial relations with Taiwan and has no desire to alter this commitment.
- The United States Government reiterates that it has no intention of infringing on Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity, or interfering in China’s internal affairs, or pursuing a policy of “two Chinas” or “one China, one Taiwan.”

These statements should be made in combination with actions that bolster cooperative engagement with China, such as the initiation of a combined civilian and military Track 1.5 dialogue with Beijing. We believe that this type of reassurance would lead to corresponding commitments from China that would improve stability in the Taiwan Strait, such as reductions in provocative military exercises and potentially high level Chinese declarations that reject coercive measures towards Taiwan and a specific timeline for reunification.

The recent improvements to the Sino–American relationship shouldn’t go to waste. The United States and China should go beyond the mere appearance of stabilization and revitalize the original understanding over Taiwan. Otherwise, they risk a continuous spiral towards full–scale conflict.

Introduction

In the leadup to Taiwan’s January 13 presidential election, many observers expected a highly belligerent response from Beijing if the very pro–independence Lai Ching–te were elected, a response perhaps greater than the intensive, prolonged saber rattling and strong rhetoric that followed former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s quasi–official trip to

the island in 2022.¹ This, by and large, did not occur. The Sino-American relationship has instead continued on its apparent course toward greater normalcy, made possible by a series of senior-level meetings culminating with the positive November 2023 San Francisco meeting between presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden.

On the surface, both sides might now appear to be committed to maintaining stable, if not highly productive, overall relations. Such a commitment has seemingly emerged out of a mutual need to address their tumultuous domestic political and economic environments – marked in China by a faltering economy and numerous purges within the military and in the United States by the huge uncertainties of the domestic political scene – and avoid adding yet another international crisis to those in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Some observers have drawn the conclusion from this situation that the contentious Taiwan issue has finally been put on a much more durable footing able to withstand future disruptions.² This appearance is deceptive, however. While it is true that such factors arguably work at present to suppress provocative U.S. or Chinese actions

¹ "Experts react: Taiwan just elected Lai Ching-te as president despite China's opposition. What's next?" The Atlantic Council, January 13, 2024.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/experts-react-taiwan-just-elected-lai-ching-te-as-president-despite-chinas-opposition-whats-next/>; Ryan Woo and James Pomfret, "China, Taiwan opposition warn of threat to peace from ruling party candidate," Reuters, January 11, 2024.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-warns-taiwan-ruling-party-presidential-candidate-over-possible-2024-01-11/>; Adm. Aquilino, John C. and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, "Adm. John C. Aquilino, Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Keynote and Q&A at the Pacific Forum," Transcript of speech given at Pacific Forum in Honolulu, Hawaii, January 16, 2024.

<https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/3658408/adm-john-c-aquilino-commander-of-us-indo-pacific-command-keynote-and-qa-at-the/>; Vincent Y. Chao "Taiwan's Election Isn't About War. It's About Clarity," *The Diplomat*, December 01, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/taiwans-election-isnt-about-war-its-about-clarity/>; Chris Buckley, et al. "In a Setback for Beijing, Taiwan Elects Lai Ching-te as President," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/13/world/asia/taiwan-election-china-us.html>; Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "China expected to ramp up pressure on Taipei and Washington after Taiwan's election," Axios, January 14, 2024. <https://wwwaxios.com/2024/01/14/china-taiwan-elections-military-political-biden/>; David Sacks, "Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election: Analyzing William Lai's Foreign Policy Positions," Council on Foreign Relations, December 20, 2023.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/taiwans-2024-presidential-election-analyzing-william-lais-foreign-policy-positions>.

² Patricia M. Kim, "The US-China relationship in 2024 is stabilized but precarious," Brookings Institution, January 12, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/us-china-relations-in-2024-are-stabilized-but-precarious/>; Syaru Shirley Lin, "Taiwan's 2024 Election Outcomes: Balancing Domestic Challenges and International Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, February 27, 2024.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/taiwans-2024-election-outcomes-balancing-domestic-challenges-and-international-relation>; David Sacks, "China Responds to Taiwan's Presidential Election: Is Beijing Biding Its Time?" Council on Foreign Relations, January 17, 2024.

<https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-responds-taiwans-presidential-election-beijing-biding-its-time>.

regarding Taiwan, they have not altered the many underlying features and trends in both countries that continue to push toward an eventual crisis and possible conflict over the island. These factors include:

- The increasingly high (and arguably growing) stakes the Taiwan issue presents for both Beijing and Washington;
- Deepening levels of domestic threat inflation on each side;
- The growing tendency on both sides to worst case the motives and intentions of others (fed by a persistent lack of trust) while failing to recognize the interactive nature of the rivalry;
- A resulting steady erosion of confidence in the original, stabilizing bilateral understanding regarding Taiwan reached between Beijing and Washington during the 1970s normalization process, and a related stress on deterrence over assurance;
- The absence of effective bilateral crisis prevention and management mechanisms.

