

EXCERPTED FROM

Hedging the
China Threat:
US-Taiwan Security
Relations Since 1949

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1

China, Taiwan, and the United States

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINA AND TAIWAN, KNOWN AS “CROSS-STRAIT relations,” is one of the most highly controversial and important topics in world politics today. It is also the central flash point in US-China relations. In May 2021, *The Economist* labeled Taiwan “the most dangerous place on Earth.” If China were to attack Taiwan, it is expected that the United States would intervene in the cross-strait military conflict. It is likely that such an intervention would result in a major war between the two superpowers.¹ Because of US alliances with other powerful countries, it is easy to imagine that such a conflict could conceivably escalate into a world war.

American philosopher George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”² An in-depth study of the security relations between the United States and Taiwan (formally known as the Republic of China, or ROC) would be in vain without a close examination of their historical background. China (formally known as the People’s Republic of China, or PRC)³ has never dropped its claim that it has the right to use force against Taiwan in realizing its goal of reunification. Because of China’s continued threats, Taiwan has modernized its military capability and enhanced its security relations with the United States

The goals of this book are twofold. First, it describes the inside story of the US security relationship with Taiwan, a country under China’s threat since the Harry S. Truman administration. By reviewing the most important events and crises involving these three countries, the book explains how the US government has assisted Taiwan in responding to this threat since 1949. Second, the book systemically examines the US government’s security policy toward Taiwan from the Harry S. Truman to the Joe Biden administration across three levels of analysis. The individual level examines the

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beliefs, philosophies, and worldviews of different US presidents in determining cross-strait policy. The state level introduces cross-strait policy decisions and changes by the US National Security Council, the US State Department, and the US military. The international level looks at the impact of the changing international politics and security concerns on US cross-strait policy.

China and Taiwan: A Brief History

When I was in middle school and high school in Taiwan during the 1980s, the media, politicians, and history teachers taught us that cross-strait relations were like “siblings” and that “blood is thicker than water.” At the time, most Taiwanese students were proud of being Chinese because we had 5,000 years of history and culture as well as the world’s largest population. Taiwanese were told that “Taiwan is a part of China.” Today, however, most youth are taught that “Taiwan has nothing to do with China.” As I explored this subject more deeply, I discovered that cross-strait relations were far more complicated than I had imagined.

To understand the current cross-strait tensions, it is important to begin with a broad overview of their history. As early as the seventh century, Chinese merchants and fishermen visited Taiwan; however, most historians who study Taiwan and China relations begin with the seventeenth century.

Before 1949: Exploring Taiwan

Prior to 1949, Taiwan experienced many influences from both Western powers and Chinese governments. In the early seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company established a trading base in Taiwan. In the early 1660s, fleeing from the Qing conquest of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE), Ming loyalists led by Zheng Cheng-gong drove out the Dutch from Taiwan.⁴ With a labor force of both Chinese immigrants and Indigenous people, Taiwan gradually became an important trading center. Merging trade with military capability, Zheng’s regime was able to rule Taiwan for two decades.⁵ Zheng was highly regarded and even viewed as a deity in Taiwan. Several temples, as well as the National Cheng Kung University, were built to remember his contributions.

In 1683, the Qing dynasty (1644–1912 CE) launched a naval invasion against Zheng’s regime and reestablished control of Taiwan. After the conquest, the emperor of Qing was unconvinced of Taiwan’s strategic value. But Admiral Shi Lang, who had directed the invasion, argued that due to its geostrategic location and natural resources, China should maintain control.⁶ He recognized that if Taiwan was occupied by foreign pow-

ers, it would pose a grave threat to China's security. Shi's advice prevailed. In 1684, Taiwan was formally included within the territory of the Qing dynasty.

In the first Opium War of 1839, British forces attacked China and ushered in the "Century of Humiliation" for the Chinese people. The Opium War marked the beginning of a century of military defeats, unequal treaties, and territorial concessions for the Chinese. After the end of that terrible century, China resolved that it must never let history repeat itself.⁷ Taiwan was also affected by the Opium War. The treaty signed by the defeated Qing government and the victorious British Empire required Taiwan to open its harbors to British opium dealers. The United States and Russia also demanded the opening of ports to trade and foreign residents. As Taiwan's economic importance increased, the Japanese Empire began to covet Taiwan. The threat to China's sovereignty pushed the Qing government to launch the Self-Strengthening Movement (1865–1895) in Taiwan by developing basic infrastructure, agriculture, industry, commerce, and education. Several leaders spearheaded the movement, the most renowned of which was Liu Mingchuan. Liu advocated modernization strategies, including the revival of modern coal mining, and the establishment of a railway line, cable, and telegraphic infrastructure.⁸ His contribution to the Taiwanese people was profound. In commemoration of his achievements, Mingchuan University in Taipei, Taiwan's capital, was named after him.

When Japanese imperial forces defeated the Qing military in 1895, the Qing government ceded the islands of Taiwan and Penghu to Japan in the Shimonoseki Treaty.⁹ Chinese elites viewed the loss of Taiwan as a national humiliation. A local resistance movement in Taiwan rose to fight against Japanese rule. Despite their brave armed resistance, the Qing forces were defeated. After the Japanese takeover, Japan exploited Taiwan's natural resources and agricultural output.¹⁰ The imperial Japanese ruled Taiwan with an iron fist and treated the Taiwanese people as second-class citizens.

