

# Policy Report



## Is War Over Taiwan Coming?

Rémy Carugati

Is war over Taiwan coming? If yes, how would it take place? These questions are among the most salient debates in the security studies community. While it is impossible to offer uncontested answers, we can provide elements of responses through a rational assessment of the factors that make war likely or not. The most consequential factors tilting the balance towards war is the modernization of China's armed forces, coupled with the exasperation of the Chinese Communist Party about the status quo and its confidence in undertaking a successful military action against Taiwan. Inversely, the immense cost, whether economic, political, or reputational, of forcefully reunifying Taiwan with the Chinese mainland is the main factor that reduces its likelihood as it would threaten regime security. The most likely scenario until the end of the decade is the continuation of Chinese gray zone measures. However, if violence is used, the incentives are to display a massive use of force to impose a *fait accompli* on Taiwan.

### 1. Context

After two decades of Chinese civil war, in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang party fled to Taiwan to establish the Republic of China (ROC), while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gained control of China's mainland and established the People's Republic of China (PRC/China). Since then, the Chinese civil war has never officially ended, and one of the CCP's most important sovereignty objectives has been to unify Taiwan with the mainland. The ROC, considered a breakaway Chinese province by Beijing, has since 1949 metamorphosed. From a dictatorial nationalist government, its government evolved from the late 1980s into a liberal democratic regime that held its first presidential election in 1996.

Since 1978, the U.S. has switched recognition from the ROC to the PRC as the sole legal government of China. In 1979, the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) was signed, which, with the U.S.' six [Assurances](#) to Taiwan, and the three U.S.-PRC communiqués of 1972, 1978, and 1982, delineate [U.S.-Taiwan relations](#). Although not a formal military alliance, the TRA specifies U.S. commitments to provide weapons to Taiwan. The U.S. does not officially take a stance on how the Taiwan question should be resolved as long as it is done peacefully. The U.S. ambiguity regarding its support of Taiwan in the event of war aims to deter China from attacking Taiwan just as it intends to prevent Taiwan from declaring *de jure* independence. This policy of [dual deterrence](#) has successfully prevented war since 1979, but there are debates over whether the U.S. should clarify its commitment to Taiwan, given that China's power has massively increased since 1979.

There has been an increasing pressure from China directed at Taiwan manifested in the recurrent violation of Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) beyond the median line serving as a [de facto frontier](#), which had not been crossed prior to 2020. Beijing has also significantly stepped up its diplomatic

pressure to prevent Taiwan from entering [free trade agreements](#), international organizations, or bilateral relationships. More generally, Beijing's geopolitical clout resulting from its fulgurant development is used assertively to advance reunification through information warfare, cyber-attacks, economic coercion, and military demonstrations, also known as [grey zone measures](#). The deteriorating situation over Taiwan is happening in the context of the Sino-American great power competition, where Taiwan is of strategic, technological, economic, and ideological value to both the U.S. and China. Taiwan is a flashpoint because the struggle for the island's control has the potential to trigger a war between two foes competing for hegemonic influence in East Asia. There are enough stakes on each side for the two protagonists to fight and go to great lengths to achieve their preferred outcome over Taiwan.

Given the tensions resulting from the U.S.-China strategic competition, the status quo in Taiwan is increasingly complicated to maintain. An accident could precipitate a conflict with high escalation potential. The cost of invading Taiwan is incredibly high for the CCP. Still, China could decide to use force depending on the evolution of China's domestic situation, its perception of the balance of power, the modification of the status quo, and its assessment of the current window of opportunity. So, if war is not necessarily imminent, it is a serious possibility in the medium to long term. As such, it is essential to understand the potential factors that could cause friction and war between Taiwan, China, and the U.S.

Is war over Taiwan coming? What are the Chinese red lines, and what kind of conditions could trigger the use of force by China against Taiwan? What is the most likely scenario of a Taiwan contingency?

Based on the Network for Strategic Analysis' "*Is War Over Taiwan Coming*" [symposium](#), held in Montreal on June 2-3, 2022, this report starts by presenting Taiwan's importance to China and the U.S., respectively. Then it lays out the conditions that could trigger a mainland attack on Taiwan prior to assessing the arguments that support the relative imminence of an attack against Taiwan. The report then turns to the arguments against an impending attack on Taiwan, highlighting that most experts think China has more to lose from a rational cost-benefit analysis in launching an attack than in enduring the unpleasant status quo. The report concludes that war is not inevitable and that the most likely scenario until the end of the 2020s is the continuation of China's grey zone measures.