Unless these factors are countered or corrected, the probability of a severe crisis over Taiwan will grow, not diminish, over the coming years, along with the likelihood that any such crisis will result in military conflict. Either outcome (crisis or conflict) will almost certainly produce disastrous consequences for regional and global stability, economic development, and the overall ability of nations to address growing world threats, from climate change to future pandemics.³

³ Jennifer Welch et al. "Xi, Biden and the \$10 Trillion Cost of War Over Taiwan," *Bloomberg*, January 8, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-01-09/if-china-invades-taiwan-it-would-cost-world-economy-10-trillion>; Brad Lendon and Oren Liebermann, "War game suggests Chinese invasion of Taiwan would fail at a huge cost to US, Chinese and Taiwanese militaries," *CNN*, January 9, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/09/politics/taiwan-invasion-war-game-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

A perfect storm continues to build

In China, the necessity to uphold the Party's absolute leadership and strengthen its legitimacy as the defender of Chinese nationalism and development, along with Xi Jinping's overall assertive foreign policy stance, increase the tendency for the PRC to bolster its legitimacy by treating sensitive sovereignty-related issues such as Taiwan with growing resolve and rigidity. This inclines the regime toward ever greater levels of assertiveness and increases the chance of a Chinese overreaction to any perceived major provocations by the United States or Taiwan.

While it is true that Beijing wishes to avoid a conflict over Taiwan, the extremely high nationalist stakes involved in the Taiwan situation ensure a strong level of domestic elite and public pressure on the PRC government to look tough and steadfast on this particular issue. Xi Jinping's apparent heightened stress on making major progress toward unification, if not resolving the Taiwan issue, as a key component of his overall plan for Chinese rejuvenation by mid-century, increases such assertiveness.⁴

In the United States, rising public and elite alarm and anxiety toward China as a strategic competitor, a bipartisan consensus in Congress on the need to ever more aggressively counter Beijing, and the U.S. presidential election campaign season combine to engender calls for greater levels of resolve to protect Taiwan. Support is steadily growing in Congress, among virtually all U.S. presidential contenders, and among many defense analysts, for an approach to the Taiwan issue that is all the more heavily centered on military deterrence of China.⁵ In contrast, little if any concern is expressed

⁴ "Highlights of Xi's speech at gathering marking 40th anniversary of Message to Compatriots in Taiwan," Xinhua, January 2, 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/02/c_137715300.htm; "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," The State Council of the People's Republic of China, August 10, 2022. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html; Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," Xinhua, October 18, 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf; "Full text of resolution on 19th CPC Central Committee report," Xinhua, October 22, 2022. <https://english.news.cn/20221022/e9f90843c675417da2753866407612d8/c.html>.

⁵ "Taiwan: Defense and Military Issues," Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2024. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12481#:~:text=Increasingly%2C%20the%20U.S.%20government%20has.strengthening%20U.S.%2DTaiwan%20defense%20ties.>; "Ten for Taiwan: Policy Recommendations to

for providing essential levels of credible reassurance on continuing U.S. support for the long-standing One China policy or a clear U.S. willingness to accept a peacefully negotiated settlement of any kind. American politicians are instead vying with one another to show their anti-China credentials.⁶ Especially worrisome, political pressure is growing to remove all strategic ambiguity around the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan independence, and to tighten all ties with Taiwan, especially military and political ties.⁷ There is no clear sense of a limit to this process short of the complete unraveling of the Sino-American strategic understanding over Taiwan.

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Beijing believes that a combination of the U.S. political trends, trends in Taiwan indicating a growing resistance to any form of unification with China, and Lai Ching-te's recent victory require ever stronger efforts to deter Taiwan "splittists" from building momentum in favor of the permanent separation of the island from the mainland with Washington's acquiescence, if not backing. The clearest expression of such deterrent efforts is military, in the form of increasing numbers of air and naval sorties around Taiwan, more intimidating military exercises, and the acquisition of more military capabilities aimed at the island.⁸ China gives little attention to providing credible reassurances of its continued commitment to peaceful unification as a top priority,

Preserve Peace and Stability in the Taiwan Strait," The House Select Committee on Chinese Communist Party, May 24, 2023.

<https://selectcommitteeeontheccp.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/selectcommitteeeontheccp.house.gov/files/evo-med-a-document/ten-for-taiwan-final-with-cover-page-2.pdf>.

⁶ Christopher S. Chivvis and Hannah Miller, "The Role of Congress in U.S.-China Relations," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 15, 2023.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/11/15/role-of-congress-in-u.s.-china-relations-pub-91012>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Amy Chang Chien and Chris Buckley, "China Sends Record Number of Military Planes Near Taiwan," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/18/world/asia/china-taiwan-military-planes.html>; "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," U.S. Department of Defense, October 19, 2023.

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3562442/dod-report-details-chinese-efforts-to-build-military-power/>.

despite the rote repetition of such a commitment in statements by Chinese leaders. Thus, China's turn toward military deterrence and away from diplomatic reassurance of peaceful intentions mirrors a similar trend in the United States.

