

China and Taiwan:

America's Role in the Conflict

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Executive Summary

- As tensions between the U.S. and China continue to increase, the importance of safeguarding regional allies has become paramount. Critically, the democratic island nation of Taiwan, officially the Republic of China (ROC), stands under the most frequent and direct threat from the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC has made armed and non-violent coercive attempts to reunify in the past and has made it clear they intend to complete this goal. The PRC has engaged in significant asymmetric warfare to open a sphere of operation to complete their goal. The PRC also is in a time of significant instability, leading to the desire to shore up support through a significant unifying project. Based on an analysis of Chinese history, authoritarian regime case studies, and known Chinese tactics, **it is likely the People's Republic of China (PRC) poses a high threat to the Republic of China (ROC).**
- Taiwan's geographic position is crucial in assisting U.S. force projection and naval access to key regions in the South China Sea. Economically, the ROC is a major supplier of microchips, and represents a well-developed high-tech economy, which is key to global supply chains. Beyond economic and geostrategic interest, the U.S. is both treaty-bound and ideologically motivated to protect the democratic island nation against forceful reunification attempts. **A conflict over the island of Taiwan would quickly destabilize the region, the U.S., with well-informed interventions, could shorten, de-intensify, or outright prevent a wider war.** By utilizing scenario planning for the most likely and most optimal situations, the United States will be better able to respond to any crisis.

A History of Conflict & Intervention

How did we get here?

The ROC originated as the post-Imperial Chinese government, following the 1911 Chinese Revolution.¹ It was nominally established to bring democratic and republican rule to the former Qing Empire but quickly split into military warlord states after the death of President Yuan Shikai.² From this, the nascent form of the PRC emerged as the Red Army (People's Liberation Army).³ Famously led by Mao Zedong, this small guerilla force fought the ROC from 1927 to 1949, in a period known as the Chinese Civil War. After a brief pause in hostilities during the Second World War, the Chinese Civil War resumed between the ROC and the PRC, which was backed by the Soviet Union (USSR). In 1949, a weakened ROC evacuated the mainland and set up a government on the island of Taiwan. In what was known as the 1949 Revolution, the PRC was officially proclaimed and claimed all of China, including Taiwan, as its sovereign territory.⁴ Conversely, the ROC, now exiled to Taiwan continued to claim its full original 1911 borders.⁵ Regardless, this has remained the de-facto situation since. After 1949, the PRC made multiple attempts to 'reunify' with Taiwan. The last use of military force to cause 'reunification' was during the Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1954-1958.⁶ However, the U.S. passed the Formosa Act and intervened on behalf of the ROC.

Communication between the ROC and PRC was cold, if not entirely broken following both the civil war and the Taiwan Straits Crisis. Despite this, an unspoken understanding had been reached between the two parties, particularly after the death of Mao Zedong. In the interest of the flow of commerce, neither party would make attempts to militarize the Taiwan Strait, and an informal line of demarcation would be established splitting the two.⁷ In addition, a mutual unspoken policy of 'no reunification, no Taiwanese independence, and no use of force' guided government actions for much of the late 20th century.⁸ These principles have defined the status quo. In 1992 the ROC under the Kuomintang Party and the PRC broke a longstanding no-contact protocol and interacted on an official level for the first time since the Second World War. Here, an agreement known as the 1992 Consensus was reached. The agreement stated that each government agreed to open further communication, maintain the status quo, and affirm the One China Principle.⁹ Relations between the PRC and the ROC are defined in the modern era in the context of the One China Principle, which states there is only one legitimate government of China, of which Taiwan is an integral part.¹⁰ The PRC, particularly since the rise of leader Xi Jinping in 2013, has taken this agreement to mean that reunification is not only justified but inevitable. The ROC, more specifically the Kuomintang Party, took the agreement and principle to mean that the status quo should be maintained, and if reunification occurs that it be under a one-country two-systems approach. Despite these different understandings, relations and mutual commerce improved between the two, until the rise of PRC President Xi Jinping and the election victories in 2000 and 2016 of the implicitly pro-independence DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) in Taiwan.¹¹

This change in leadership also marked a change in attitude toward the PRC. While the KMT was more amiable to closer ties with the PRC, the DPP was suspicious. Citing violations of Hong Kong's status under the One China Principle and one-country two-systems, the DPP publicly stated that the PRC cannot be trusted with unification.