After Japan's defeat in World War II, Taiwan was returned to the Republic of China. While the ROC forces fought against Chinese Communists during the Chinese Civil War (from 1945 to 1949), the ROC government was not able to control mainlanders who arrived in Taiwan. Because some mainlanders thought they were superior to the Taiwanese, tensions emerged. The conflict erupted on February 28, 1947, when a quarrel between a cigarette vendor and a government official ignited a widespread riot. The ROC government sent forces from China to put down the uprising.¹¹ The impact of this incident had far-reaching effects. Relations were so bad that intermarriage between mainlanders and Taiwanese was discouraged by some Taiwanese parents.

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Chiang Kai-shek Administration (1950–1975): The Military Confrontation

From 1943 to 1948, Chiang Kai-shek was chairman of the National Government of China, based in mainland China. In 1949, when his defeated forces were forced to retreat from mainland China to Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek established an authoritarian government there and vowed to retake China. When I was in elementary school, we learned to sing patriotic songs like “Retaking Mainland China.” Patriotic education was common in all sectors of Taiwan’s society. Chiang Kai-shek was determined to retake China to rebuild his tarnished image after his loss of mainland China.

During the Cold War, hostility across the Taiwan Strait became a flash point throughout East Asia. In the 1950s, when the ROC government recognized that it had lost control of mainland China, it deployed troops to the offshore islands. This caused cross-strait tensions that led to military conflict. The ROC leaders viewed these islands as a launching pad for their forces to retake China.¹² In 1951, the US military began to equip and train the ROC military.¹³ In 1954, the United States and Taiwan signed a Mutual Defense Treaty. The People’s Republic of China viewed this treaty as collusion between the United States and Taiwan and a threat to its national security. The Mutual Defense Treaty precipitated what came to be called the “First Taiwan Strait Crisis.” The PRC began to bombard the island of Quemoy, and soon expanded its targets to the Matsu Islands and the Dachen Islands. The Chinese bombardment aimed to stop the defense treaty as Beijing worried about the separation between China and Taiwan. To assert its support of Taiwan, in January 1955 the US Congress passed the Formosa Resolution, which gave the US president authority to defend Taiwan and the offshore islands. In exchange for a private promise from the United States to defend Quemoy and Matsu, Chiang Kai-shek agreed to withdraw his troops from the Dachens.¹⁴ To avoid the offshore islands crisis from escalating, both Washington and Beijing felt a need to maintain communication. The crisis introduced ambassadorial talks in 1955. The dialogues, however, made little progress on the issues of Taiwan.¹⁵

The Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) artillery assault against Quemoy in 1958 was a continuation of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. Throughout the crisis, Mao Tse-tung was concerned not by the presence of ROC troops on Quemoy, but by the aggressive attitudes of the US government. The PRC Central Military Commission (CMC) forbade combat forces from engaging the US military. Even when US destroyers escorted the ROC’s logistical ships, Mao ordered his troops to “only attack Chiang’s ships, not U.S. vessels.” The United States proposed resuming ambassadorial talks at Warsaw in 1955. The PRC leaders agreed, deciding to shift their policy from a military confrontation to a diplomatic approach and, through the Warsaw talks, to create a wedge between Taipei and Washington.¹⁶

The 1958 Quemoy Crisis prompted US leaders to reassess Quemoy's military value and put pressure on Chiang Kai-shek's administration to reduce the ROC forces stationed on the islands. This resulted in tension between Taipei and Washington. Later, the PRC and ROC came to an arrangement in which they shelled each other's garrisons on alternate days. This continued for twenty years until the PRC and the United States normalized relations in 1979.¹⁷

*Chiang Ching-kuo Administration (1972–1988):
Thawing Relations*

President Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek, was the driving force behind Taiwan's modernization and democracy. He initiated the "Ten Major Construction Projects" that led to over 10 percent economic growth for Taiwan and the world's second-largest foreign exchange reserves. Under his leadership, Taiwan's successful economic performance was labeled the "Taiwan Miracle." By 1971, Taiwan's economic edge could compete against China on the international front even after Taiwan was expelled from the United Nations and replaced by the PRC. However, when China's top leader, Deng Xiaoping, launched "reform and opening up" in 1978, Chiang Ching-kuo decided to move toward becoming a democratic country to confront China's authoritarian regime.¹⁸ Chiang Ching-kuo understood that if Taiwan moved toward democracy, it would garner US support.¹⁹

Mao's policy toward Taiwan sought to achieve unification by force; whereas Deng changed the PRC's Taiwan policy in the hope that it would bring about a peaceful unification. When the United States shifted diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 1979, Deng felt confident that his government had an advantage in convincing Taiwan to engage in dialogue. On January 1, 1979, the National People's Congress (NPC) of the PRC called for a peaceful unification with Taiwan. In 1981, Ye Jianying, chairman of the NPC, proposed several initiatives: party-to-party talks, postal communication, commercial exchanges, and maritime shipping with Taiwan.²⁰ In 1982, Beijing introduced the "One Country, Two Systems" policy for Hong Kong and Macau, with the suggestion that this could also be applied to Taiwan under peaceful reunification.²¹ Chiang Ching-kuo responded with "Three No's": no contact, no negotiation, and no compromise.

