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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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17.10.2021

Why Taiwan is an explosive flashpoint for a US-China war

As the Biden administration ramps up its aggressive confrontation with China, Taiwan is rapidly becoming the most immediate and dangerous flashpoint for war between the world's two largest economies—both armed with nuclear weapons.

The status of Taiwan has long been highly contentious and potentially explosive. However, for four decades, after the US and China established diplomatic relations in 1979, tensions over Taiwan were largely managed and contained within the framework of delicately balanced arrangements.

Beginning with the Trump administration, those agreements, diplomatic protocols and tacit understandings increasingly have been torn up—a process that Biden is accelerating. The most egregious step, so far, has been the provocative leak this month via the *Wall Street Journal* that US special forces have been on Taiwan training troops for more than a year.

In 1979, the US, as part of its arrangements with China, withdrew all of its military forces from Taiwan, broke off diplomatic relations and ended its military treaty with Taipei. The stationing of US troops on Taiwan is a flagrant breach of what has been the status quo for decades and calls into question the basis for US-China diplomatic ties.

To understand the great dangers posed by the Biden administration's deliberately inflammatory actions it is necessary to examine the historical background. To justify its

menacing military build-up in the region and the inflaming of this sensitive flashpoint, the US portrays Taiwan as a thriving democracy confronted with a growing Chinese threat of aggression.

In reality, US imperialism has never had the slightest concern for democracy on Taiwan or anywhere else in the region. Following Japan's World War II defeat in 1945, the US helped install the dictatorial Kuomintang (KMT) regime of Chiang Kai-shek as the government of China. In October 1945, the US Navy transported KMT troops to Taiwan, which had been a Japanese colony following China's defeat in the 1895 Sino-Japanese war.

The brutal US-backed Kuomintang regime

The KMT administration under the governorship of General Chen Yi was brutal from the outset as a worsening economic crisis strained relations between local Taiwanese and newly-arrived Chinese from the mainland. The shooting of a civilian protestor on February 28, 1947 provoked island-wide unrest that was violently suppressed by the KMT military. Estimates of the number killed range from 18,000 to 30,000.

The savage repression in Taiwan was part of the broader crisis of the Chiang Kai-shek regime, which was riddled with corruption. It used police-state measures against rising opposition that included a strike movement in the working class and from 1947 reignited a civil war against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the wake of the CCP's victory in 1949 and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, the KMT and its supporters fled to Taiwan.



Chiang Kai-shek reviewing troops in 1966 [Source: Wikimedia Commons]

The mass exodus of some two million people included the KMT leadership, soldiers, officials and the wealthy business elites. China's gold and foreign currency reserves, as well as many national cultural treasures, were carted off to Taiwan. The KMT government proclaimed Taipei the temporary capital of the Republic of China (ROC) and declared that its aim was to retake the mainland.

Taiwan today, separate from China, is the creation of American imperialism. Following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, then President Truman placed the island under the protection of the US Seventh Fleet. The KMT could only posture as a government-in-exile of all China with the backing of the United States. With Washington's backing, China's seat on the UN Security Council was handed to the ROC and Taipei, not Beijing, was recognised as the capital of China.

Just as it backed dictatorial and autocratic regimes throughout Asia, the US gave its full support to the KMT dictatorship, which imposed martial rule in May 1949 that continued for nearly four decades, until 1987. The KMT ruthlessly suppressed all political opposition, in what was known as the White Terror. According to one estimate, that involved the imprisonment or execution of 140,000 people for alleged anti-KMT or pro-Communist sentiments.

KMT provocations against Beijing, with US backing, including an air and naval blockade of the Chinese coast, were a constant source of tension. Taipei controlled, and continues to

control, a number of fortified islets just kilometres off the Chinese mainland and close to major Chinese cities.

Two major crises erupted in the 1950s. In August 1954, the KMT put tens of thousands of troops onto the islets of Matsu and Kinmen and began building military installations, to which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) responded by shelling Kinmen. At the height of the crisis, the US Congress authorised the use of military force against China and the Pentagon advocated nuclear strikes.