In addition, the PRC's drift further into authoritarian nationalism, under Xi Jinping, has drastically increased tensions and has led to a cutting of most communication. The PRC under Xi have attempted numerous non-violent coercive tactics to force reunification, from disinformation campaigns, to severing economic ties. Most notably, the PRC unsuccessfully attempted to interfere in the 2024 ROC election, to unseat the unfriendly DPP.^{12 13} Additionally, the leaders of the PRC have made it clear that military force is on the table regarding unification and have made clear moves in preparation for this outcome.¹⁰ The ROC, in response, has gained further security guarantees from its foreign partners to supplement its defense, particularly the United States.

The United States has, throughout the 20th century, created policy concerning its relations with Taiwan. Namely, the Taiwan Relations Act, which guarantees U.S. support for Taiwan in the case of an armed attempt at reunification. However, the U.S. outwardly is vague about what shape that intervention may take in a principle called Strategic Ambiguity. In recent years, the U.S. has moved further toward direct assistance to Taiwan in the form of weapons sales and advisor based military training.

Key Points

- China (PRC) and Taiwan (ROC) **emerged out of the Chinese Civil War.**
- Conflict existed from 1949-1992. Both direct and indirect. Afterwards, a tentative cooperation emerged. **This is the exception.**
- Under Xi Jinping relations **have returned to their hostile norm.**
- The United States has been involved in every major dispute and has **treaty obligations toward Taiwan.**

Threat Assessment and Alternatives

How likely is the potential threat?

Utilizing a threat assessment framework common to those used in the intelligence community, a threat assessment was conducted. One major judgement was concluded supported by four sub-judgements. Of the four sub-judgements, three (Intent, Opportunity, and Means) are common to intelligence community assessments, one (Reaction to Outside Pressure) was added in the course of the assessment due to the need to explain the role of international actors. With that said, the assessment concluded **that the People's Republic of China (PRC) poses a high threat level to the Republic of China (ROC) in the next 18 months.**

Intent: Precedent of Conflict

The PRC has held the capture of Taiwan and the destruction of the rival ROC government as a national priority since its founding in 1949. Chairman Mao, upon the evacuation of the ROC government from the mainland made preparations to invade, which were thwarted by the onset of the Korean War.¹⁴ The PRC attempted an armed invasion on two more occasions. Once in 1954-1955, the First Taiwan Straits Crisis, seizing the near coastal islands of Yijianshan and Dachen and once in 1958, the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis, with the bombardment and invasion of the Kinmen and Matsu islands.⁶ Both of these attempts were predicated by U.S. action of some sort. In the First Taiwan Straits Crisis, the PRC began action upon learning of the U.S. intention to form a defensive pact with the ROC.⁶ The Second Taiwan Straits Crisis began as a reaction to U.S. intervention in Lebanon, with the PRC believing the U.S. was too distracted to effectively intervene.⁶ In modern times, the PRC has reacted violently with any shift toward recognition of the ROC. In 1996, the Third Taiwan Straits Crisis began upon the U.S. allowing then President Lee of the ROC to land with a visa in Hawaii. The PRC responded with targeted military exercises and missile testing. These served the dual purpose of military threat and attempted election interference in President Lee's 1996 Campaign.¹⁵ Notably after the visits of Nancy Pelosi in 2022 as well as subsequent visits by members of Congress, the PRC responded by increasing aircraft sorties across the Taiwan Strait as well as conducting missile test and naval exercises.^{16 17} Economically, the PRC has made a habit of engaging in trade coercion by erecting barriers or announcing new tariffs around election times to force a favorable result, with efforts notably in 1996, 2022, and 2024.^{18 19} These violent and non-violent coercive actions, collectively known as gray zone violations, demonstrate the PRC's continued willingness and intention to act on the Taiwan issue. Using its past actions as a precedent, it is highly likely that the PRC will continue to have a strong motivation to act toward the aim of reunification.