In 1986, the China Airlines incident, however, "untied the knot" of the cross-strait stalemate. When a Taiwanese pilot hijacked a cargo airplane and landed in China, Chiang Ching-kuo's administration had no choice but to engage in dialogue with its counterparts. Consequently, officially appointed representatives from both sides met in Hong Kong.²² Having been away from mainland China for almost forty years, many China-born veterans in Taiwan pressed Chiang Ching-kuo's government to allow family reunions. Consequently, the president began to soften his China policy

and decided to open links with the PRC, allowing Taiwanese citizens to visit relatives on the mainland.²³ My father was one of them. When he returned to his hometown, my father was warmly welcomed by his family members, relatives, and even local officials. It was a momentous period for thawing relations. The Chinese government also highlighted the family reunions as proof of the saying that “blood is thicker than water.” This has been a common strategy in its propaganda to promote unification.

Lee Teng-hui Administration: Rising Tension

Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui proposed “One Country, Two Governments” (or “one Chinese culture, two independent governments”) and pursued pragmatic diplomacy. On one hand, Lee’s administration recognized the division of China and renounced the use of force against China. On the other hand, Lee actively sought opportunities to join international organizations. Beijing was suspicious of Lee’s intentions. To send an olive branch to China, President Lee established a National Unification Council in 1990 and announced the Guidelines for National Unification, which proposed three phases that were intended to lead to eventual reunification: a short-term phase of exchanges and reciprocity, a medium-term phase of mutual trust and cooperation, and a long-term phase of consultation and unification.²⁴ Negotiations were held between Taiwan’s Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and its Chinese counterpart, the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS).

The 1992 Consensus was an agreement by negotiators who found a way to sidestep Beijing’s long-standing precondition that, before talks could begin, both sides had to declare that there is only one China. These negotiators decided to agree to disagree, in that each side had a different interpretation of what “China” was: for the Taiwan delegates “China” meant the Republic of China, but the Chinese delegates had in their minds that “China” was clearly the People’s Republic of China.²⁵ For the PRC, the two sides belonged to one China and needed to work together to seek national reunification. For the ROC, “One China” had a different interpretation with the ROC representing One China. Thanks to the 1992 Consensus, representatives of China and Taiwan later had a productive meeting in Singapore. In 1995, President Lee accepted an invitation to speak at his alma mater, Cornell University. At first, the US State Department refused to issue Lee a visa because of Taiwan’s unofficial relationship with the United States. The US Congress, however, passed a resolution and pushed the State Department to give a green light to Lee’s visit. Beijing believed that President Lee had no interest in unification talks, but was attempting to lead Taiwan into becoming an independent country.²⁶ In March 1996, Taiwan conducted its first presidential election. As a result, the PLA

launched military exercises and missile tests in the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese unification strategy had shifted from emphasizing a peaceful stimulus to using a carrot-and-stick strategy. In response, the Bill Clinton administration sent two carrier battle groups to the waters near Taiwan to deter the crisis from further escalating.²⁷

In July 1999, President Lee defined *cross-strait relations* as “two countries.” Lee also noted that there was no need for Taiwan to declare independence again since the ROC had established an independent country in 1912.²⁸ After Lee’s announcement of the “two states” theory, the PRC government issued a white paper titled “The One China Principle and the Taiwan Issue.” The white paper said that the ROC’s position as the sole legal government was terminated in 1949, and the PRC assumed that role, giving it the right to exercise sovereignty over all of China, including Taiwan.²⁹

Chen Shui-bian Administration: A Tumultuous Period

In the 1990s, China’s cross-strait policy focused on economically integrating Taiwan, internationally isolating Taiwan, and blocking the movement toward Taiwan’s bid for formal independence. Since 2000, China’s definition of the “One China” policy regarding Taiwan had become flexible with a trend of moving toward equality. For example, the interpretation of “one China” had moved from “Taiwan is a part of China” to “both Taiwan and the mainland are a part of China.” Beijing was attempting to make it easier for Taiwanese to accept the One China principle.³⁰

When Chen Shui-bian won Taiwan’s presidential election in 2000, China was concerned about Chen’s stance on Taiwan’s independence.³¹ The PRC assumed that Chen would basically continue Lee’s separatist policy and, although Chen’s China policy would be neither reunification nor independence, Chen would deviate from the ROC government’s long-term goal of ultimate reunification with China. Eventually, the independence movement would gradually erase the bilateral cultural ties. PRC president Jiang Zemin responded that Chen was welcome to come to China for dialogues and vice versa, but Chen must first recognize the “One China principle.” In his inauguration speech, Chen announced the “Five Nots”; namely, not to declare independence, not to change the national title, not to push for the inclusion of the “two states” description in the constitution, not to promote a referendum to change the status quo on the question of independence or unification, and not to abolish the National Unification Council and the Guidelines for National Unification.³²

In 2001, President Chen authorized three “mini-links” between Quemoy and Matsu and mainland China. His intention was to express goodwill to Beijing and pave the way for future economic cooperation; nevertheless, Beijing did not respond positively to Chen’s initiatives. Beijing refused to

return to the negotiating table until Taipei accepted the One China principle. To encourage Taiwan to acknowledge One China, PRC vice premier Qian Qichen proposed a new One China position. He reiterated that both the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China. Qian argued that this position was more pragmatic and inclusive than previous formulations, but Taipei dismissed the statements as nothing new.³³