### 1.1. Taiwan's Importance to China

In 1992, the Consensus was signed between Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) party and the PRC, acknowledging the [existence of a single China](#). Despite disagreement on the meaning of "China" - PRC or ROC? - the ambiguous 1992 Consensus has maintained the cross-strait status quo. But in 2016, with the arrival in power of pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Tsai Ing-Wen, and her reelection in 2020, cross-strait relations have plummeted. Tsai Ing-Wen refused to uphold Beijing's interpretation of the 1992 Consensus in her reelection speech in 2020. This is because Beijing equates the 1992 Consensus to the "one country, two systems" arrangement under which Macau and Hong Kong are administered.

When Xi Jinping arrived in power in 2012, he developed the concept of the "China Dream," which is associated with the [rejuvenation](#) of the Chinese nation. It implies, among other things, reunification with Taiwan. The Chinese rejuvenation finds roots in Chinese historical traumas as an enduring theme in China's domestic discourse. There was never a precise timeline accompanying the discourse on the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but Xi mentioned [2049](#) as a date for the rejuvenation to be completed, which raises questions about Taiwan. Xi has increasingly allowed the discussion of a forceful takeover of Taiwan, making the [theme mainstream](#) in the CCP - a significant development in highly

censored China. Xi's multiple calls to advance on the path of reunification, and not pass the issue on from generation to generation have linked [Xi's legitimacy](#) to the Taiwan question. Xi's own desire to reunify with Taiwan and the fact that he provided what seems to be a date is a significant departure from previous Chinese leaders. Especially given that preparation for contingencies over Taiwan attracts one-third of China's defence budget and is the Chinese armed forces' [primary warfighting mission](#) for strategic, economic, and cultural reasons.

Strategically speaking, conquering Taiwan would provide greater leverage to China over regional actors. Located in the first island chain, the seizure of Taiwan would allow the PLA to project power into the Western Pacific and possibly [checkmate U.S. forces](#) in the region. With Taiwan under control, China could implement blockades on local actors such as Japan or the Philippines. China would also free up [“dozens of ships, hundreds of missile launchers and combat aircraft, thousands of personnel, and billions of dollars”](#) dedicated to a Taiwan contingency. As a result, China would be able to increasingly coerce regional actors to make them comply with its preferences in the South and East China Seas, thereby strengthening regional domination.

Moreover, absorbing Taiwan's [\\$600 billion](#) economy and cutting-edge technology firms would be a major advantage for the PRC. Taiwan is home to Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), one of the two leading companies with Samsung that has a near-monopoly on producing the most advanced electronic chips available on the market. Whoever controls TSMC controls a technology essential to remain ahead in artificial intelligence and hence, [next-generation weapons platforms](#). Semiconductors are also crucial for producing many electronic products used in everyday life. China's production of capabilities in [“advanced manufacturing and digital technologies”](#) depends on access to advanced chips from Taiwan. Consequently, controlling the source of production of higher-end semiconductors is strategic.

Culturally, Taiwan's de facto independence is seen as an egregious stigma of a dark period of Chinese history: the Century of Humiliations (1839-1949). After its defeat in the Second Opium War, China was forced to sign the first of a long list of unequal treaties which dismembered China's territories. Seizing Taiwan would not only end the Chinese civil war and affirm the CCP's legitimacy and authority, but it would also be a major advancement in the [rejuvenation of the Chinese nation](#). By successfully conquering Taiwan, the CCP would demonstrate that China has fully recovered from the Century of Humiliation, during which it could not defend its territorial integrity.

Placing Taiwan under the CCP's control is highly symbolic and a matter of honor, strategic thinking, and nationalist motivations closely associated with the China Dream, the CCP, and Xi's legitimacy. Concretely, Taiwan's reunification with the mainland under the “one country, two systems” on [Beijing's terms](#) would mean that:

- “The ROC would cease to exist, and the PRC flag would replace that of Taiwan”
- “Taiwan would be absorbed then transformed into a special administrative region like Hong Kong or Macau”
- “Taiwan would no longer have a defence and foreign policy of its own”
- “The mainland would have a say on how Taiwan's leaders are picked”
- “Taiwan would keep its army, and the PLA would not be stationed in Taiwan.”
- “The U.S. would not be allowed to project power from Taiwan.”

## 1.2. Taiwan's Importance to the U.S.

If Taiwan is crucial for China's great rejuvenation, it is also central to the U.S. dominance of the Indo-Pacific. Washington has geostrategic, geoeconomic, and ideological incentives to guarantee Taiwan's de facto independence. Taiwan is a primary element of the U.S. capacity to project its power in East Asia and contain China. As described by General Douglas MacArthur 70 years ago, this [unsinkable aircraft carrier](#) is vital for the U.S. effort to prevent China's regional territorial expansion behind the first island chain. According to Charles Philippe David, without Taiwan, there is no offshore balancing.

