



## Will Xi's China Invade Taiwan?

**A**s tensions between Xi Jinping's Communist China and the Biden administration worsen, top American military officials are warning of the possibility of a mainland invasion of the island of Taiwan. Other experts maintain that war between China and Taiwan is not inevitable.

Wherever one stands on these questions, China is visibly preparing for such a war, and China has grown increasingly aggressive militarily toward Taiwan. In 2022, China sent 1,727 jets into Taiwan's air defense zone, up from 960 in 2021 and 380 in 2020. In 2023, Xi's government escalated these incursions. In April alone, 54 Chinese warplanes entered Taiwanese airspace.

Meanwhile, Taiwan has responded with its own military buildup. Other countries in the region, most notably Japan, have quietly improved their military preparedness.<sup>1</sup> Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government has significantly expanded Japan's military capabilities through increased defense spending.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin warned China that a war with its democratic neighbor Taiwan would have a "devastating" impact on the world. Speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 3, Secretary Austin said, "Make no mistake: conflict in the Taiwan Strait would be devastating."<sup>2</sup> After two separate meetings with Japanese, South Korean and Australian counterparts in Singapore, Austin told the press that the "United States remains deeply committed to preserving the status quo in the strait, consistent with our longstanding one-China policy, and with our well-established obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act." He added, "So we will support our allies and partners as they defend themselves against coercion and bullying."<sup>3</sup>

Exactly what this support means in case of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan remains unclear. Does it mean American military intervention or simply economic and financial sanctions

against China? The history of U.S. responses to communist aggression is mixed, as *Mindszenty Report* readers know.<sup>4</sup>

Any understanding of China-Taiwan relations needs to begin with asking: Why is China so obsessed with Taiwan in the first place? And what is stopping China and Taiwan from negotiating a reunification agreement?

### Warnings of Invasion

**S**ome believe a mainland invasion of Taiwan is inevitable. Testifying before the Senate in 2021, the since-retired U.S. Indo-Pacific naval commander Admiral Philip Davidson warned that China sees itself as the dominant world power by 2050 and will invade Taiwan before attaining that status. "Taiwan is clearly one of their ambitions," he said. "And I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years" (i.e., by 2027).<sup>5</sup> He reiterated this timeline last January. Last November Admiral Michael Gilday, chief of U.S. naval operations, and General Mike Minihan, head of the U.S. Air Mobility Command, predicted that war with China could come in 2023.<sup>6</sup>

China now boasts the world's largest navy in terms of ships, possesses a sizable ballistic missile arsenal, and spends second only to the United States on defense. Over the last decade China's defense budget has nearly doubled, now exceeding the combined military budgets of U.S. allies in the region including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand.

As Xi has consolidated power, he has made no bones about China's neo-imperial ambitions to become the hegemonic world economic and military power. The first phase of this ambition has found expression in Xi's ambitious Belt and Road investment and infrastructure initiative, which touches 60 countries already. China has made major investments in Africa in order to develop maritime trade routes and infrastructure and control of strategic minerals. China is also

investing heavily in Venezuela, Brazil and other Latin American countries.

The second phase of Xi's ambitions is evident in China's acquisition of military bases. China has a naval base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, and has militarized atolls in the South China Sea. There are reports that the city of Bata in Equatorial Guinea could become China's first Atlantic seaboard naval base—which could place warships and submarines within striking distance of the U.S. East Coast.

Speaking at a party conference in July 2021, Xi declared, "We never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow anyone to bully, oppress or subjugate [China]. Anyone who tries will find themselves on a collision course with a steel wall forged by 1.4 billion people."<sup>7</sup>

Experts fearing an imminent attack on Taiwan point to two factors that might propel a Chinese invasion. First, some experts warn that an invasion is likely because Xi is contending with major domestic problems, including high unemployment and a slowing economy (contrary to official reports). There is nothing like a war to rally the people to take their eyes off domestic problems. Under Xi, nationalist fervor has reached a new intensity.

## China's Cyclical View of History

The second driving force is how the Chinese, including Xi, see history. History for the Chinese is cyclical. Dynasties rise and fall in a cyclical movement. Cyclical history can be found in Western thought as well. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that city-states pass through cyclical stages of mob democracy, elite aristocratic rule, tyranny and representative republics. In contrast, Christian and Enlightenment thought produced the concept of linear progress (or apocalyptic decline). History was headed somewhere, not just in a repetitive circle.

Why is this important? The Chinese way of thinking is that China is the center of the universe. Its history is one of dynasties rising and declining in repetitive order. Signs of decline within a dynasty can be found in internal rebellions or outlaw regions. The duty of rulers and their court historians is to study the past to preserve imperial power. This means a close study of dynastic histories. Mao spent more time studying dynastic histories than he did studying Karl Marx.