In 2004, the reelection of Chen encouraged supporters of Taiwan's independence. They thought it was time for Taiwan to move toward independence. Chinese leaders perceived that the rising Taiwan identity was causing a threat to its national security. In March 2005, the National People's Congress of the PRC passed the Anti-Secession Law. In this new law, Article 8 stated that the PRC would use nonpeaceful means against the separation of Taiwan from China. The law aimed to coerce the Taiwan independence movement by threatening the use of force, if the PRC deemed Taiwan had crossed the redline. The Chen administration strongly condemned the PRC's aggressive stance.

I served as an intelligence analyst in the ROC Ministry of National Defense from 1998 to 2008, during which time President Lee and President Chen were in office. I found that whenever China increased its military activities, such as when warplanes crossed the middle line of the Taiwan Strait, these actions were usually directly related to political issues. The Chinese government was using military pressure to send a signal to Taiwan and the United States that it would not hesitate to use military force if Taiwan drifted away from the One China policy.

Ma Ying-jeou Administration: A Period of Reconciliation

After eight tumultuous years of the Chen administration, tensions diminished during the next administration. During the 2008 presidential election campaign, candidate Ma Ying-jeou stated that he would abide by a Three No's approach (no unification with the PRC, no declaration of independence, and no use of force) with China.³⁴ After he was elected, under the 1992 Consensus negotiations between the Straits Exchange Foundation and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait resumed. The two semiofficial organizations agreed to focus on the economy first, and to set politics aside. They produced agreements on a wide range of functional and economic issues.³⁵

Normalization with China became a top priority for President Ma. His administration believed that improved cross-strait relations not only would strengthen Taiwan's security, but also would increase economic trade with China.³⁶ Ma's goodwill gesture received a positive response from his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao. President Hu stated that China was willing to resume a dialogue with Taiwan under the 1992 Consensus.³⁷ Ma's policy

generated economic benefits for both sides. As of 2024, Taiwan has now become China's largest trading partner and more than 1 million Taiwan compatriots live and work in mainland China. Ma's China policy also has unleashed a surge of commerce and tourism.³⁸

The Ma administration has sought to integrate Taiwan into a global economic system through closer economic engagement with China. A key example is the signing of the Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement in 2010.³⁹ Ma, however, did face pressure from the Taiwanese people, who strongly disapproved of his cooperation with Beijing. This opposition culminated in the 2014 Sunflower Movement when student activists occupied the Legislative Yuan (Congress) in protest of a free service trade agreement.⁴⁰

In 2015, a summit took place in Singapore between Ma Ying-jeou and Xi Jinping, to develop further peaceful relations and economic cooperation. During the summit, Ma expressed the following concerns with Xi: the needs to resolve disputes peacefully, to diminish China's growing military threat, and to participate in regional economic integration. Xi responded to each of Ma's requests in noncommittal ways. The only practical result of the meeting was a commitment to establish a hotline between the two governments.⁴¹

The Ma administration adopted policies that would capitalize on opportunities for cooperation with China. First, Taiwan would help to stabilize cross-strait relations by expanding economic engagement with China, including an expansion of Taiwan's bilateral and multilateral free-trade agreements (FTAs). Second, Taipei would continue accommodating Beijing as part of its hedging strategy. The Ma administration moderated its diplomatic activities in compliance with Beijing's One China principle, despite criticism from the opposition.⁴² Some Taiwanese people accused Ma of going too far with his policies and were afraid that China would perceive Ma as being a weak leader. This perception could develop into military action to invade Taiwan.

Tense Current Relations Between China and Taiwan

After winning Taiwan's 2016 presidential election, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ing-wen refused to accept the 1992 Consensus. Public opinion in Taiwan seems to be moving in her direction. Since 2020, Chinese leaders have appeared to believe that increasing its military threats is the most effective means of preventing Taiwan from moving toward independence. I believe that there are several reasons for their aggressiveness. First, with Hong Kong and Macau handed over to China, Taiwan is China's last lost territory that must be subdued to recreate a unified nation. Second, the relationship of Taiwan and the United States poses a serious threat to Chinese security. Tsai's administration has greatly improved its relations with the United States, clearly evident by increased visits of high-ranking

US officials, arms sales, and military cooperation. Third, the PLA's capability has greatly improved. The rapid military buildup and modernization have boosted China's confidence. China feels that it is in a good strategic position to take Taiwan by force and to resist US intervention.⁴³

China's coercive responses. President Xi has been taking increasingly aggressive actions in response to the rise of the Taiwan independence movement, and deteriorating US-China relations. According to the PRC Anti-Secession Law, China is justified in the use of force if Taiwan were to declare its independence or if it were to indefinitely delay cross-strait dialogue on unification.⁴⁴

On September 21, 2020, after PLA warplanes flew over the Taiwan Strait, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin denied the existence of a median line in the Taiwan Strait, claiming that there is no such thing as a "median line" in the Taiwan Strait. The PLA ramped up this rhetoric when Defense Ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang told reporters that, regarding the Taiwan issue, "Those who play with fire are bound to get burned."⁴⁵