Furthermore, the U.S. technological industries depend on Taiwanese higher-end semiconductor chips, just like China. There have been [efforts](#) lately to repatriate semiconductor plants to the U.S., but the most advanced technology will remain in Taiwan for the foreseeable future. Therefore, an attack on Taiwan by China would engender an economic contraction in the U.S. and threaten the U.S. technological advance in critical technologies like artificial intelligence, with dire consequences for America's primacy.

There is also the fear of [losing credibility](#) if the U.S. does not react to aggression, even though Washington has no formal defence treaty with Taiwan comparable to the ones with South Korea or Japan. The U.S. nonetheless risks reputational costs in the absence of a reaction to aggression because the language of the TRA specifies a role for the U.S. in arming Taiwan to deter an attack. Additionally, a lack of U.S. reaction in the face of external threats to Taiwan could increase the fear of abandonment in Japan and South Korea despite their defence treaties, according to Hyon Joo Yoo and Steven F. Jackson. As a result, Washington's regional allies could either seek nuclear weapons or accommodate China's preferences that are antithetic to the U.S. vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which would be a threatening outcome for the U.S. and other trading nations.

Lastly, the U.S. has ideological stakes in keeping the Taiwanese democratic regime. It is easier and preferable for Washington to deal with fellow democracies based on common liberal political and economic principles than illiberal regimes. Taiwan is a regional political counterpoint to the PRC's authoritarian rule, and helping Taipei resist forced reunification is beneficial to the U.S. [preferred normative standards](#).

## 2. Is War Coming?

### 2.1. Factors Tilting the Balance Towards a Taiwan Contingency

#### A. The Solidification of the Taiwanese Identity

Very few Taiwanese would like to reunify with the Chinese mainland. According to a [survey by National Chengchi University](#), 64% of [Taiwan's residents](#) identify as exclusively Taiwanese, 30% as both Taiwanese and Chinese, and 3% as Chinese. Compared to [1992](#), 46.4% identified as Taiwanese and Chinese, 25.5% as Chinese, and 17.6% as Taiwanese. In 2020, the reelection of Tsai Ing-Wen, who wants to keep some distance from the mainland, exemplifies this trend in Taiwanese society. However, she is not the most anti-mainland politician. Tsai Ing-Wen intends to maintain the status quo and avoids explicit references to Taiwan's independence. That is not the case with her very popular vice president, William Lai, a likely candidate in the 2024 election who is more in favor of Taiwan's independence. If he were to run and win the next election, it would encourage Beijing to take drastic measures. The current

Taiwanese political climate worries Beijing that peaceful reunification might never happen and that the only way to reunify Taiwan with the mainland is to force it upon the Taiwanese society.

### B. U.S.-Taiwan Growing Links

Concomitantly, we are witnessing growing [U.S.-Taiwan links](#). Recurrent visits from [U.S. lawmakers and deputy assistant secretaries](#) to Taiwan provoke [China's ire](#). In reaction, the PLA's military demonstrations have blossomed. At some point, China could launch an attack if it deems that the presence of foreign militaries in Taiwan is too important or that the links between the U.S. and Taiwanese officials have become unacceptable. Tsai Ing-Wen officially confirmed the [presence of U.S. soldiers](#) in Taiwan "to increase the islands' defence capability," which is a risky acknowledgment.

Taiwan is one of the rare dossiers that enjoys bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress. The latter passed in 2018 the Taiwan Travel Act, establishing a framework for increased high-level U.S.-Taiwan government exchanges. In 2018, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act was signed, allowing for closer economic, political, and security links with Taiwan. In 2019, the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act was adopted to help Taiwan broaden its global diplomatic ties and partnerships. The Taiwan Assurance Act, part of the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act, calls upon Taiwan to boost its defence spending and demands more U.S. arms transfers and sales to the island. It also intends to support Taiwan in becoming part of more international organizations. Finally, one could mention the [Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act](#). Although not passed, this bill is of paramount importance because it has provisions for the U.S. to use force to defend Taiwan under certain circumstances. If it ever becomes law, this would end the U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity.

### C. The PLA's Modernization

The most significant factor associated with aggression concerns the PLA's modernization and the resulting modification of the balance of power between the U.S. and China in East Asia. With Xi's arrival to power in 2012, he initiated a reform of [China's armed forces](#) to produce a "world-class force" capable of fighting global wars by 2049 – the date of the one-hundredth anniversary of the PRC. [Military reforms](#) include the creation of new joint theater commands, updates to hardware, better military-civilian collaboration, and the transformation of the PLA Army Navy into a maritime powerhouse. China has acquired [anti-ship missiles, quiet submarines, advanced fighter aircraft, and integrated air defenses](#).