*For mainland China, Taiwan represents a rebel state that threatens the entire Chinese imperial regime. Unless this rebel power is crushed or annexed, the imperial regime is in*

*trouble.* This view of history explains in part Chinese Communist Party's crackdown on Hong Kong. Another explanation of that crackdown is that totalitarian power cannot tolerate any sign of democracy or human freedom.

*Still, an invasion of the Taiwan Strait presents serious logistical problems for China.* Crossing the 100-mile strait is harder than it sounds. An invasion means mounting an amphibious operation on the magnitude of D-Day. The People's Liberation Army would need transport vessels for hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers, and Taiwan's air defenses would have to be neutralized. Landing on Taiwan's rocky coast would be difficult, and occupying a country of close to 24 million people is no easy task.

## Why Invasion May Be Unlikely

The sheer logistics of invading Taiwan suggest that China will not invade Taiwan in the very near term. Few doubt that an invasion of Taiwan would create major economic upheaval on a global scale. *In a war, China would face great difficulty in maintaining its own production and exporting its goods to a world market. China relies on its exports to maintain its economy.*

China relies on Taiwan for its semiconductors and chips, even sourcing the majority of its chips from Taiwan. More importantly, an invasion of Taiwan threatens world peace. China might not want to go to war with America and its allies over Taiwan—at least at this point.

*A surprise, quick attack by China without Taiwan or the United States knowing about it is impossible.* In preparing for such an attack, China would have to take visible steps to protect its economy, military and key industries from disruption caused by sanctions. As a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report noted in October 2022, near-term indicators of approaching conflict would include financial elements such as imposition of stronger capital controls, a freeze on foreign financial assets within China, and rapid liquidation and repatriation of Chinese assets held abroad.<sup>8</sup>

In order to launch a war, China would need to begin stockpiling key munitions, especially precision-guided missiles for high-intensity naval, air and amphibious warfare. A major escalation of war materiel, bases and military launching infrastructure would be noticed (one hopes) by foreign intelligence agencies, including those of United States and Taiwan.

These considerations do not negate the possibility of war. War can be planned, or it can occur through a series of accidental escalations. Witness World War I. A crucial point is that China

is a dictatorship, one with imperial aspirations. We know what this can lead to. Witness World War II, as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Any possibility of a diplomatic resolution between mainland China and Taiwan for a unification went out the window with China's brutal crackdown on Hong Kong. The Taiwanese saw that the principle of "one country, two systems" cannot be believed when it comes to Communist China. Such a principle is necessary for any diplomatic negotiation that would allow a unification of the mainland and Taiwan.

## Diplomacy Won't Unify Them

The Taiwanese understand that China cannot be trusted, even though mainland China relies heavily on Taiwanese investment and computer chips. *The two major parties in Taiwan, reflecting public opinion, have turned hardline against China.* Increasingly, the Taiwanese view mainland China as a foreign place. In the 1990s, fewer than 20 percent of the people on the island viewed themselves as Taiwanese. Most saw themselves as at least partially Chinese. By 2021, only a third of the population identified themselves as both Chinese and Taiwanese. Today, most of those living in Taiwan describe themselves as exclusively Taiwanese.

Taiwan is a democracy. Elections in Taiwan, as a Brookings Institution report found in 2021, are "free, fair, and highly competitive."<sup>9</sup> The Taiwanese electorate strongly supports democracy in principle and approves the island's democratic system. In presidential races, turnout usually exceeds 70 percent. Since a democratic election process was instituted, there have been three presidential transfers of power.

The party system is institutionalized with two large, distinctive parties, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Each of these parties is supported by smaller parties and groupings. At the same time, civil society organizations have grown and play major roles.

As a result, recent surveys of public attitudes show that the *Taiwanese are satisfied with democracy and do not want to return to a dictatorship in their own country or have one imposed by mainland China.* Indeed, the support for democracy in Taiwan is impressive given that postwar Taiwan was created by Chiang Kai-shek, who came to power after losing to Mao Zedong in a civil war on the mainland. The transition to a democracy in Taiwan occurred only about two decades ago and now enjoys popular support.<sup>10</sup> The Taiwanese are not going to accept a communist dictatorship coming out of any reunification agreement. They have little trust in Xi or the Chinese government to allow a one-country, two-system structure.

Taiwan has its problems. It has a declining rate of population growth and an aging population; finding employment for young people entering the work force is difficult; and it faces budget problems with generous benefits for retirees. In this regard, the country's problems are similar to those of Western Europe and the United States, although it may be argued that Taiwan's education system is better. Also, on social values, there is greater uniformity than in many countries in the West. Political polarization is less severe as well. Most voters in Taiwan take centrist positions on income inequality, private versus government ownership of business, and whether the government or the people should be responsible for the people's welfare.