Since 2020, China has been conducting a show of force in the Taiwan Strait with increased air patrols around Taiwan. It is obvious that the purpose of these exercises has been to test Taiwan's response time in preparation for a future military invasion.⁴⁶ According to the US Department of Defense 2020 report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, the PLA could initiate the following options at any time: an air and maritime blockade, a limited force of coercive options, an air and missile campaign, or a military invasion of Taiwan.⁴⁷

It is likely that if China were to attack Taiwan, it would be a full invasion. China's state broadcaster, CCTV, warned that "the first battle would be the last battle." Prior to a military invasion, the PLA would likely utilize cyber and electronic forces to target Taiwan's key infrastructure. Airstrikes would target Taiwan's top leaders in a decapitation attack, and an invasion would follow with PLA warships and submarines traversing the Taiwan Strait.⁴⁸

In the face of the mounting threat from China, the ROC military has said its armed forces have the right to self-defense and counterattack amid "harassment and threats." Taiwan originally vowed to follow a guideline of no escalation of conflict and no triggering incidents,⁴⁹ but recently Taiwan has been taking steps to prepare for future military conflict. It will enhance its electronic warfare, shore-based mobile missiles, fast minelaying, minesweeping, and drones.⁵⁰

In August 2022, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei, enraging Chinese leaders who viewed the move as a violation of China's internal affairs. As a result, China conducted several large-scale military exercises, which ushered in the 2022 Taiwan Strait Crisis.⁵¹ In response, President

Biden sent a clear message to Beijing that the United States would defend Taiwan should the PLA attempt an invasion.

In late March and early April 2023, enroute to a state visit in South America, President Tsai transited through the United States and met with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. From April 8 to 10, China conducted military drills in response. Beijing stated that the exercises were a serious warning to the Taiwan independence separatist forces and external conspirators.⁵²

Reasons for the rising tensions. According to China's Taiwan Affairs Office, the reason for the rise in tensions was Tsai's refusal to accept the One China principle and her continuing collusion with the US government.⁵³

China has observed that the ROC government has moved toward de-Sinicization (a process of reducing Chinese culture identity) by removing Chinese history from Taiwanese textbooks and portraying the PRC as an enemy. It thinks that if the trend does not cease, the Tsai administration will eventually move toward de jure independence. The Chinese media also have accused her administration of promoting de-Sinicization, claiming that Taiwan has moved toward the path of separatism by severing its connection with China and allying itself with the United States.

The percentage of ROC citizens who identify as Taiwanese is on the rise, according to a 2023 survey conducted by the National Chengchi University. Only 2.7 percent of participants said they self-identified as Chinese, compared to 60.8 percent as Taiwanese, and 30.5 percent identified as both Chinese and Taiwanese.⁵⁴ Because mainlanders who arrived in Taiwan in the late 1940s have passed away and the DPP government has promoted Taiwanese identity, PRC authorities have become frustrated by the trend of a rising Taiwanese identity and a continuing drift away from the Chinese identity.

The PRC has increased its diplomatic pressure on Taiwan, discouraging Taiwan's efforts to participate in any intergovernmental organizations.⁵⁵ In 2024, only twelve countries recognized Taiwan as a sovereign state, due to the rise of China's international influence and its buying of Taiwan diplomatic allies. Most of the intergovernmental organizations bar Taiwan's participation at China's behest. Taiwan is seeking strategies to reverse this problem. During the coronavirus pandemic, Taiwan donated millions of masks and medical supplies to its thirteen diplomatic allies and to other friendly countries around the world, including the United States. Both Taiwan's medical diplomacy and its exemplary handling of Covid-19 garnered positive coverage in the international press. In contrast, China's international image has suffered due to its intervention in Hong Kong, its culpability in the spread of coronavirus worldwide, and its aggressive territorial expansion in the South China Sea.⁵⁶ Taiwan's active pursuit of international recognition has been criticized by the Chinese government as an attempt to disrupt the status quo of cross-strait relations.

Beijing has perceived Taiwan's de-Sinicization, international recognition seeking, and US support as threats to its fundamental goals. Beijing has employed a host of methods in response, including coercive rhetoric, aggressive diplomacy, and belligerent military posturing against the Tsai administration.

US Security Relations with Taiwan

Over the past seven decades, the US government has played a crucial role in hedging China's threat in the Taiwan Strait. Without US assistance, Taiwan already would have been occupied by a PRC military invasion. A key element of US security commitments to Taiwan has been the prevention of any Chinese military invasion. To understand US obligations in a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue is to consider how those interests might be harmed if China attacked Taiwan. The impact on US interests would include the following: first, a cross-strait military conflict would draw the United States into an armed confrontation with China. Second, US trade interests in East Asia would be greatly affected.⁵⁷

During the Cold War

Most observers expected Chiang Kai-shek's government to eventually fall in response to a Communist invasion of Taiwan, and the United States initially showed no interest in supporting him in his final stand. Things changed with the onset of the Korean War in June 1950. At this point, allowing a total Communist victory over Chiang Kai-shek became politically unacceptable for the United States, and President Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait to prevent the ROC and PRC from attacking each other.⁵⁸

The PRC attempted to achieve its political objectives through military aggression during the Cold War. In response, US intervention, either by diplomatic or military means, successfully de-escalated the tensions. At the time, the United States and Taiwan security relationship was robust because both countries were allies, grounded on the 1954 US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty. From the time of the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 until the late 1960s, the United States considered Taiwan to be an important link in the strategy to contain Chinese Communists. However, the relative importance of Taiwan to the United States declined throughout the 1970s and 1980s as the United States attached higher priority to a better relationship with China to counter the rising threat of the Soviet Union.