The China-Taiwan [military balance benefits China](#) as it spends twenty-five times more on its military budget than Taiwan. China spent \$3 trillion in the last three decades to develop its armed forces. Unsurprisingly, in most [war games](#), China is capable of subjugating Taiwan before the U.S. gets a chance to intervene. China's military capabilities, which are [structurally linked](#) to Russia, have significantly improved and allow for power projection in the South and East China Seas and over Taiwan. The PLA Navy has become the largest navy globally, with [355](#) ships and submarines against [293 vessels](#) for the U.S. The U.S. Navy remains dominant in the Western Pacific regarding combat power.

That said, China has the most extensive [shipbuilding capacity](#) worldwide, which is an asset for the PLA Navy's growth. According to Indo-Pacific Command, China is expected to have an 8-to-1 advantage in regional naval vessels relative to the U.S. and similar advantages in aircraft by [2025](#). Not only that, but China has been catching up with the [U.S. military-technological advance](#) and hopes to exceed the U.S. by the end of the decade. China has expanded its ground-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles. Some missiles can switch between conventional and nuclear warheads, which renders difficult the



identification of the type of missile being launched. China's A2/AD seriously reduces the U.S. marge for maneuvers in East Asia if it decides to intervene to help Taiwan.

Another striking feature of the PLA's modernization is that it has primarily been conducted to prevail in the case of an amphibious invasion of "a big island," a blockade, or a missile attack – hard not to think of Taiwan contingencies here. Although not completed yet, the successful modernization of China's armed forces has allowed Beijing to alter the balance of power in the region, including in the Taiwan Straits, where Beijing had long been militarily disfavored. With the joint action capacity of the [air force, the navy, the army, and the strategic rocket force](#), China theoretically has the upper hand over Taiwan. The credibility of Taiwan and American deterrence vis-à-vis China has diminished due to [Taiwan's low military readiness and the eroding position of the U.S. regional forces](#).

#### D. China's Confidence in Its Armed Forces

Such modernization has encouraged the belief that China has the means [to destroy Taiwan's strategic infrastructures with highly advanced ballistic and cruise missiles](#) or that it could [easily implement a blockade against Taiwan indefinitely](#), just as it could cut off Taiwan from the Internet and impair lines of communication through cyber-attacks. However, mounting a victorious amphibious invasion is less certain, as it is an arduous campaign to pull off. But the general feeling in Beijing is that the PLA can win a limited military confrontation against Taiwan and potentially against the U.S. The PLA believes that the balance of power favors Beijing because China cares more about and is closer to Taiwan than the U.S.

According to [Michael Beckley and Hal Brands](#), Beijing generally uses force to avoid losing territory or capitalize on a closing window of opportunity to expand its control on disputed [claims](#). The U.S. and its partners are hardening their regional presence and are encircling China. Although Taiwan's armed forces are currently [critically understaffed](#), they are trying to fix this issue and increase their capabilities. Additionally, [experts](#) remark that U.S. defence investments in East-Asia and military coalitions and partnerships, like the QUAD and AUKUS, already impede China's power projection and will increasingly do so as time passes.

By [2030](#), China will likely face a much more difficult operational environment than it currently does. Many U.S. assets deployed in the region are old and will need to be replaced in the next decade. Thus, the 2020s is an optimal decade for a Chinese move as the balance of power will be the most in favor of China. If China waits too long, this window of opportunity will close, rendering more complicated and costly any military actions in the future. U.S. Admiral Davidson thinks 2027 is the year, while other [high-ranked American](#) and [Taiwanese](#) military officials have proposed a range of potential dates (2025, 2027, 2030 to 2049) where China could attempt armed reunification.

According to Oriana Skylar Mastro, the [Chinese leaders' perception of their chances of victory matters more than their objective chances of success](#). And Xi is increasingly being told by advisers that the PLA could reunify Taiwan by force at a [bearable cost](#). Consequently, it is not unthinkable for Xi to believe that the window of opportunity could soon close and that it must quickly act. The increasing [publication of articles](#) in China calling for the swift resolution of the Taiwan question while China enjoys maximum chances of success expresses a sense of urgency. This makes U.S. Admiral Michael Studeman declare that Taiwan's invasion "is only a matter of time, not a matter of if." And Mastro estimates the current chances of war between Taiwan and China at 60%.