Geographically, the island of Taiwan sits at a critical location for the PRC. Taiwan is one of the largest islands in the First Island Chain, which is a set of strategic islands that extends from the Japanese Home Islands, through the Philippines, and toward the southern Vietnamese coast, with a narrow opening at the strait of Malacca between Malaysia and Indonesia.²⁰ These islands present a formidable barrier to exit for Chinese naval and merchant vessels into the wider Pacific Ocean. Thus, the location of the island of Taiwan in relation to major Chinese trading ports within this island chain makes its seizure an easy way to bypass the bottleneck at the Strait of Malacca and gain control over access to the China Sea and the Western Pacific.²¹ China has expressed and acted upon a wish to expand into the Western Pacific. It has courted nations such as the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Palau, and Kiribati, building military posts and engaging in defense pacts. This displays a clear desire to break out into the Pacific, and thus very likely to continue viewing Taiwan as an essential access point for control of the sea.^{21 22 23}

Authoritarian regimes have a history of engaging in territorial disputes to display national strength, to unify the population behind a project, or defend the nation against perceived threats. It is a major piece of the legitimization of these regimes.^{24 25} Russia, in its approach to the Ukraine, provides an excellent example of a long-standing territorial dispute escalating into a conflict. Russia, following the Revolution of Dignity in the Ukraine, began to operate aggressively due to the loss of influence in the nation and internally-perceived national weakness. Russia began by seizing the Crimea, then starting a civil war in the Donbass region, and now is involved in full-scale fighting with the Ukraine, despite the efforts of the international community. This displays a clear willingness to escalate and continue conflict, even with possible international backlash.²⁵ Earlier, in the 20th century, Germany engaged in multiple national expansion projects, despite the risk of conflict, in response to the 'humiliating' Treaty of Versailles leading to World War II.²⁶ These examples demonstrate that in an authoritarian regime's view, the risk of conflict is often outweighed by the need for regime power and security. Xi Jinping, having made reunification and revenge for the 'century of humiliation' a significant regime goal is highly likely to act similarly to other authoritarian regimes.^{27 28 56}

Key Takeaway: The PRC and ROC have a long history of conflict over reunification, particularly in moments of U.S. distraction or as a reaction to perceived threats on the part of the PRC. The strategic position of the island of Taiwan is valuable for the PRC in its aim to reach into the Pacific. In addition, historical precedent demonstrates the authoritarian willingness, and often necessity, to escalate disputes. The PRC is likely to follow these trends.

Opportunity: Regime Instability

Authoritarian legitimacy is often bound up in ideas of national strength, patriotism, and economic prosperity.²⁴

²⁹ Often, to deliver on these promises, authoritarian regimes direct their focus outward, particularly when legitimacy is in question. This serves a twofold effect, shielding the regime from internal scrutiny and providing a unifying force for popular support.^{42 43} This unifying force may be particularly important for the PRC as the regime has relied on somewhat fluid traditional socio-cultural loyalties to the state and leader to maintain order.⁴⁴ These loyalties are embodied in the 'Mandate of Heaven', which grant the current ruler a semi-divine right to govern. This right can be lost through de-legitimation without outside pressure, and lead to rebellion.^{44 45}