The perceptions of the US top leaders on the balance of power in Asia and the cross-strait relations played a central role in determining their Tai-

wan policy. After Richard Nixon assumed the presidency, he and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, sought a rapprochement with China because of US-Soviet tension. In 1978, the worsening crises in Afghanistan made Washington and Beijing more flexible on the terms under which normal relations would be established.⁵⁹ In 1979, the Jimmy Carter administration established diplomatic relations with the PRC, ended formal diplomatic recognition of the ROC, and terminated the Mutual Defense Treaty. From the perception of US national interests, it is easy to understand why Kissinger said, “America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests.”

In 1979, the US government enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which has become the US foreign policy guide for its unofficial relations with the Taiwanese government. The TRA states that the United States would maintain the capability to resist any force or action that would imperil the security of Taiwan.⁶⁰

During the period to 1992, which included the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations, the United States sought to preserve its interests through a balanced “dual track” policy of maintaining friendly official ties with China and friendly unofficial ties with Taiwan. During the latter half of the 1980s, internal developments in China and Taiwan and changes in the international system began to have a negative impact on US interests in Taiwan. The Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 was a major setback to US-China relations. The United States condemned the brutality of the Beijing regime and imposed an arms embargo on China. After the incident, the United States developed a closer relationship with Taiwan.

After the Cold War

At the end of the Cold War, China lost its strategic value to the United States. However, since 1990 the “China threat theory” has become a popular topic in academic circles, as China’s economic growth at the end of the twentieth century was unprecedented. China’s emergence as an economic and military power has been interpreted by some as a threat to the United States on issues such as Taiwan.⁶¹ In this study, however, I focus on the security threat posed by China against Taiwan. In response to China’s growing security threat, the United States has been more willing to provide military assistance to Taiwan than previously. The US security assistance to Taiwan has given the United States an advantage and a bargaining chip in its dealings with both Taiwan and China.

Cross-strait relations have also played an important role in influencing the US security commitment to Taiwan.⁶² Prior to the 1990s, Taiwan had been committed to eventual unification with China, based on the ROC constitution and patriotic education. In 1990, President Lee promoted Taiwan’s identity to

achieve international recognition. Consequently, Taiwan shifted away from its commitment to the One China policy toward a separate political identity for Taiwan. The impact of Lee's 1995 visit to the United States and the United States' dispatch of naval forces to the Taiwan area led to a low ebb in US-China relations. The United States' intervention in the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis succeeded in deterring China's military aggression.

The pillar of US policy in cross-strait relations is China's nonuse of force and Taiwan's not declaring its independence. However, the PLA is preparing for war against Taiwan by acquiring advanced weapon systems and performing frequent military exercises. The United States opposes any changes in the status quo in the Taiwan Strait made by either side. The United States has been bolstering its military capability in East Asia. If China were to launch an assault, the United States would likely respond with strong political rhetoric, economic sanctions, diplomatic mediation, and military intervention to deter China. Consequently, since 2020, the relations between the United States and China have become tense. The US government has taken a more assertive approach to dissuade China's coercion.

Strategic Ambiguity or Strategic Clarity?

It is currently unclear as to whether the United States would defend Taiwan in case of an attack by China. Since the Carter administration terminated the defense treaty with Taiwan in 1980, Washington has intentionally abided by a policy of strategic ambiguity to govern its cross-strait relations. US strategic planners believe that ambiguity can confine any unilateral decisions by either China or Taiwan. First, it can prevent a declaration of independence from Taiwan on the assumption that the United States will come to defend the island if China attacks. Second, it allows the United States to conceal its intention of whether it will come to defend Taiwan or not. Thus, Beijing will be reluctant to use force against Taiwan because it does not know how the United States will respond to a cross-strait crisis. This strategy acts as a deterrence, restricting China and Taiwan from escalating the tension.⁶³

However, the downside of strategic ambiguity is that Washington is not able to send a clear and consistent message of deterrence to leaders in Beijing. Most Chinese people think that if a military conflict were to occur across the Taiwan Strait, the chances that the United States would deploy military forces to defend Taiwan are slim. This perception has encouraged Beijing to become more aggressive. Thus, some US scholars and strategists have advocated for a change of its current policy to one of strategic clarity. These advocates believe that Washington should send a clear message of US military support for Taiwan against any Chinese military action. Richard Haass, former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, sup-

ports the advocates of the strategic clarity policy. He has argued that the United States should unequivocally state that it would intervene to deter China to reassure US allies. Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Phil Davidson, stated that “more than 40 years of the strategic ambiguity has helped keep Taiwan in its current status,” but that “these things should be reconsidered routinely.”⁶⁴ After Joe Biden became president, he publicly stated several times that he would defend Taiwan. Biden believes in “peace through strength” and moves toward strategic clarity on Taiwan’s defense.

