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The Trouble With Taiwan



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Taiwan is a country, but not many other states recognize it as such. Only 13 countries maintain diplomatic relations with the island nation. These are small or poor or both, like Haiti, Paraguay, and Tuvalu. Honduras switched its diplomatic allegiance from Taipei to Beijing just one month ago.

Taiwan doesn't have a seat at the United Nations, and it has been blocked from joining international bodies like the World Health Organization. It tries hard but rarely manages to function as a member of the international community.

For a country with around 23 million people and the twentieth largest economy in the world, it might seem strange that Taiwan gets so little respect. But Mainland China claims the island as part of its own territory. And few countries, including the United States, have been willing to challenge Beijing directly on that issue.

Of course, the United States has long challenged China indirectly by providing enormous amounts of military assistance to Taiwan (with a huge bump up during the Trump

presidency) and serving as the country's second leading trade partner for goods (Taiwan is also the tenth largest U.S. trade partner).

Moreover, despite an official policy of ambiguity, the United States has provided a number of veiled promises to Taiwan that it will intervene on its behalf in the event of an attack from China.

This latter promise has many analysts in the United States concerned about a looming superpower conflict with China over Taiwan. A number of Washington thinktanks have conducted simulations of such a war. Then, last month, the new House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, created by Republican leader Kevin McCarthy when he took over as House speaker in February, also gamed out a Chinese invasion.

“We are well within the window of maximum danger for a Chinese Communist Party invasion of Taiwan, and yesterday’s wargame stressed the need to take action to deter CCP aggression and arm Taiwan to the teeth before any crisis begins,” the committee chairman told the press.

Writing in *The Nation*, Michael Klare warns of the possibility that a real-life conflict between the two superpowers would quickly escalate to the nuclear level: “Should the US experience significant setbacks—such as the loss of its prized aircraft carriers—might Washington not just as easily brandish or detonate a nuclear weapon in an effort to end Chinese involvement in the war?”

The Taiwanese have long lived under the threat of invasion. The political sphere is divided between those who favor a self-declared independent Taiwan and those who prefer accommodation with the Mainland alongside possible reunification in the future. The two parties that represent those options have alternated in office for the last two decades after the more pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) defeated the more accommodationist Kuomintang Party (KMT) for the first time in 2000.

The DPP has been at the head of government since 2016, and relations with China have deteriorated considerably. But the DPP did poorly in last November’s local election. The “blue” coalition led by the KMT believes it has a fair chance of regaining the lead from the “green” coalition led by the DPP in next year’s presidential elections.

There isn’t much middle ground between the two, particularly on the issue of China, even though polling suggests that the vast majority of the country favors the status quo: not pushing for outright independence and not moving toward reunification as soon as possible.

“Fear of conflict with China is tearing at tolerance, civility and our confidence in the democratic society we have painstakingly built,” writes Yingtai Lung, a former culture minister of Taiwan in *The New York Times*. “When 37 current and former Taiwan scholars last month issued an open letter calling for Taipei to chart a middle path between China and the United States and criticizing U.S. ‘militarism,’ they were attacked as naïve and soft on China.”

Like South Korea in its relations with North Korea, Taiwan doesn't have the option of relocating to another part of the globe. One way or another, it has to learn how to live with Beijing.

So far, coexistence has meant fluctuating tensions in the Taiwan Strait separating the two countries combined with considerable economic cooperation. The United States may be Taiwan's second leading trade partner but its first is China. Beijing relies on high-tech imports from Taiwan, especially the semiconductor industry, while Taiwan depends on a wide range of imports. Last year, Taiwan imported \$84 billion of goods while exporting \$121 billion to the Mainland. These numbers seem virtually unaffected by political tensions between the two countries.

But the level of trade doesn't predict everything. Ukrainian exports to Russia actually showed a modest uptick in 2021 while Russian exports to Ukraine surged quite a bit at that time: this just prior to the Russian invasion in February 2022. Taiwan can't assume that a booming trade relationship is a guarantee that China won't invade.

What might be a more reassuring factor, however, has been Russia's recent experience of war. The Kremlin failed to take over Ukraine, and the war has adversely affected Russia's economy and international reputation. Surely, China has watched how the much smaller Ukraine has managed to survive the initial invasion, lock down Russia in a costly conflict, and garner international support to expel the invaders.

Taiwan is a much wealthier country than Ukraine, and it expects the United States to come to its direct assistance. Any conflict across the Taiwan Strait will thus have an even more devastating effect militarily and on the global economy than the current war in Ukraine, even if the war in East Asia stops short of a nuclear exchange.

Taiwan can count on one thing, though. China has been singularly focused on economic growth for more than three decades. Unlike Russia, it seems unwilling to sacrifice the country's economic well-being on the pyre of nationalism, even if those fires have been burning more brightly in recent years.

The United States and its allies would be well-advised not to do anything to encourage Chinese nationalism. Practical cooperation on climate change and the global economy would not only be mutually beneficial but would also reduce the likelihood of war across the Taiwan Strait. Wherever one stands on the independence vs. accommodation spectrum in Taiwan, everyone should agree that a war is in nobody's interest.

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