²⁷ This effect can also be seen in other dictatorships, such as North Korea in their posturing toward the South and Russia toward the Ukraine and eastern Europe. Russia, prior to the onset of direct fighting, had suffered economic downturns and national humiliation in the form of losing control of Eastern Europe.^{25 46 47 48} While this effect is not exclusively the cause for action it remains a significant destabilizing factor and can be seen as one piece in forcing an opportunity.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has suffered several de-legitimizing events since the beginning of the 2020s. In early February 2024, the Chinese Stock Market and some of its largest firms suffered a major blow, with the market losing 7 trillion dollars in value and large real estate firms like Evergrande being over 300 billion dollars in debt.^{30 31} This marks a change in the lives of many average Chinese citizens, with little sign of improvement this year.³² The CCP, like many authoritarian regimes, wrapped its 'right to rule' in its ability to deliver prosperity, though they are attempting to change this messaging to a one based upon culture.^{29 33 34} Failure to deliver prosperity can be fatal for some regimes if another legitimation factor isn't found.³⁵ Secondly, the CCP has also endured a recent scandal regarding corruption in its military. It was found by unspecified U.S. intelligence sources that the PLAAF (Peoples Liberation Army Air Force) Missile Corps had a faulty stockpile, much of which was waterlogged, leading to open questions of the PRC's military ability.^{36 37} This was followed by a significant military purge, which also removed officers who had made openly anti-war statements.³⁸ The CCP has placed a lot of emphasis on national pride and military strength, open weakness here can lend credence to opposition.³⁹ Lastly, the CCP policy of "Zero-Covid" and the highly restrictive lockdowns led to significant protesting, an unusual sight in the PRC, suggesting that the regime's popularity may not be as robust in the face of severe adversity.⁴⁰ It is likely that the CCP has suffered some loss internal legitimacy as a result of these factors. It is also likely, given the PRC's weakened state and a lack of quick internal fixes they will turn outward, which intensifies the risk toward the ROC.^{27 55}

Key Takeaway: The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has suffered recent blows to its legitimacy including a major economic downturn, high-profile civil-military corruption cases, and an unpopular COVID lockdown protocol. Authoritarian governments, to mobilize popular support, often turn their focus outward during domestic instability. As such, the PRC is highly likely to continue acting on the Taiwan crisis.

Means: Asymmetric Warfare as a Shaping Tactic

Asymmetric warfare is a type of civil-military strategy that attempts to avoid direct conflict or involvement as much as possible. Its methods include but are not limited to cyber-warfare, proxy warfare, terrorism, political interference, military intimidation, and espionage. While during the Cold War, it was used as the primary tactic to achieve geopolitical goals, its efficacy in this way has been called into question following its failures in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As of late, asymmetric warfare is being used, primarily by near-peer authoritarian regimes as a way to shape the battlefield; in other words to force the U.S. to conform to its advantages prior to a strike.

Russia engaged in this sort of operation prior to the Ukraine War. Russia engaged in political intimidation following the Revolution of Dignity and sparked a proxy-war in the Donbass region.⁴⁹ The Russians carried out multiple cyberattacks on Europe and the U.S., as well as performed silent infiltrations to probe U.S. defenses.^{50 51} In addition, Russians interfered in the 2016 U.S. election.⁵² All of these factors combined did little to change the status quo at large but provided greater opportunity for the 2022 invasion by creating a situation where the United States was internally distracted and the Ukraine was already forced to fight Russia on solidified defensive lines. Iran, another authoritarian regime, has used asymmetrical warfare to limited effect in the Middle East. Iran carries out numerous proxy wars through groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in Israel/Palestine.⁵³ These actions provide limited influence in the region without direct action but serve as effective probing strikes to test U.S. resolve in the region and provide distraction. China itself has engaged in significant Asymmetric Warfare against the U.S. and the ROC, with strong evidence of PRC infiltration into U.S. and ROC infrastructure systems, election interference in the ROC, as well as frequent use of military threats known as Gray Zone Violations.^{54 57 58} Gray Zone Violations are the most frequent tool in the PRC's Asymmetrical Warfare arsenal with near daily violations of ROC air and sea spaces.

In addition, the PRC has participated in hacking strikes on U.S. infrastructure. While these strikes do not have much effect on their own, they are a clear demonstration of complex military-civil planning and have a precedent of being used in preparation for wider action. It is almost a certainty that the PRC will continue using these tactics in their actions toward the ROC and U.S. in a bid to distract the U.S. and breed uncertainty in the ROC as to when a strike may occur.