To prevent China from launching a military invasion, the ROC government, in recent years, has encouraged the United States to adopt a policy of strategic clarity, which would go a long way toward making China think twice before launching any military attacks against Taiwan.

Why Taiwan Matters to the United States

With a population of 24 million people, Taiwan is one of the world’s most vibrant and democratic countries. The ROC and the United States have had a long and close relationship dating back to World War II. After the defeated nationalist forces retreated to Taiwan, the United States continued to recognize the ROC as the sole legitimate government of China.⁶⁵ Sending US aid to the ROC in the 1950s and 1960s helped Taiwan to develop its economy.⁶⁶ Although official diplomatic relations ended with the ROC, the United States maintained unofficial, but robust, ties with Taiwan. I was a briefing officer when the US delegations visited the ROC Ministry of Defense from 2000 to 2008. Our Taiwan delegation always emphasized that the ROC government shared many core values with the United States, particularly its mutual dedication to democracy and a market economy. Taiwan is also an important trading and security partner with the United States. The two countries enjoy a multidimensional relationship that serves both of their interests.

Democratic values. With the end of the Cold War, the ROC government underwent a transition, evolving from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. Taiwan’s transition to democracy has augmented the US-Taiwan relationship from one based primarily on shared security and financial interests to one based on shared values. Taiwan’s successful democratic and economic transformation is an inspiration for other countries in Asia that are still under the rule of authoritarian regimes. As a beacon of democracy, Taiwan serves as a role model for future democracy throughout all of China.⁶⁷

Economic interests. Since 1979, the United States and Taiwan have maintained robust economic ties. In 2020, bilateral trade reached \$83.1 billion. Taiwan’s imports from the United States amounted to \$32.6 billion. Most of

the imported products included electronics, precision instruments, information and communication products, and transportation equipment. Taiwan was the United States' ninth-largest trading partner, ahead of much bigger countries like Brazil and India. The United States is Taiwan's second-largest trading partner.⁶⁸ Taiwan has been the seventh-largest source of international students in the United States. During the 2021–2022 school year, more than 20,487 students from Taiwan studied at higher education institutions in the United States, contributing over \$706 million to the US economy.⁶⁹

Strategic interests. Taiwan is located in the middle of the First Island Chain, which is composed of the Kuril Islands, the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and the Philippines. During the Cold War, the First Island Chain served as an important frontier to prevent communist expansion. Taiwan's location is critical to Japan and the United States in East Asia.⁷⁰ With the end of the Cold War, the United States has insisted on the peaceful resolution of cross-strait differences, opposed unilateral changes to the status quo by either side, and encouraged both sides to engage in constructive dialogue.⁷¹ Since 2013, China has become aggressive in the South China Sea by constructing long-range sensor arrays, port facilities, runways, and reinforced bunkers. The PLA has also increased its military exercises and patrols.⁷² Taiwan occupies the biggest island, Taiping Island (known as Itu Aba) in the region. In the face of China's growing military threat in the South China Sea, the US government has enhanced its military cooperation with Taiwan. In March 2021, both governments signed a Coast Guard Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that would create a working group to build cooperation and share information. Taiwan's military has also ramped up training of troops and added defensive weaponry on Taiping Island.⁷³

Science and technology cooperation. Taiwan has made efforts to become Asia's "Silicon Valley," and it has achieved a certain degree of success. Some of the most advanced technologies have been developed and manufactured by Taiwanese engineers. Yahoo and YouTube have Taiwanese-born founders. Semiconductor manufacturing companies in Taiwan are responsible for more than half of the global production.⁷⁴ Taiwan has advanced up the value chain in manufacturing as an innovator and producer of information technology. The science and technology cooperation between Taiwan and the United States includes areas of high-level research such as nuclear energy, environmental conservation, space science, and biomedical engineering. As of June 2019, there have been over 260 bilateral collaborative agreements and MoUs signed to promote science and technology.⁷⁵ In 2023, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) produced 90 percent of the world's most advanced processor chips.⁷⁶

Taiwan matters to the United States because of the countries' shared interests and values. Besides the previously mentioned interests, Taiwan is a longtime friend and loyal democratic ally of the United States. Taiwan stands as a beacon for US policy in East Asia.⁷⁷ Taiwan needs the US security umbrella, whereas the United States needs Taiwan to contain China's expansion and access to Taiwan's microchip technology.

Levels of Analysis

When we study international conflicts, we must ask what is happening and why did an event occur.⁷⁸ If political scientists can find out what elements influence foreign security policy, it will help us to better understand the decisionmaking process during international crises.⁷⁹ Kenneth Waltz categorized the causes of international conflict into three "images." Known as levels of analysis, his categorization distinguishes between international influences, state influences, and individual influences for explaining the causes of conflicts.⁸⁰ At the international level are structural features of the international system. At the state level are domestic influences. At the individual level are the characteristics of national leaders. All three levels influence decisions. Overall, the United States' hedging of China's threat was influenced by changes of the international system, policymaking of key political institutions, and decisions of US presidents. This study adopts three levels of analysis to dissect the United States and Taiwan's security relations.