A second Taiwan Strait crisis erupted in August 1958 after the shelling of Matsu and Kinmen and clashes between KMT and PLA forces near Dongding Island. Air and sea engagements and artillery exchanges continued for three months, with losses amounting to hundreds dead on both sides. The US reinforced the KMT military, escorted KMT naval vessels to the beleaguered islets and the Pentagon again raised the necessity of using nuclear weapons.

The hostile standoff between China and the KMT regime on Taiwan, backed militarily by the US continued throughout the 1960s.

Washington's rapprochement with Beijing

US President Nixon's visit to China in February 1972 marked a major shift in geo-political relations. The trip had been announced the previous year, based on secret talks that Nixon's National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger had held with senior CCP leaders. Nixon and Kissinger calculated that the US could exploit the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s and the sharp tensions between Moscow and Beijing, which included border clashes, to forge a quasi-alliance with China against the Soviet Union.

Nixon's meeting with Chinese leader Mao Zedong and the release of the joint Shanghai Communiqué paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations. It was a reactionary partnership in which the CCP regime backed right-wing US allies such as the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and the repressive Iranian regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The pact also opened the door for the reintegration of China into the world capitalist market as a cheap labour platform.



Mao Zedong with US President Richard Nixon in 1972 [Source: Wikimedia]

Washington's abrupt about-face had far-reaching consequences for the KMT dictatorship on Taiwan. The status of Taiwan was a central issue in the protracted negotiations that eventually led to formal diplomatic ties between the US and China in 1979. The CCP insisted that the US recognise "One China" with Taiwan as part of China and end its military and diplomatic ties with Taipei.

In the Shanghai Communiqué, the US acknowledged: "[A]ll Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves." Furthermore, it affirmed "the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all US forces and military installations from Taiwan."

In 1979, when diplomatic ties were established, Washington broke diplomatic relations with Taipei, withdrew its forces and abrogated its military treaty—effectively, though not formally, acknowledging "One China" with the CCP regime in Beijing as the legitimate government. Taipei had already lost its seat in the UN in 1971 when Beijing took China's position as a permanent member of the Security Council—a move that the US did not block.

At the same time, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which opposed any attempt by Beijing to reunify Taiwan by force, authorised the sale of "defensive" military

weapons to Taiwan and established the American Institute in Taiwan, through which unofficial ties could be maintained. Washington adopted a stance of “strategic ambiguity” toward a conflict between China and Taiwan—that is, it did not give a guarantee as to whether it would intervene. This was aimed at curbing both Chinese aggression and provocative actions by Taiwan.

The end of the KMT dictatorship

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the US assisted Taiwan economically with financial assistance, investment and access to the American market that assisted in its state-supported industrialisation. During the 1970s, Taiwan was the fastest growing economy in Asia after Japan. With the turn to globalised production from the late 1970s, Taiwan became one of the major cheap labour platforms in Asia. Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore—the four Asian Tigers—were held up as a new model for economic development.

The KMT dictatorship was based on a nationally-regulated economy that was associated with corruption involving KMT cronies—“mainlanders”—at the expense of the indigenous Taiwanese elites. Under pressure from the US, the regime began to open up its economy in the 1980s, privatising state-owned corporations and eliminating state economic regulation—moves that led to a weakening of the KMT’s political base of support.

Political opposition remained illegal under martial law but was increasingly voiced through protests against the regime’s anti-democratic measures. Taiwan’s rapid economic expansion also led to a huge growth of the working class that was increasingly militant and conducted a wave of strikes demanding improved wages and conditions.

In response, the KMT conceded a series of limited democratic reforms. The bourgeois political opposition led by indigenous Taiwanese elites was able to form the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986 and the following year martial law was lifted on the main island of Taiwan. The main legislative bodies—the Legislative Yuan and National Assembly—had been stacked with unelected KMT representatives for provinces in mainland China on the basis of the fiction that the government still represented all of China. A full election for a reformed National Assembly was held in 1991 and a reformed

Legislative Yuan in 1992. The first direct election for the president and vice-president was held in 1996.