Key Takeaway: Asymmetric warfare, or the use of cyber-war, proxy war, influence campaigns, and military posturing to create a situation to achieve regime goals, is a cornerstone of modern authoritarian foreign policy. The PRC has been using these tactics with limited success on their own, transforming it to a shaping maneuver in a larger strategy. China is highly likely to continue using asymmetric warfare to create an optimal environment to invade Taiwan or coerce unification.

Response to External Pressure: Chinese Diplomacy

Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy is a style of foreign policy which emphasizes national reputation over cooperative relationships. It has been in use in the PRC since the late-2010s into the 2020s. It is characterized by aggressiveness, stubbornness, and nationalistic zeal.⁶⁰ It is most frequently used when the PRC desires to increase the national reputation, an important point of legitimacy in authoritarian regimes, in attempts to coerce smaller nations, or most importantly when threats to geo-strategic goals emerge.^{60 24} Authoritarian governments often use aggressive diplomacy when they believe they possess relative strength to their adversary.⁶¹ Due to this, aggressive diplomacy can be seen as a more accurate representation of regime goals.⁶¹ Sharp shifts to détente, therefore, generally are a deceptive tactic to gain time and the element of surprise on potential adversaries. Particularly in moments of severe international resistance. This can be seen with Russia's frequent attempts to negotiate at opportune moments in the Ukraine War.⁶² The PRC is will likely continue engaging in aggressive diplomacy when it feels it has the strength to, in addition the current period of de-confliction is somewhat likely a deceptive strategy to buy time. In addition, International Relations literature suggests that authoritarian regimes are the most frequent instigator of conflict, either between each other or democracies. This is largely based on the notion that authoritarian regimes have less checks on rash decision making and that authoritarian regimes are often legitimated on strength.⁶³ It is likely that faced with further outside pressure, the PRC will continue to react aggressively, unless internal ability shifts.

Key Takeaway: The PRC has utilized an aggressive and nationalistic military-diplomatic strategy called "Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy". Aggressive foreign policy is common among authoritarian regimes as a reflection of their ideology and goals. In addition, prevailing International Relations theories suggest rising authoritarian regimes tend to find themselves in conflict with democracies. The PRC is likely to continue its aggressive diplomatic style and find itself further at odds with the Democratic world.

Assumptions and Alternatives

The main assessment of this analysis relies on three assumptions: all major in impact. Firstly, that the authoritarian regime of the PRC functions similarly to the regimes that both precede and exist concurrently with it. While the evidence suggests that some tenets of Chinese authoritarianism may depart from traditional models, we assume that authoritarian governments follow some universal patterns. If this assumption proves false, there would be major changes to this analysis, as the assessment relies heavily on case studies of other authoritarian regimes. In this case a wholesale reassessment of the threat would need to be carried out.

Secondly, that the government and society of the PRC remain nationalistic in nature following the recent de-legitimizing events. If the de-legitimizing effects have substantially changed the outlook of the CCP and the larger society, this assessment would change substantially as it relies heavily on the past being a precedent.

The alternative assessments may prove more likely in this case.

Thirdly, that PLA (People's Liberation Army) and CCP are still able to carry out asymmetric and some conventional warfare campaigns having not been rendered inoperable by the recent economic downturn or military purges. If this proves false, the assessment would undergo major adjustments as it relies on the PLA and CCP having the capability to act significantly beyond its borders. Alternative assessments would gain far more likelihood in this case.

Alternative 1: The PRC is an Exceptional Authoritarian Regime – If the first assumption proves false, it is possible that the PRC would behave entirely different from authoritarian regimes of the past. It is possible, in this case that the PRC would not react violently as others have in the past. It is possible, given the long history of China that the PRC had simply developed differently with different cultural trends. Given that past being precedent is accepted as strong linking logic and that the PRC shows no signs of being exceptionally different, this alternative is unlikely.