The chaotic nature of the international system is the most important factor at the international level. A country's behavior is shaped by its traditions, common goals, and shared norms.⁸¹ The international level focuses on the states' interactions, states' relative power positions in the international system, and the interactions between them.⁸² The distribution of power in the system (e.g., unipolar, bipolar, multipolar) and the nature of order (e.g., balance of power and collective security) are also important factors.⁸³ From the realists' point of view, international conflict is caused by the clash of interests between states and the absence of an effective international agency for resolving disputes.⁸⁴

The state level concerns the groups of individuals within nations that influence actions of the top leaders. The term *state* refers to the key political institutions responsible for making and implementing important policies in a country.⁸⁵ The objective of national security is to sustain freedom from foreign dominance.⁸⁶ National security is equal to military security. The aim of a nation's security policy is to enhance the national safety against threats arising from other states.⁸⁷ In defense of its national survival, the predominant duty of a nation is to prevent the loss of anything that would threaten its fundamental values.⁸⁸ This level concerns those political organizations

and government agencies influencing the US security policy regarding Taiwan. Standard operating procedures (SOPs) in an organization are major determinants of foreign policy behavior. Organizations employ SOPs to respond to a range of events. Bureaucratic politics suggest that agencies compete with one another for control over resources and policy. The result of this competition creates the policy.⁸⁹

The individual level concerns the perceptions, choices, and actions of individuals.⁹⁰ When we study international conflict at the microscopic level, human beings are the primary cause of war. Many people believe that war may be anticipated as a natural and recurrent inevitability. War not only has its roots in the hearts and minds of people, but these roots cannot be eradicated.⁹¹ Most leaders are rational and choose a policy that maximizes benefits and minimizes costs, but other factors such as beliefs, personality, and perceptions also influence decisionmaking.⁹² Rational leaders are able to differentiate between all of their options, and usually select the higher valued options.⁹³ This study focuses on how top leaders influence the course of history. The protection of a nation from all types of external aggression, espionage, hostile reconnaissance, sabotage, and subversion is the duty of a nation's leader.⁹⁴ Without neglecting the international and state levels of analysis, this study pays special attention to individual-level explanations in the decisionmaking process; specifically, how the presidents perceived the crisis, and how they made their decisions.

The three levels of analysis provide multiple explanations of the triangular relations between the United States, China, and Taiwan. For example, many possible explanations exist as to why the United States and China established diplomatic relations in 1979. At the international level, the relations between the United States and China improved in the 1970s. By working together, both countries could more strongly confront their threatening rival, the Soviet Union. At the state level, key security leaders of the Carter administration such as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wanted to establish diplomatic relations with China. For China, after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, normalizing relations with the United States could improve China's image in the world. At the individual level, President Carter calculated that improving relations with China could help his poor domestic approval rating. Chinese leaders believed that the establishment of relations with the United States would consolidate their newly established political power.

Organization of the Book

Few publications have touched on US-Taiwan security relations since 1949 when the ROC government retreated to Taiwan.⁹⁵ As a result, readers have

not been able to grasp the entire background and overall picture of bilateral military relations. This is the main purpose of this book, which is based on historical analysis. Furthermore, I would like to clarify the fact that US security commitments to Taiwan for a peaceful settlement have been backed by every administration since President Truman and that the principal reason the United States has assisted Taiwan in its drive for defense self-sufficiency is that the policy serves many US interests.

The book begins in 1949 because that is when Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan. From there, we study each US administration to the present. Each chapter is divided into similar sections to allow for comparative study. The historical events section introduces the administration and its policies, and is followed by analysis at the individual, state, and international levels. Chapter 2 ushers in the beginning of US security commitments to Taiwan with the Harry S. Truman administration (1945–1953). Chapter 3 explores the importance of the US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty to Taiwan's national security during the Dwight Eisenhower administration (1953–1961). Chapter 4 assesses why President John F. Kennedy (1961–1963) thought that any change in the China policy would have been a disaster for his new administration. Chapter 5 explains how PRC nuclear testing and the Vietnam War influenced Taiwan policy during the Lyndon Johnson administration (1963–1969).

Chapter 6, the Richard Nixon administration (1969–1974) and Chapter 7, the Gerald Ford administration (1974–1977), examine the reasons for détente with China and the move toward normalization of the relations, leading to the Jimmy Carter administration (1977–1981) establishing diplomatic relations with China as discussed in Chapter 8. Chapter 9, which covers the Ronald Reagan administration (1981–1989), explains the US arms sales policy and security assurances to Taiwan before looking at how the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident affected US-China relations under the George H. W. Bush administration (1989–1993) in Chapter 10. Under Bill Clinton (1993–2001), the US government dispatched carriers to the Taiwan Strait and the administration focused on the Taiwan missile crisis (Chapter 11). Under the George W. Bush administration (2001–2009), the government moved from a strategic competitor to a strategic partner with China as explained in Chapter 12. Notably, the Barack Obama administration (2009–2017) sought a rebalanced policy toward Asia. Chapter 13 looks at its impact on China policy. A more assertive China then led to rising confrontation during the Donald Trump administration (2017–2021), as discussed in Chapter 14. The Joe Biden administration (2021–) had to deal with the Taiwan Strait Crises of 2022–2023 as discussed in Chapter 15. Chapter 16 concludes the book with a look at the future of US-China-Taiwan relations and suggestions for curbing the cross-strait conflicts.

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