The status of Taiwan, which is inextricably intertwined with relations with mainland China, has increasingly dominated Taiwanese politics. President Lee Teng-hui, who initiated the limited democratic reforms, became the first Taiwanese-born president. Although a member of the KMT, he sought to promote a Taiwanese identity to counter the influence of the DPP and to project Taiwan on the international stage.

Lee challenged longstanding US diplomatic protocols against high-level visits by Taiwanese officials to the US by accepting an invitation in 1995 from Cornell University to deliver a speech on “Taiwan’s Democratisation Experience.” While the Clinton administration turned down his request for a visa, Congress supported the visit. It went ahead, provoking an angry reaction from Beijing, which denounced Lee as a “traitor” who was attempting to split China.

For its part, the CCP regime under Deng Xiaoping pushed the reunification of Taiwan on the basis of the formula “One Country, Two Systems”—that is, Taiwan would retain a significant degree of autonomy in politics, state structures and economy. Beijing was hostile to any suggestion that Taiwan could declare formal independence and regarded Lee’s visit to the US as a breach of undertakings given by Washington in 1979.

The visit provoked the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–96, underscoring the dangers of the current deliberate breaches by the US of its arrangements with China. Beijing announced missile tests and a build-up of military forces in Fujian—the Chinese province adjacent to Taiwan across the Taiwan Strait. The Clinton administration responded with the largest show of military might in Asia since the Vietnam War, dispatching two aircraft carrier battle groups to waters near Taiwan and sending one through the narrow Taiwan Strait. Beijing backed down.

The polarisation of Taiwanese politics between a pro-independence DPP and a KMT oriented toward China is rooted in the island’s economy. On the one hand, the lack of diplomatic recognition is a barrier to Taiwan’s entry into international bodies, including economic institutions, and makes economic and trade relations more difficult. The 2000 election of the first DPP President Chen Shui-bian, who promoted greater Taiwanese

autonomy, heightened tensions with Beijing, which warned it would respond to any formal declaration of Taiwanese independence with force.

On the other, capitalist restoration in China from 1978 onward opened up huge economic opportunities for Taiwanese corporations. Taiwanese businesses invested \$US118 billion in China between 1991 and early 2020 and the value of cross-strait trade in 2019 was \$149.2 billion. The KMT has sought to facilitate relations with China. Under KMT President Ma Ying-jeou, who was elected in 2008, a trade agreement opened up direct flights and cargo shipments between Taiwan and China, and economic relations strengthened.

In 2015, the first-ever meeting between Taiwanese and Chinese presidents—Ma and Xi Jinping took place in Singapore. They carefully stepped around any suggestion of two presidents of two countries by addressing each other as “Mr” and referring to “two coasts” rather than the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China. Both adhered to what is known as the 1992 consensus whereby the CCP and KMT agree that there is One China but still disagree as to who rules it.

US heightens tensions over Taiwan

The installation of Obama as president in 2009 marked a sharp turn toward confrontation with China, reflecting Democrat criticism of the previous Bush administration for ignoring Asia while prosecuting wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East. While the “pivot to Asia” was formally announced in 2011, the Obama administration initiated a wide-ranging offensive aimed at boosting the US position in Asia, undermining China economically and strengthening the US military presence and alliances throughout the region. By 2020, 60 percent of US naval and air assets were to be positioned in the Indo-Pacific, in line with the Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy for war with China.

The Obama administration deliberately stoked up tensions in the South China Sea by declaring that it had a “national interest” in the low-key territorial disputes between China and its neighbours. It made no attempt to end festering tensions on the Korean Peninsula over North Korea’s nuclear programs. At the same time, however, Obama steered clear of de-stabilising the status quo over Taiwan, in recognition of its centrality to US relations with China and the potentially explosive consequences.

Trump had no such qualms. Even before his formal inauguration, Trump provocatively took a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen from the DPP who had taken office in mid-2016. While the phone call was nominally to congratulate Trump on winning the election, it breached established protocols.