Beijing is also doubling down on its use of the "One Country, Two Systems" formula for cross–Strait relations, despite the fact that such a model has been thoroughly rejected by the Taiwanese population after Beijing's nullification of its application in the case of Hong Kong.⁹ Equally concerning, although it has almost certainly not set a deadline for unification, Beijing may be showing greater impatience regarding the need to achieve significant progress toward unification – a view that could lead to dangerous miscalculations.¹⁰ China currently places all blame for the current Taiwan imbroglio on the activities of Taiwan "splittists" and interference by "external forces" (read: Washington) while refusing to acknowledge that it has contributed to the deteriorating situation through its inflexibility and growing use of military deterrence. These actions all contribute to Beijing's rigidity and feed Western anxiety regarding the possibility that China will use military force.¹¹

⁹ Ja Ian Chong, "The Many "One Chinas": Multiple Approaches to Taiwan and China," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 9, 2024.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/09/many-one-chinas-multiple-approaches-to-taiwan-and-china-pub-89003/>.

¹⁰ Dave Lawler, "Xi vows China and Taiwan will "surely be reunified" in New Year's speech," Axios, January 1, 2024. <https://wwwaxios.com/2024/01/01/xi-china-taiwan-unification-speech/>; Michael D. Swaine, and James Park, "Paths to Crisis and Conflict Over Taiwan," January 11, 2024.

<https://quincyinst.org/research/paths-to-crisis-and-conflict-over-taiwan/>.

¹¹ Oriana Skyla Mastro, "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>; Hal Brands, "Deterrence in Taiwan Is Failing," *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2023.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/08/us-military-deterrence-china-taiwan-war-east-asia/>; Michèle Flournoy, and Michael Brown, "Time Is Running Out to Defend Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, September 14, 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/time-running-out-defend-taiwan>; Elbridge Colby, "America Must Prepare for a War Over Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/america-must-prepare-war-over-taiwan>.

China's turn toward military deterrence and away from diplomatic reassurance of peaceful intentions mirrors a similar trend in the United States.

While correctly calling attention to the dangers inherent in Beijing's policies, Washington fails – at least publicly and likely even privately, in conversations with Chinese counterparts – to acknowledge the possibility that at least some of China's behavior is a response to U.S. actions regarding Taiwan and that these are contributing to the overall deterioration of the relationship. Of greatest concern, many China and Taiwan security specialists in the United States believe that the U.S. government is steadily eroding its One China policy, despite Washington's repeated public assertion that the policy has not changed.¹² This is likely provoking Beijing to increase its deterrence signaling beyond what it would otherwise be doing.

Many examples exist to show the eroding credibility of Washington's One China policy, a process that began well before the Biden administration but has accelerated under both Trump and Biden. Four major sets of U.S. actions should be highlighted.

1.) Moves towards a commitment to permanent Taiwan independence and away from strategic ambiguity: Washington has virtually stopped affirming, as it did for decades, that it would accept any outcome to the Taiwan situation arrived at peacefully and without coercion. Instead, it appears at times to support the idea that the United States should prevent even a peaceful, uncoerced unification of Taiwan with China. In this regard, Washington has failed to explicitly reject the increasingly common notion that Taiwan is a strategic location critical to U.S.

¹² Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken's Press Availability," U.S. Department of State, June 19, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-antony-j-blinkens-press-availability/#:~:text=That%20policy%20has%20not%20changed,status%20quo%20by%20either%20side.>; David Cohen, "Biden hasn't changed U.S. policy on Taiwan, Jake Sullivan says," Politico, June 4, 2023. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/06/04/china-taiwan-biden-sullivan-00100100#:~:text=President%20Joe%20Biden's%20national%20security,defend%20Taiwan%20if%20China%20invaded.>; Steve Holland, et al, "U.S. does not support Taiwan independence, Biden says," Reuters, January 13, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-us-does-not-support-taiwan-independence-2024-01-13/>.

security and developmental interests, a stance that implies Taiwan must be kept permanently separate from China even if a non-coercive solution could eventually be found.¹³ In addition, President Biden has repeatedly stated that the United States will militarily defend Taiwan if China attacks, a view that directly contradicts the long-standing U.S. stance of strategic ambiguity toward the island. And he has stated that it is up to Taiwan to decide if it wants to become independent, a view that undermines the oft-repeated U.S. stance that it would not support a unilateral Taiwanese move to independence.¹⁴

2.) Moves toward official, governmental contacts with Taiwan and efforts to discourage others from dropping such contacts: Washington now increasingly allows or undertakes actions undermining the unofficial nature of U.S.–Taiwan relations under the One China policy. Such actions include using official, governmental types of nomenclature or symbols to describe U.S. offices or maps relevant to Taiwan, and/or sending or permitting very senior government officials and military officers to visit the island (e.g., House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit when she was House Speaker), while receiving senior Taiwan officials in U.S. government offices.¹⁵ The United States also now discourages countries from switching their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China, despite the fact that the United States took the same action in 1979, and had avoided taking a stance against diplomatic recognition for decades.¹⁶

¹³ Ely Ratner, “Statement By Dr. Ely Ratner Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Office of the Secretary of Defense Before the 117 Congress Committee on Foreign Relations,” Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, December 8, 2021. https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/120821_Ratner_Testimony1.pdf.