### E. A War to Divert Attention From Domestic Issues

Using force against Taiwan is as much a [political decision as a military one](#). As the legitimacy of the CCP is increasingly based on [nationalism](#) rather than merely on economic growth, it might feel compelled to act. Especially as 70% of Chinese [strongly support using force](#) to reunify Taiwan with the mainland. Given China's domestic social, political, and financial issues, bolstering nationalism through the "Taiwan card" might be a convenient way to divert attention away from unemployment, electricity shortages, corruption, high debt, inequalities, lower growth rate, or any other domestic issues. In the words of [Jennifer Chang](#), "[...]When China is operating from a position of internal and external weakness [...] it could become emboldened to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy—and potentially use military action against Taiwan." It is also important to note the [demographic problem](#) of China. Its population is rapidly aging. It is typical for a nation that gets wealthier, but young people are crucial to fighting wars. Such demographic decline imposes a limited timeframe for action.

## 2.2. Scenarios of a Taiwan Contingency

There are [several red lines](#) that, if crossed, could trigger a Chinese military action against Taiwan. The first and most important red line that Taiwan must not cross if it wants to avoid a Chinese military action against it is to formally declare its independence or organize a referendum on its independence. The PRC has passed, in 2005, an [Anti-Secession Law](#) that requires China to strive for a peaceful reunification with Taiwan, while making limpid that if all peaceful avenues have been exhausted and that Taiwan is seriously moving toward independence, then "the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity." A clear Taiwanese "secession," or even serious rhetoric about independence, is likely to trigger an immediate response from the mainland. However, even if Taiwan respects the current status quo, the combination of Beijing's power and exasperation related to the slow advancement of reunification could result in aggressive action. Below is a list of the various scenarios a Taiwan contingency could look like:

- [Seizure of Taiwan's Small Islands](#): After having imposed an unsuccessful ultimatum on Taipei to initiate the reunification process under the "one country, two systems," Beijing could bombe Taiwan's small islands near Chinese coasts like Taiwan's Dongsha Island, Taiping Island, Pratas Island, or Wuqiu Island. China could then seize and turn one or several of them into [launching grounds](#), threatening future military actions if Taiwan still refuses to start the reunification process.
- [Aerial Bombing Campaign](#): Starting from the same premises, a more energetic move would be joint PLA missile and airstrike campaigns against Taiwan right from the start, hitting strategic military and government targets and potentially even strategic civil infrastructures like axes of communication, roads, bridges, etc. The goal would be to force Taipei to surrender and accept some form of reunification without stepping foot on the island through shock and awe.
- [Blockade](#): An aerial bombing campaign could be supplemented by a blockade to cut the island off from its vital imports. The PLA Navy can surround Taiwan and stop merchant ships from entering any of its seven major ports, four of which face China's mainland. Taiwan imports 60% of its food and 98% of its energy. Taiwan's food and energy reserves would last a few months without external supplies. The goal would be to strangle the island to force it to capitulate.

- [Aerial Bombing Campaign on Taiwan and U.S. Regional Targets](#): In addition to bombing Taiwan, China could decide to attack U.S. forces in the region (Japan, South Korea, and even Guam) to cripple the U.S. capacity to intervene in the first stages of the conflict. The more credible the U.S. intention to intervene militarily, the more likely China could target U.S. forces in its [opening salvo](#). This would entail a significant risk of escalation as China and the U.S. would be at war, potentially exposing China's mainland to U.S. retaliation. According to Bruno Tertrais, China could attempt to offer Japan a deal before the bombing campaign: no Japanese assistance to the U.S. in exchange for Beijing dropping its claim on the Senkaku Islands.
- [Amphibious invasion of Taiwan](#): This would be the costliest and most complex campaign to pull off. It would require a joint operation on a colossal scale with massive casualties, high risks of failure, and billions of dollars spent. Millions of Chinese service members would need to be mobilized, "[including soldiers, sailors, airmen, rocketeers, marines, cyber warriors, armed police, reservists, ground militia, and maritime militia](#)." According to the three-to-one ratio of attackers to defenders, approximately 1.35 million soldiers would need to be sent across the strait to have any chance of overwhelming the Taiwanese forces.

### 2.3. Factors Tilting the Balance Against a Taiwan Contingency

Despite alarming factors indicating that a war over Taiwan could be imminent, there are important factors that militate against a reckless move from the PLA against Taiwan. After a relatively recent [meeting](#) between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping, Beijing reaffirmed its intentions to "strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with utmost sincerity and efforts." Xi also [restrained from mentioning Taiwan](#) in major CCP's speeches where he concentrated on modernization and socioeconomic progress instead. Overall, China is satisfied with its [steady economic growth, expanding influence, and stability](#). For now, economic and anti-corruption reforms are more important than Taiwan unification as developing China is the main source of CCP's legitimacy. Legitimacy is crucial to regime security, which is the CCP's most important objective. Therefore, Beijing is not [motivated to use military force](#) to speed up reunification as it would endanger economic growth and technological access.