Taiwan's support for democracy prevents the government, whichever party is in control, from negotiating with mainland China for eventual reunification. The incumbent DPP and the opposition nationalist party, the KMT, both oppose unification, although the KMT calls for friendlier ties with China. KMT leadership accuses the DPP government, which came to power in 2016, of worsening tensions. Xi understands that Taiwan has hardened its position toward China. As a result, near-term diplomatic resolution is unlikely.<sup>11</sup>

## Where Will the U.S. Stand?

Just as Taiwanese foreign policy is dictated in large part by domestic politics, so is American foreign policy toward China.

In 1972, relations between the U.S. and China changed when President Richard Nixon walked down the red carpet from Air Force One to shake hands with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. A diplomatic relationship between the nations was formalized in 1979. The opening of diplomatic and trade relations with China transformed both the U.S. and China. The opening offered Americans new investment opportunities, while promising China new investment and trade opportunities.

In this new relationship, the U.S. took a "one China" policy position that Taiwan is part of China, but never officially recognized Beijing's claim to the island. Although not recognizing Taiwan as a distinct country, legally the U.S. is bound to provide the democratic island with the means to defend itself. President Biden, on at least four occasions, has gone further in committing the U.S. to defending Taiwan militarily if attacked by mainland China. Biden's statements were quickly countered, or at least qualified, by State Department officials who asserted that the United States was committed to a "one China" policy.<sup>12</sup>

How would the U.S. respond to a direct Chinese attack on Taiwan now or in the future? Relations with Taiwan at present are as good as they have been since the Eisenhower administration. Support for Taiwan is especially strong in Congress on both sides of the aisle. In April, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy met with Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen in southern California. In August 2022, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan, even though the Biden administration tried to dissuade her from going. In addition, *like China, the U.S. relies heavily on Taiwan's production of semiconductors and especially the most sophisticated chips.*

Chinese military incursions and threats against Taiwan have drawn strong opposition from both U.S. political parties. American public opinion has turned against mainland China. *Perhaps the main source of support for China is corporate America*, which has made huge profits from investment in the communist country. Technology companies, Wall Street and even Hollywood are heavily invested in China. Corporate America wants to ensure that money continues to be made in China, and refuses to call out China for its severe persecution of political dissidents, Christians, Uyghur Muslims and the Falun Gong. Corporate America won't stand behind any administration, Democrat or Republican, that takes too strong a stand against China, even as China becomes more aggressive toward Taiwan.

*Mindszenty Report* readers, however, know that China under Xi is a techno-fascist surveillance state that stifles dissent, oppresses minorities, and has global ambitions. China stands as a threat to American democracy. Moreover, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would create chaos in the region, especially with Japan. We don't want war; we seek diplomatic solutions where possible, but we understand what Ronald Reagan told us: Peace comes through strength. Weakness invites mischief. *We do not want a war with China caused by the United States appearing weak or equivocal.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2023/japans-new-military-policies-origins-and-implications>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/us-defense-secretary-lloyd-austin-014432857.html>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.theepochtimes.com/war-with-china-over-taiwan-would-have-devastating-impact-defense-secretary-austin-says\\_5311416.html](https://www.theepochtimes.com/war-with-china-over-taiwan-would-have-devastating-impact-defense-secretary-austin-says_5311416.html).

<sup>4</sup> The United States did not go to war when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956, or with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. On the other hand, the U.S. nearly entered World War III when the Khrushchev regime tried to put Soviet missiles into Cuba. American responses were both strategic and driven by domestic politics.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/china-could-invade-taiwan-in-next-six-years-top-us-admiral-warns>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinese-invasion-taiwan-isn-t-inevitable>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/12/xi-jinping-china-beijing-new-age-of-imperialism>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/03/how-we-would-know-when-china-is-preparing-to-invade-taiwan-pub-88053>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/FP\\_20190226\\_taiwan\\_bush\\_hass.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/FP_20190226_taiwan_bush_hass.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Surveys show that a large majority of Taiwanese express confidence in the central government, civil service, armed forces and the courts. Close to 90 percent of the public believe that democracy is the best form of government, whatever its problems. Close to 85 percent believe "democracy is suitable for our country"; 63 percent were satisfied with the way democracy worked in Taiwan; and 63 percent believed that "democracy was always preferable."

[https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/FP\\_20190226\\_taiwan\\_bush\\_hass.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/FP_20190226_taiwan_bush_hass.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/24/taiwans-choice-who-will-replace-tsai-ing-wen-as-president-amid-china-tensions>

<sup>12</sup> The ambiguity of U.S. policy toward Taiwan is captured in the State Department's website which reads, "The United States approach to Taiwan has remained consistent across decades and administrations. The United States has a longstanding one China policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three U.S.-China Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances. We oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side; we do not support Taiwan independence; and we expect cross-Strait differences to be resolved by peaceful means. We continue to have an abiding interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States makes available defense articles and services as necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability – and maintains our capacity to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of Taiwan. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>.

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