¹⁴ Kevin Liptak, “Biden’s past promises for US to defend Taiwan under microscope in meeting with China’s Xi,” CNN, November 14, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/13/politics/joe-biden-taiwan/index.html>.

¹⁵ Ben Blanchard, “Former US officials to visit Taiwan for post-election talks,” Reuters, January 14, 2024. [https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/former-us-officials-visit-taiwan-post-election-talks-2024-01-14/#:~:text=TAIPEI%2C%20Jan%202014%20\(Reuters\).U.S.%20embassy%20in%20Taipei%20said.;](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/former-us-officials-visit-taiwan-post-election-talks-2024-01-14/#:~:text=TAIPEI%2C%20Jan%202014%20(Reuters).U.S.%20embassy%20in%20Taipei%20said.;) David Sacks, “Why Letting Taiwan Change the Name of Its Office in the United States Is a Mistake,” Council on Foreign Relations, September 13, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-letting-taiwan-change-name-its-office-united-states-mistake.>; Creery, Jennifer, “US Lawmakers Arrive in Taiwan as Tensions in Strait Simmer,” Bloomberg, February 21, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-22/us-delegation-led-by-mike-gallagher-lands-in-taiwan.>

¹⁶ Sarahj Kinosianand and Sam Blanchard, “U.S. leans on Honduras to rethink China switch, hopes for reprieve,” Reuters, March 18, 2023. [https://www.reuters.com/world/us-leans-honduras-rethink-china-switch-hopes-reprieve-2023-03-18/](https://www.reuters.com/world/us-leans-honduras-rethink-china-switch-hopes-reprieve-2023-03-18/;); “Taiwan: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, February 23, 2024. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10275#:~:text=We%20do%20not%20support%20Taiwan.both%20si>

3.) Redefining the components of the U.S. One China policy to stress pro-Taiwan statements while downplaying original understandings with Beijing: In describing the core elements of the One China policy, U.S. officials and documents now routinely de-emphasize features of the policy that are based on U.S.-China agreements contained in the three key Sino-American communiqües, in favor of other documents supportive of Taiwan. For example, officials frequently place the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) first in line as a primary element of the policy ahead of the three communiqües, a clear departure from the past practice.¹⁷ In fact, the TRA is a law passed by Congress that was designed to define and protect unofficial relations with Taipei, and to legally ensure continued U.S. military assistance to Taiwan. As such, it was not part of the original One China policy.

In an even more disturbing development, Washington now routinely and publicly asserts the Six Assurances¹⁸ made to Taiwan in the 1980s as a central part of U.S. policy, despite its non-binding nature and original low-profile origins.¹⁹ Though upheld by Congress via a 2016 non-binding “sense of Congress” resolution, the Six Assurances statement is not part of U.S. law and is not worded to convey its permanence in U.S. policy. The Six Assurances also do not

des%20of%20the%20Strait; Eduardo Baptista et al, “China rebukes U.S. for changing Taiwan wording on State Department website,” Reuters, May 10, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china-slams-us-changing-taiwan-wording-state-department-website-2022-05-10/>.

¹⁷ “Taiwan: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service; Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “U.S. Relations With Taiwan,” U.S. Department of State, May 28, 2022.

<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>; Dennis Van Vranken Hickey, “Taiwan Relations Act: Time for a Change?” Wilson Center, March 2014.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/TRAPolicyBrief.Hickey.pdf>.

¹⁸ There are at least three differing sets of descriptions of the Six Assurances in the record of the U.S. government. The version conveyed to Taiwan for its public release in 1982 by then-Secretary of State George Shultz stated them as follows: 1) The U.S. has not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan; 2) The U.S. has not agreed to consult with the PRC on arms sale to Taiwan 3) The U.S. will not play any mediation role between Taipei and Beijing; 4) The U.S. has not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act; 5) The U.S. has not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan; 6) The U.S. will not exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC.” Note that assurances 1, 2, 4, and 5 refer to past, not future U.S. behavior and hence do not necessarily constitute permanent commitments. For more detailed information, see Susan V. Lawrence, “President Reagan’s Six Assurances to Taiwan,” Congressional Research Service, June 13, 2023. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11665.pdf>.

¹⁹ For example, the latest State Department factsheet on U.S.-Taiwan relations describes the U.S. approach toward Taiwan to be guided by the Six Assurances, along with the Taiwan Relations Act and the three U.S.-China Joint Communiqües. “U.S. Relations with Taiwan,” U.S. Department of State, May 28, 2022.

<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>.

represent a U.S.–China agreement. They were originally produced at Taiwan’s request to clarify, privately, the U.S. stance toward Taiwan and the PRC at the time it was issued (in 1982).²⁰ Although reaffirmed by successive administrations, for decades, it was treated as an ancillary component of U.S. policy, not publicly listed as a core element of the One China policy.²¹ They should thus not be treated as core, immutable elements of the U.S. One China policy equal in importance to the three communiqües and the TRA.