#### A. [The PLA is Not Ready Yet and Lacks Combat Experience](#)

The PLA's modernization and creation of joint theatre commands have enhanced the effectiveness of the Chinese armed forces, especially for contingencies over Taiwan. But one must remember that China's latest battle was in 1979 against Vietnam and lacks recent fighting experience. The [PLA's modernization](#) is not complete either, as China does not have all the necessary naval and air assets to lead a cross-strait invasion successfully. There is still ample room for progress in coordinating ground, sea, and air forces in large joint amphibious operations. According to the 2021 Pentagon report on China's military and security development, the PLA Navy has been focusing on developing the capacity to launch "[regional and eventually global expeditionary missions rather than the large number of landing ship transports and medium landing craft that would be necessary for a large-scale direct beach assault](#)."

The Pentagon's report also mentions the PLA's [Five Incapables](#), which limits the effectiveness of the Chinese armed forces, especially at the operational level: "Some commanders cannot (1) judge situations; (2) understand higher authorities' intentions; (3) make operational decisions; (4) deploy forces; and, (5) manage unexpected situations." An amphibious invasion is already a risky move for any military to undertake. It requires "[air and maritime superiority, the rapid buildup and sustainment of supplies](#)



[onshore, and uninterrupted support](#).” It is even riskier for a military that is not optimally prepared and that lacks recent combat experience.

### B. Invading Taiwan is Difficult

In addition to the PLA’s lack of preparedness, capabilities, and combat experience, there is the highly challenging task of conquering an island ideally suited for [defence](#). As Ian Easton puts it, “[Taiwan’s] [coastal terrain ... is a defender’s dream come true](#).” Only fourteen Taiwanese beaches are prone to an amphibious invasion, surrounded by cliffs and jungles. The Taiwan Strait regularly has typhoons and high waves, which would hinder the PLA’s operational effectiveness. Easton also remarks that Taiwan has granite hills that host tunnels and bunkers and that Taiwan’s highly urban setting advantages the defence. Taiwan’s [asymmetric capabilities](#) like drones, sea mines, portable air defence, anti-armor systems, etc., would render the PLA’s task of landing on Taiwan’s beaches remarkably complex and costly. Not only that, but even if China were to invade Taiwan successfully, the CCP would then face tremendous local resistance and maybe guerilla. It would be a [nightmare to pacify the island](#) and incorporate it into [China’s governance structures](#) after imposing massive destruction, casualties, and suffering – Ukraine is a prime example. Given the difficulty of invading Taiwan, an amphibious invasion seems unappealing, especially if one adds the risk of an international intervention to blunt the PLA’s attempt to subjugate the island.

### C. Economic, Political, and Reputational Factors Constraining China’s Use of Force

The U.S. [provides arms and training](#) to Taiwan’s armed forces, while most Western and regional countries sympathize with Taiwan’s de facto independence and/or democratic political system. This situation implies that Taiwan will never accept just to surrender and accept Beijing’s diktat peacefully. Taiwan has resources and support, enabling Taipei to resist. The only way for Beijing to impose its will on Taiwan is through coercion. However, the prospect of a successful blow against Taiwan is unlikely. Washington would probably throw its weight behind Taiwan in the case of Chinese aggression with the relative help of international partners and allies like Japan and Australia. Even by itself, the U.S. is already a formidable military power capable of causing consequential difficulties to China. American [naval and air forces](#) could harass and destroy Chinese supply lines. The Chinese Navy would constitute targets of choice for U.S. bombers, fighter aircraft, submarines, and other military equipment stationed in the region. The prospect, for China, of having to militarily grapple with the U.S. [“throws the entire notion of deterrence on its head”](#) given the terrible consequences of such an outcome. If China and the U.S. are at war over Taiwan, things could escalate dramatically, even though the Mutual Assured Destruction doctrine constrains such an escalation.

Furthermore, Taiwan is a central hub for the latest semiconductor technology. The prospect of controlling Taiwan’s cutting-edge semiconductor production capacity is attractive to Beijing as it would benefit its ambition of reducing its chip dependency on external sources and becoming a tech giant. However, if China starts a war, it is almost sure that the facilities where these precious semiconductors are produced would be [damaged if not destroyed](#). Any abrupt disruption in the semiconductor supply chains would be costly for the global economy, leading to market shortages, inflation, higher unemployment, and social unrest. Beijing would face a semiconductor shortage, seriously crippling its technological production capacities.