Alternative 2: The People's Liberation Army is Incapable of Action – The PRC is posturing as a mask for significant internal weakness and inability to project its power asymmetrically or otherwise. This alternative is plausible as recent intelligence has revealed significant weakness in the PLA in the form of corruption.^{36 37} In addition, other authoritarian regimes have shown that military posturing is a decent way to maintain internal stability and external reputation.⁴¹ This alternative is assessed to be unlikely, as the PRC has not shown significant drawback in forward-deployed regions and still is engaging in suspected asymmetric strikes such as cyberattacks on U.S. infrastructure and daily violations of the ROC's air defense zone.

Alternative 3 – The PRC is truly attempting détente – The PRC has relegated the Taiwan Crisis to a secondary or tertiary issue and is engaging in true détente with the west. This alternative is somewhat plausible as while the evidence has shown that the Taiwan Crisis remains front of mind for Xi Jinping, forces from inside the CCP may have been able to reign in his ambitions.²⁸ If this alternative is true the threat toward the ROC would be medium as opposed to high. However, this alternative is unlikely as Xi Jinping has shown his ability and willingness to purge non-compliant party members and operates a highly personalist regime.³⁸

Scenarios and Responses

How can we plan accordingly?

Based on the threat assessment, below is a range of responses to likely scenarios. The first giving the path of least resistance. The second giving the deadliest scenario. The third giving the most optimal scenario. It should be noted that scenarios one and two are the most likely given the prior threat assessment, but all fall within a reasonable range of likelihood.

Scenario 1: Status Quo – This scenario primarily involves the situation not changing substantially from its current disposition. This would require the least effort on the part of the PRC but would leave its internal issues unresolved, potentially signaling inability for further action. In this scenario the U.S. should see the regime as weak and continue to act forcefully but not militarily. Sanctions and trade regulation targeting war-making industries such as steel, microchips, and aeronautics should be levied to further limit PRC ability. However, these sanctions should remain limited as to not overly stress the world economy, negating our advantages. The U.S. should continue to supply defensive weapons such as anti-air and anti-ship missiles to the ROC, but nothing that could hit the mainland, as to no force PRC action in desperation. In addition, a strong regional defense agreement should be created to present a formidable barrier to action for the PRC. The goals of this approach hope to exacerbate weakness in the PRC and promote strength of regional allies without forcing the PRC to act in their defense. Simply to wall them in.

Scenario 2: Increased Violent Action – This scenario involves the PRC choosing to increase the level of violent action it is willing to use to reunify with the ROC. This would require the PRC to engage in an invasion, blockade, or missile strike. This would certainly involve other actors, raising the risk of a wider conflict. In this case, the U.S. would need to respond with requisite severity to safeguard regional allies and democracies. A full economic embargo and cutting of SWIFT access of the PRC would be appropriate in this case to deny all access to funds essential to war-making. This would have massive implications for the global economy and it should not be understated that consumer markets will be hurt. Potential rationing would be appropriate in this case. In addition, quickly establishing cooperability with ROC command through military attachés as well as providing the ROC with offensive weapons would be key to the ROC forces being capable enough to defend the island until support can arrive. Lastly, deployment of U.S. military domestic quick activation forces to the region is key. Any and all available fleets and units in the region should be put on alert and air forces should be available to perform harassing strikes on PRC vessels at sea.

Scenario 3: Regime Change/Détente – In this case, the PRC leadership changes dramatically with either the removal of Xi Jinping or the Chinese Communist Party outright or the PRC deciding to cede the point of Taiwan openly to U.S. and the ROC. In this case, certain limited rewards that are perceptible but not empowering would be appropriate. Including the new Chinese government in security dialogues extends a friendly posture but does not substantially change the balance of power. Economic rewards such as the lifting of sanctions and controls on targeted industries such as consumer electronic microchips, agriculture, and light industrial goods would encourage a peaceful industrial growth while keeping in check war-making industries. Lastly, forging a free trade and movement agreement between the ROC and PRC/China would allow for a sort of reunification to save face while still maintaining sovereignty of both parties.

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