4.) The stationing of U.S. military forces in Taiwan: Finally, Washington continues to dispatch hundreds of U.S. military trainers to Taiwan, some now on a more or less permanent basis, while failing to push back against calls by government–related defense analysts and politicians for the deployment to the island of U.S. combat units or the visitation of U.S. naval vessels.²² The treatment of Taiwan as a de facto security ally within the U.S. defense perimeter would directly contradict the One China policy.

Many of these actions are no doubt direct responses to more assertive Chinese behavior, which has undermined trust in Beijing’s commitment to peaceful unification as a first priority. But whatever their origins, their effect is to undermine confidence in the One China policy without appreciably increasing deterrence toward Beijing or strengthening the status quo in Taiwan. They undermine the symbolic and substantive

²⁰ Lawrence. “President Reagan’s Six Assurances to Taiwan.”

²¹ Richard C. Bush, “Why assurances matter in U.S.–Taiwan relations,” Brookings Institution, August 29, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-assurances-matter-in-u-s-taiwan-relations/>.

²² Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “U.S. to Expand Troop Presence in Taiwan for Training Against China Threat,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2023.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-expand-troop-presence-in-taiwan-for-training-against-china-threat-62198a83>;

Joseph Trevithick, “Air Mobility Command Boss Predicts War With China In 2025 In Dire Memo,” *The Warzone*, January 27, 2023. <https://www.twz.com/usaf-general-warns-of-war-with-china-over-taiwan-in-2025>; Congress.gov. “S.332 - Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act,” February 22, 2021.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/332/text>; Bernard Orr, “US Navy sends first warship through Taiwan Strait post-election,” Reuters, January 24, 2024.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-navy-says-uss-john-finn-conducted-transit-taiwan-strait-2024-01-24/>; Matthew Lee, “China objects as US approves military aid to Taiwan under program aimed at sovereign nations,” Associated Press, August 31, 2023.

<https://apnews.com/article/us-military-aid-taiwan-sovereign-one-china-policy-23dbe7da92c63bc33e93f95ab09b7f2b>;

Eric Gomez, “A Costly Commitment: Options for the Future of the U.S.–Taiwan Defense Relationship,” Cato Institute, September 28, 2016.

<https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/costly-commitment-options-future-us-taiwan-defense-relationship>.

agreements around normalization that have kept the peace for decades, without improving Taiwan's actual security situation.

These actions undermine the symbolic and substantive agreements around normalization that have kept the peace for decades, without improving Taiwan's actual security situation.

Instead of addressing the worsening interactive dynamic underway, Washington continues to point publicly to Chinese provocations as a justification for taking the above actions. This mirrors and encourages China's own one-sided, unreflective behavior. More broadly, in high-level dialogues between U.S. and Chinese officials, Washington's efforts to avoid confrontation or conflict focus on the maintenance of communication channels in order to clarify policies and avoid misunderstandings, rather than creating a pattern of constructive, cooperative interactions that could address the core sources of tension between both nations and, in the process, build a modicum of trust between the two leaderships.

In China, U.S. assertions that the One China policy has not changed, or that its relations with Taiwan remain unofficial, thus fall on deaf ears.²³ And the apparent hypocrisy of U.S. behavior is then used to justify more provocative Chinese actions, which lead many Americans to conclude that Beijing is jettisoning its commitment to peaceful unification.

This worsening situation is made even more dangerous by the absence of substantive crisis prevention and management mechanisms and procedures between the two nations. It is true that Washington and Beijing have recently agreed to resume a

²³ "Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 2, 2022.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202208/t20220802_10732293.html; "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on January 16, 2024," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, January 16, 2024.

http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202401/t20240116_11225146.htm.

nascent military-to-military crisis communication working group that remained suspended since 2019 and appear to be working to revive a few other more established agreements designed to avoid incidents in the air and at sea.²⁴ But the mere establishment of communications channels and limited understandings around such communications is a long way from producing the kind of extensive and substantive military and civilian crisis prevention mechanisms required to avert or de-escalate a serious Taiwan crisis.²⁵

Reversing the slide

Under conditions marked by deep mutual distrust, the failure to match words with actions, the influence of domestic politics, and the overall refusal to acknowledge the interactive nature of the Taiwan imbroglio, the continued heavy reliance by both Washington and Beijing on deterrence (as opposed to credible signals of reassurance) will simply serve to increase the chance of a severe crisis.

There are, however, concrete steps that the U.S. government, Congress, and civil society can take to reduce the mounting tension around the Taiwan issue and remove it as a major factor driving the growing rivalry between Washington and Beijing. Most importantly, both sides must reverse the tendency to regard the island as a surrogate for the overall U.S.–China strategic competition.

Ending Extreme Rhetoric and Hypocrisy

This requires, as a first step, efforts to reduce the overall intensity of the bilateral rivalry, by eliminating the heretofore divisive, often politically-induced, zero-sum rhetoric that has dominated much of the dialogue in Washington and Beijing, and ending, to the

²⁴ Lolita C. Baldor, “Biden and Xi agree to restore some military-to-military communications between the US and China,” Associated Press, November 15, 2023.