It would also cost China billions of dollars to reconstruct the infrastructures, re-attract talents, and re-set up the logistics needed to restart the production of semiconductors after the war. It would cost trillions of dollars to reconstruct Taiwan itself, as it would undoubtedly be annihilated by an aerial bombing

campaign or an amphibious invasion. Suppose one adds the resulting sanctions, trade embargo, and [suspension of commercial ties](#) with many important countries that have been the basis of China's economic growth. According to Charles Parton, it would amount to an existential threat.

As noted by Jeangène Vilmer, the potential low Chinese social acceptability of the massive casualties that would come with a Taiwan invasion is a powerful deterrent. Not to mention the reputational damages for China that one must factor in. If Russia is any indication, the U.S. would go to great lengths to turn China into a pariah if it ever starts a war against Taiwan. China would suffer monumental isolation, albeit more complicated to implement, given China's central position in the global economy. But China's image in the world would be stained, complicating the country's global leadership plans, especially in international institutions where one needs to cooperate with and get the consent of others.

#### 2.4. The Lessons of the War in Ukraine

According to [Lyle Goldstein](#), the more worrying implication of the Russia-Ukraine war for Taiwan is that China might conclude that Russia has gone too "soft" on Ukraine and should have aggressively bombarded the country right from the start to secure a rapid victory. For [Wen-Ti Sung](#), the current war in Ukraine has raised the required military superiority threshold to achieve victory in a cross-strait conflict. [Ni Lexiong](#) deduces that the war in Ukraine will probably reduce the temptation for China to use force to settle the Taiwan question because the PLA has not yet reached the required military threshold to prevail, which means there are high risks of failure. The Chinese army is structurally linked to Russian weapons, which have done a poor job in Ukraine. Consequently, China could doubt its [operational capacity](#) to successfully lead an invasion of Taiwan, especially as Taiwan is armed with many of the same U.S.-made weapons that have seriously damaged the Russian military. As Jeangène Vilmer puts it, "China is much less prepared to do something that is much more difficult than what Russia failed to do in Ukraine."

Anything that is not a total victory over Taiwan could formally push the island to declare [independence](#). This would obliterate China's credibility and make its armed forces appear as a "[paper tiger](#)," to use the expression of Bonnie Glaser, ultimately jeopardizing the most important thing for the CCP: [regime security](#). Historically speaking, China has used force to stop [declining trends](#), but in today's global context China is, overall, rising. Attacking Taiwan would just endanger Chinese progression with no guarantee of success. [Most analysts](#) think that realizing the China Dream, which necessitates continued economic growth and access to technology to develop the rest of China, is sufficient to deter Xi from attacking Taiwan. The [logic](#) is that a war would threaten China's export markets, foreign direct investments, and access to the required technological inputs to achieve its objectives - be it the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Made in China 2025, or any developmental plan.

The consequences of an aggressive move toward Taiwan would derail China's development course when China has an advantageous situation in Asia despite [domestic challenges](#). Conquering Taiwan would likely "result in a much firmer anti-China Coalition globally." Not only would it "torpedo" the realization of Xi's China Dream in 2049, but it could even shake the foundation of the CCP's power. It makes the prospect of an outright invasion unlikely. However, "[one should never underestimate what elites can talk themselves into if they really want to go to war.](#)"

## Conclusion

If the U.S. neither changes its policy of strategic ambiguity, nor deploys forces in Taiwan, and if Taiwan does not declare its de jure independence, China will likely stick to gray zone measures in the short to medium term. China will increasingly rely on various [coercive actions](#) ranging from espionage, maritime harassment, disinformation, and military demonstrations to cyber, space, electromagnetic, and cognitive warfare in order to signal its ability to “digitally sabotage Taiwan during a crisis” and “isolate the island across multiple domains.” Beijing’s strategy is to subdue Taiwan without fighting and impose constant pressure on Taiwan to erode its willingness to maintain de facto independence. Gray zones are “a choice for revisionist states, and the alternative is war.” Rand Corporation identified 80 types of gray zones.