Tsai Ing-wen speaking on the phone with US President Trump in December 2016 [Source: Wikimedia]

Trump also put Beijing on notice by publicly declaring in an interview with Fox News in December 2016: “I don’t know why we have to be bound by a One China policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade.” The statement effectively transformed the “One China” policy from the basis for US-China relations to a bargaining chip in the trade and economic warfare Trump was to unleash.

The Trump administration included a number of top officials who had longstanding ties to Taiwan and who were deeply hostile to China, including his initial chief of staff Reince Priebus and White House trade adviser Peter Navarro. Under Trump, the US ramped up arms sales to Taiwan, increased the number of US warships passing through the Taiwan Strait, backed Taiwanese President Tsai’s anti-China stance and boosted contact between US and Taiwanese officials—all despite Chinese objections. In August 2020, Secretary of Health Alex Azar became the highest-ranking US official to visit Taiwan since 1979.

Trump’s deliberate and provocative stoking of the issue of Taiwan greatly heightened the danger of war. While the American propaganda incessantly warns of potential “Chinese aggression,” a new book, *Peril*, by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa published earlier this

year revealed that General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was compelled to take extraordinary steps to counter Trump's efforts to instigate a war with China as part of Trump's attempt to overturn his election defeat.

Far from attempting to mend relations with China, the Biden administration has further heightened tensions, including over Taiwan. Biden signalled his intentions to develop close relations with Taiwan by being the first president to invite the de facto Taiwanese ambassador to Washington Hsiao Bi-Khim to attend his inauguration. In the dying days of the Trump administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had announced he was ending all limitations on contact between US and Taiwanese officials, civilian and military, at every level. With minor modifications, the Biden administration has continued that policy. In June, with Biden's blessing, a group of US senators visited Taiwan nominally to announce a donation of COVID-19 vaccines.

US military and economic threats

The dispute between China and the US over Taiwan is not simply about diplomatic protocols. The strengthening of US ties with Taiwan poses definite threats to China—strategically and economically. The secret deployment of US special forces trainers to Taiwan coincides with a more sinister possibility, revealed in the Japanese Nikkei news agency, that the US was considering the stationing of medium-range offensive missiles in Asia, including on Taiwan.

The island of Taiwan is not only strategically located close to the Chinese mainland but forms part of the first island chain, stretching from Japan through to the Philippines, that US strategic planners regard as vital to hemming in Chinese naval forces in the event of war. During the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur stated that Taiwan was “an unsinkable aircraft carrier” able to project American power along China's coast in a containment strategy.

Economically, Taiwan is home to the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), which accounts for a 55 percent of international chip production and a massive 90 percent of the most advanced chips required both for industrial and military use. Trump has already dealt Chinese tech giant Huawei a huge blow by pressuring TSMC to stop supplying it chips.

In US military circles an intense discussion is underway over the danger of war with China over Taiwan. In March, Admiral Phil Davidson—the outgoing head of the US Indo-Pacific Command which would be on the frontline of any conflict with China—warned that the US could be at war with China in less than six years and called for a huge increase in his command's budget. Pointing to Chinese advances in military technology, Davidson and others have called for the accelerated development of new weapons systems for use in a conflict with China.

Behind the war drive by US imperialism against China is both the fear in Washington it is being overtaken economically and the profound political and social crisis at home. Amid huge social tensions and mounting struggles of the American working class, the ruling class could resort to war as a means of turning social tensions outward against an external enemy and at the same time reversing its historic decline and reasserting the regional and global hegemony it obtained after World War II.

For all the claims that China is considering an invasion of Taiwan, the US—by undermining the One China policy, step-by-step strengthening ties with Taipei and integrating it into US war plans—is goading Beijing toward making military moves. Any war between the world's two largest economies, both nuclear-armed, would be catastrophic for the working class in China, Taiwan, the United States and the world.

The rising tensions over Taiwan must be taken as a serious call to action for workers and youth around the world to build an international anti-war movement of the working class based on a socialist perspective to put an end to the capitalist system that is the root cause of war.

World Socialist 16.10.2021