<https://apnews.com/article/us-china-military-relations-339980a0d494bcde92905411838808a4>.

²⁵ Michael D. Swaine, “How to Break the Impasse in U.S.-China Crisis Communication,” U.S. Institute of Peace, July 26, 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/how-break-impasse-us-china-crisis-communication>; Michael D. Swaine, “The Worsening Taiwan Imbroglio: An Urgent Need for Effective Crisis Management,” Quincy Institute, November 28, 2022.

<https://quincyinst.org/research/the-worsening-taiwan-imbroglio-an-urgent-need-for-effective-crisis-management/>.

extent possible, the mismatch between the words spoken and actions taken on both sides. The former includes, for example, U.S. references to China as a “predatory” economic actor fixed on creating a Sino-centric global order,²⁶ and Chinese references to a concerted U.S. campaign to weaken China overall and end the PRC regime.²⁷ The latter involves the mismatch between Chinese espousals of benign motives and “win-win” policies toward Washington and various concerted efforts taken to undermine U.S. influence, on one side, and American assurances regarding the creation of a stable and mutually productive form of peaceful coexistence with China alongside repeated espousals of a desire to “win” a titanic struggle between U.S. democracy and Chinese authoritarianism on the other side.

Such overblown rhetoric and hypocrisy deepen distrust and signal that there is no potential common ground on critical issues such as Taiwan’s future. They reinforce worst-case assumptions about motives and therefore increase the likelihood that manageable crises will become severe conflicts. In the U.S. case, such rhetoric does not create concrete diplomatic or competitive benefits. Instead, it appears aimed at domestic political considerations. Internationally, such rhetoric does not make Washington more competitive or encourage partners and allies to support U.S. policy, given the hesitation of many such nations to fully back what they perceive to be

²⁶ U.S. portrayal of China as a global economic predator became prevalent under the Trump administration and continued under the Biden administration. For example, the Trump administration devoted a section in its China factsheet to call out on Chinese predatory behavior. “The Chinese Communist Party: Threatening Global Peace and Security,” U.S. Department of State.

<https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-chinese-communist-party-threatening-global-peace-and-security/#EconomicPractice>; Under the Biden administration, top foreign policy officials, including Jake Sullivan and Tony Blinken, have routinely referred to China as an economic predator. “On-the-Record Press Call by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on the President’s Trip to Europe,” The White House, June 17, 2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/06/17/on-the-record-press-call-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-the-presidents-trip-to-europe/>; “Blinken Arrives in Tonga, Warns of ‘Predatory’ Chinese Aid,” VOA, July 25, 2023.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/blinken-arrives-in-tonga-warns-of-predatory-chinese-aid/7198268.html>.

On the FBI website, China is described as “seeking to become the world’s greatest superpower through predatory lending and business practices. “The China Threat,” FBI.

<https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/the-china-threat>.

²⁷ The Chinese leadership has constantly accused the United States of attempting to contain China’s developments and weaken the PRC regime. “Wang Yi Meets with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, September 24, 2022.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202209/t20220924_10771042.html; Keith Bradsher, “China’s Leader, With Rare Bluntness, Blames U.S. Containment for Troubles,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/world/asia/china-us-xi-jinping.html>.

Washington's radical and overly ideological claims. Moreover, the growing contention in Congress and the Pentagon that an independent Taiwan is a strategic linchpin critical to overall Asian security and the U.S position in Asia directly contravenes the One China policy, threatening the basic bilateral political foundation established at the time of Sino-American normalization.²⁸

Overblown rhetoric and hypocrisy deepen distrust and signal that there is no potential common ground on critical issues such as Taiwan's future.

The Biden administration should explicitly reject all such rhetoric as unhelpful to achieving U.S. goals and, at the same time, call on the Chinese to do the same, while working with Beijing to end the hypocrisy that pervades both sides.

Sending Clear Messages of Deterrence and Reassurance

While attempting to improve the overall climate of the relationship, the administration should also, in recognition of the negative interactive dynamic underway regarding Taiwan, issue a set of statements designed to stabilize the overall relationship and reinvigorate and reestablish the credibility of the original One China/peaceful unification understanding that undergirds the Taiwan issue. These utterances, whether undertaken publicly or privately, could occur over time as part of Congressional testimony or in administration speeches or bilateral meetings. They are, as follows:

²⁸ Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas Christensen, "Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs*, November 30, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwan-china-true-sources-deterrence>; Michael D. Swaine, "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-one-china-policy/>; Paul Heer, "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>.