Just above gray zones is imposing a Chinese [quarantine](#) on Taiwan for a limited or unlimited amount of time, meaning to control Taiwan’s air and maritime spaces with intermittent or permanent interferences in what is entering and/or exiting Taiwan (American weapons, semiconductors, etc.). In such a scenario, Taiwan’s main port (Kaohsiung) and airport (Taoyuan) would be subject to maritime and air control operations conducted by the Chinese government. Unlike a blockade, a quarantine would not be considered an act of war, but a psychological measure aimed at spreading despair regarding the viability of Taiwan’s de facto independence. Faced with a quarantine, the Americans would have to choose between accepting the quarantine, contesting the Chinese quarantine by sending U.S. Navy vessels and aircraft to escort commercial airplanes and boats, or breaking the quarantine with raw military force. A quarantine is in the logical continuity of China’s gray zone measures. It corresponds to [Chinese writings](#) on escalation, which indicate that “escalatory actions should always be gradual and complement broader national goals.” However, the game-theoretical concept of “escalation ladder” explains the logic that could prevail in such a situation:

“As a general matter, games are not played in single turns but in multiple iterations, the results of which set the stage for the next move. The ladder works as a metaphor because each side has choices that may take them to the next rung, which might be closer to the objective but is also further away from the ground. Being further away from the ground increases the difficulty of coming down from the ladder and also increases the danger if the climber slips.”

So, a quarantine could be thought to limit escalation, while the progression expressed by the “escalation ladder” would most likely lead to massive use of force. Nonetheless, if a quarantine occurs, it will probably be between 2027 and 2030. Why? Chinese armed forces will be ready for an amphibious invasion near the decade's end. Although a quarantine is not an amphibious invasion, the escalation process could make an amphibious invasion of Taiwan inevitable once the quarantine is imposed. Thus, it is necessary for the Chinese armed forces to be capable of doing so, which will be around 2027. And after the current decade, China’s operational environment will be much more complicated for reasons presented in the report. Therefore, this 3-year window is the most likely to witness a quarantine.

According to Charles Parton, it is also conceivable that China forces its commercial partners to choose between its market or that of Taiwan, pressures countries not to recognize Taiwanese passports, and uses its leverage on Middle Eastern countries to limit their energy exports to Taiwan in order to hurt Taiwan’s economy. Jeangène Vilmer evokes massive cyberattacks, trade blockades, cutting submarine cables, and even taking small Taiwanese islands near Chinese coasts. China will most likely keep violating Taiwan’s ADIZ and potentially escalate to Taiwan’s airspace before the end of the decade. The overall goal is to create entropic processes. According to Cleo Paskal, entropic warfare aims to paralyze Taiwan from the inside and gradually weaken its resolve to the point of capitulation short of military action.

Even though most experts believe that massive force is unlikely, what would be the most likely scenario if China decides to use force anyway? We have seen in Ukraine that a state fighting for survival has great resolve. We know that China is generally more reactive than proactive and that the debate about abandoning the U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity is gaining traction. A single blockade or a mere bombing campaign of small Taiwanese islands off its coasts would not be enough to coerce Taiwan effectively but would indeed mobilize the U.S. and Taiwan. This would complicate the Chinese operational environment for further actions, while the inherent gains of controlling small island(s) are not enough for China. That's why a bombing campaign against Taiwan mainland would probably be favored if force is ever used. Concomitantly, the Chinese would most likely implement a blockade on Taiwan and try to establish air and maritime control to deny access to the U.S. Navy and commercial ships to isolate Taiwan and make it surrender.

Furthermore, we all took a step back when Russia put its nuclear forces on high alert. China is currently increasing its number of [nuclear weapons](#) and will not slow down. So, if the bombing campaign, the blockade, and even the use of special forces to eliminate high-ranking Taiwanese officials did not suffice to subjugate Taipei, Beijing could either undertake an amphibious invasion backed by nuclear deterrence or declare an incredible victory. Given the already incurred costs of a bombing campaign and the future costs that would come with public failure, China would probably choose to invade Taiwan. If China believes that America will intervene on Taiwan's behalf, China could be tempted to strike Taiwan and U.S. regional forces during the PLA's bombing campaign opening salvo simultaneously. The goal would be to compel Taiwan to start a reunification process on Beijing terms by bombing the island into submission while reducing the reaction capacity of U.S. regional forces. Regardless of whether China would strike the U.S., China is unlikely to make limited use of force.

Therefore, the incentives favor massive use of force and escalation – if force must ever be used – to solve the Taiwan question on Beijing's terms. Faced with a *fait accompli*, Washington would choose between incurring tremendous costs to break China's blockade and expel it from Taiwan or back down. Hence, the U.S.'s goal is to ensure that China does not conclude that force is preferable to the status quo nor that a *fait accompli* is possible. But how to achieve such an objective? Making the already extremely high price of forced reunification even higher by implementing a maximalist version of deterrence by denial strategy (strategic clarity and enhanced U.S. forward presence) is one option. Keeping the current strategic ambiguity and stepping up Taiwan's asymmetric capabilities is another, while striking a grand bargain with China or abandoning Taiwan to whatever faith is awaiting it are in the realm of possibilities too.