- The United States believes that a stable, constructive relationship between China and the United States is not only in the interest of the Chinese and American peoples but also contributes to the cause of peace in Asia and the world.
- The United States has no desire to weaken or overturn China's government, does not seek a new Cold War with China, much less a conflict, is not strengthening its alliances nor limiting high-technology business with China in order to undermine or weaken the Chinese nation, and does not support Taiwan independence.²⁹
- Despite the great strides in cross-Strait relations made since the normalization of diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing, the United States believes that conditions have not yet been created for a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue by the two sides of the Taiwan Strait.
- Under these circumstances, the United States believes that all parties should display patience, eschew any unilateral changes to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, and avoid actions that would compromise prospects for peaceful resolution. In this regard, the United States attaches great importance to China's declaration that its fundamental policy is to strive for peaceful unification.
- The United States is convinced that it is in the interest of both countries to establish sustained consultations on bilateral and international issues of common interest. The purpose of such consultations should be not only to reduce the danger of military conflict, but also to strengthen incentives on both sides to cooperate in solving common problems and building a more constructive relationship.
- In accordance with its long-standing One China policy, the United States will accept any resolution of the cross-Strait issue that is reached without coercion and endorsed by the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. To this end, it

²⁹ Although most (but not all) of these points have been stated at various times by U.S. officials, such assurances should be combined and clearly stated together, preferably by the U.S. president, to rebut the notion, expressed by some Chinese officials, that Washington is placing a low priority on them.

would welcome talks between Taipei and Beijing to explore avenues toward a peaceful settlement.

- For that reason, the United States does not regard Taiwan as a strategic location vital to the U.S. security position in the western Pacific that is to be kept permanently separate from China. While the United States does not oppose Taiwan eventually becoming part of China peacefully and through mutual consent, it is firmly opposed to any Chinese effort to coerce the island or compel unification through force.
- Although the United States is committed under the Taiwan Relations Act to make available to Taiwan such defense articles and services as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capacity, and would regard any security threat to Taiwan as a threat to peace and stability in Asia, the defense of Taiwan is primarily the responsibility of the people of Taiwan and requires their utmost efforts, with U.S. support. As stipulated by the TRA, how the United States should assist Taiwan in the event China were to launch a military attack will be determined by the president in consultation with Congress.
- In accordance with the U.S.–China normalization agreement, Washington is committed to maintaining only unofficial relations with Taiwan and has no desire to alter this commitment. It will maintain clear limits on the level and types of contact between Taipei and Washington. However, greater efforts by China to intimidate or coerce Taiwan will inevitably cause the United States to increase its support for Taipei by establishing closer political and military ties.
- The United States government reiterates that it has no intention of infringing on Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity, interfering in China's internal affairs, or pursuing a policy of "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan." However, the United States will continue to maintain strong cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people in Taiwan.

These statements would represent a clear shift from the current drift toward confrontation and abandonment of the “One China” normalization understandings with China over Taiwan. They would not constitute a new U.S. policy so much as an attempt to restore policy understandings that have maintained peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for decades.

To enhance the credibility of the above statements, Washington should also combine them with several specific actions and call for specific confidence-building actions from Beijing in return. These should include:

- A return to unannounced, low-profile U.S. naval transits of the Taiwan Strait, and a reduction of reconnaissance flights along the Chinese coast. But any such U.S. actions should be made conditional on Beijing reducing military tensions by lowering its recently enhanced military activities around Taiwan.
- The initiation of a combined civilian and military Track 1.5 dialogue with Beijing on how to improve both crisis management and crisis prevention capabilities. This should eventually feed into a Track One dialogue on this subject, aimed at developing a set of crisis guidelines and mechanisms to be used by agencies and leaders at all levels of the crisis decision-making system, both military and civilian.³⁰
- In exchange, the United States should also call on Beijing to confirm and uphold its support for peaceful unification by declaring at the highest level of government that China has no deadline for achieving reunification, will not attempt to coerce Taiwan into political talks, and will avoid coercive measures toward Taiwan in general.

³⁰ Specifically, this effort could aim at generating: agreed-upon crisis prevention and management guidelines or best practices; a lexicon of commonly used terms and signals employed to avert or manage a serious political-military crisis; and specific mechanisms, such as a regular, semi-official “non-conversation” channel between mutually respected senior former officials. Such a channel could “test” crisis-related initiatives under consideration at the official level and reduce misunderstandings resulting, e.g., from unclear crisis signaling.

Preliminary discussions the author has held with Chinese specialists on Taiwan and on U.S.–China relations indicate that Beijing would likely be receptive to the above statements and actions by both sides, assuming that they are clearly and consistently made by senior U.S. officials (eventually across administrations), and that they receive some Congressional support.

Beyond the above statements and actions, U.S. officials should also engage senior Taiwan officials in order to explain why stabilizing the relationship with Taiwan in this manner is in Taiwan’s interest. The overwhelming majority of Taiwanese people do not support a clear movement toward either independence or unification.³¹ Many are increasingly concerned about the island being dragged into a crisis or conflict due to a worsening strategic competition and accompanying arms race between Beijing and Washington, and looking for less dangerous ways to stabilize the current situation.³² Therefore, many Taiwan citizens could be receptive overall to the above methods for revitalizing the original Sino–American understanding regarding Taiwan and stabilizing the status quo.

Congressional and Civil Society Actions

A clear factor in the drift toward confrontation and crisis over Taiwan is the pressure from Congress toward increasingly radical rhetoric and actions over both the overall U.S.–China relationship and Taiwan specifically. This has been reflected in a steady stream of legislation, especially from the House, that would undermine the “One China policy” by weakening strategic ambiguity and pushing the U.S. government toward forms of official recognition of Taiwan.³³ To take just one example, HR 1159, which passed the House by an overwhelming majority with support from both parties, would require the State Department to issue regular reports on its “opportunities and plans to

³¹ “Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1994/12~2023/12),” National Chengchi University, February 22, 2024. <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7801&id=6963>.

³² Iain Johnston, Chia-hung Tsai, and George Yin. “When might US political support be unwelcome in Taiwan?” Brookings Institution, April 5, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/when-might-us-political-support-be-unwelcome-in-taiwan/>.

³³ Blaise Malley, “Congress and the 4 faces of China baiting bills in 2023 Congress and the 4 faces of China baiting bills in 2023,” *Responsible Statecraft*, December 27, 2023. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/china-congress-2023/>.

lift self-imposed restrictions on relations with Taiwan” – putting pressure on the Executive to lift the restrictions on official relations with Taiwan put in place to support normalization with China in the 1970s.³⁴ In the U.S. Senate, a bill that passed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2022 would have specifically required the U.S. government to reverse key parts of the One China policy by essentially restoring diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, as well as rolling back strategic ambiguity by asserting that Taiwan’s independence was a core U.S. strategic interest and moving toward an explicit commitment to the military defense of Taiwan.³⁵

In addition, the very large and well-funded Select Committee on the CCP in the House of Representatives has been a steady source of radicalizing and confrontational rhetoric around the U.S.–China relationship and increased the emphasis on highly militarized and one-sided approaches toward the Taiwan issue. The Committee’s “Ten for Taiwan” report includes recommendations to “harden and distribute U.S. force posture in the Indo-Pacific,” “urgently provide Taiwan with essential hard power capabilities,” “expand combined military training between the United States and Taiwan,” and “rapidly increase the number of long-range strike assets in the theater.”³⁶

Despite the role of Congress in channeling political pressure for a more radical U.S. position on Taiwan, there are in fact a considerable number of (primarily Democratic) members of Congress who are sympathetic to the need to de-escalate tensions around Taiwan. However, they face significant political pressure to avoid appearing “soft on China.” Standing up for common-sense measures that provide a judicious balance of deterrence and reassurance measures toward China would require clear signals of

³⁴ Congress.gov, “H.R.1159 – 118th Congress (2023-2024): To amend the Taiwan Assurance Act of 2020 to require periodic reviews and updated reports relating to the Department of State’s Taiwan Guidelines,” February 24, 2023. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/1159>.

³⁵ Congress.gov, “S.4428 – 117th Congress (2022-2023): Taiwan Policy Act of 2022,” June 16, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/4428>.

³⁶ “Ten for Taiwan: Policy Recommendations to Preserve Peace and Stability in the Taiwan Strait,” The Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, May 24, 2023. “Ten for Taiwan: Policy Recommendations to Preserve Peace and Stability in the Taiwan Strait,” The Select Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. <https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/media/policy-recommendations/ten-taiwan-policy-recommendations-preserve-peace-and-stability-taiwan>.

support from both the administration and civil society to provide them with political cover. In the short run, such support might face seemingly impossible obstacles in the heated environment of the U.S. presidential election season where contenders for office will likely compete to outdo one another in criticizing China while ignoring Washington's contribution to the current Taiwan imbroglio.

But such hyperbole could also prompt many public figures who are not directly contending in the election to become more receptive to more pragmatic, restrained approaches to the Taiwan issue (and the overall U.S.–China relationship). It is important to rally civil society to a better understanding of the stakes involved in interrupting the increasing momentum toward a crisis and possible conflict over Taiwan, and the ways in which reaffirming diplomatic understandings and ending zero-sum polemics and hypocrisy can prevent conflict while continuing to support Taiwan's security.

No time to lose

The appearance of a newly stabilized Sino–American relationship and accompanying signs of restraint on the Taiwan issue are misleading. The basic dynamic moving the issue toward a future crisis and possible conflict over the island has not changed appreciably in recent months, despite the emergence of a more regularized leadership dialogue and some positive rhetoric. Nonetheless, Washington and Beijing should take the opportunity provided by the current marginal improvement in their overall relationship to undertake the statements and actions recommended above regarding their overall rivalry and the Taiwan problem in particular. Doing so can help revitalize confidence in the original understanding between the United States and China that has kept the peace across the Taiwan Strait for decades and create a modicum of bilateral trust going forward. This will prove extremely difficult in the near term, for the reasons cited above. It will require courageous leadership on both sides. But without such an effort, Washington and Beijing will continue to slide toward a severe crisis and possible conflict over the Taiwan issue.

Acknowledgements

Quincy Institute Director of Studies Marcus Stanley and Outreach Coordinator Tori Bateman provided the information contained in this brief regarding Congressional Taiwan-related legislation.

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