



The Taiwan Strait Crisis: Evaluating the Risk of US-China Military Escalation and its Regional Implications

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ABSTRACT

The Taiwan Strait Crisis has long stood as a pivotal point of tension between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan, evolving from mid-20th century military confrontations to modern strategic rivalries. This paper examines the potential for a direct military confrontation between the United States and China over Taiwan. Central to the crisis is the conflict between China's One-China policy and the US strategic ambiguity, which has recently intensified due to the US' more assertive stance and the broader Sino-US strategic competition. The paper analyses the roles of regional alliances, economic interdependence, and internal political factors within Taiwan in influencing the potential for military escalation. Furthermore, the study explores the implications of cyber warfare and the strategic importance of Taiwan in global supply chains, particularly in regards to its semiconductor industry. The findings highlight that while various factors could exacerbate tensions, significant deterrents including regional security partnerships and economic dependencies offer considerable restraint against a full-scale conflict. However, the situation remains precarious, with potential future scenarios ranging from peaceful resolution and continued status quo to direct military confrontation. This underscores the critical need for proactive diplomacy, strategic restraint, and a commitment to dialogue on both, in fact, all sides.

Keywords: Taiwan Strait Crisis, US, China, Taiwan, One-China Policy, Regional Powers

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Taiwan Strait, a crucial geopolitical flashpoint, has been the epicenter of numerous tensions and confrontations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan since the 1950s. From artillery bombardments in the mid-20th century to large-scale military exercises in the 21st century, the mode of confrontation has varied but the stakes have remained consistently high.¹ In recent years, the crisis has garnered even greater international attention due to the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China.

Central to the Taiwan Strait Crisis is the dichotomy between the PRC's historic One-China policy and the United States' strategic ambiguity. The One-China policy, a cornerstone of PRC's sovereignty claims, insists on the recognition of Taiwan as an inalienable part of China.² Conversely, the United States, while acknowledging this policy, has maintained unofficial relations with Taiwan, bolstering its defense capabilities through arms sales and political support.³ This duality has become increasingly pronounced in recent years, with the US adopting a more assertive posture amidst the growing Sino-US strategic competition. Statements by US leaders, enhanced military presence in the region, and strategic initiatives such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

¹ Arthur Ding, "Taiwan: Trouble in the First Island Chain," in *China Story Yearbook: Chains*, ed. Linda Jaivin, Esther Sunkyoung Klein, and Annie Luman Ren (Australia: ANU Press, 2023), 224–29.

² Sheriff Ghali Ibrahim, Chubado Babbi Tijjani, and Ahmet Arabaci, "The One-China Policy and Implications of U.S. Invariable Support for Taiwan," *African Journal of Law, Political Research and Administration* 4, no. 2 (2021): 43, <https://doi.org/10.52589/ajlpra-xwxscxj8>.

³ Sheriff Ghali Ibrahim, Chubado Babbi Tijjani, and Ahmet Arabaci, "The One-China Policy and Implications of U.S. Invariable Support for Taiwan," *African Journal of Law, Political Research and Administration* 4, no. 2 (2021): 43, <https://doi.org/10.52589/ajlpra-xwxscxj8>.

Strategy (FOIP) underscore a shift in the US approach, contributing to the escalating tensions.⁴

Regional alliances and dynamics further complicate the scenario. The US leverages its security partnerships with countries like Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia to counterbalance China's influence. However, the extent of these alliances' support in the event of a military escalation remains uncertain. Each regional ally faces a delicate balancing act between aligning with the US and mitigating the risk of Chinese retaliation.⁵ This strategic calculus is influenced by geographic proximity, economic dependencies, and domestic political considerations, often tilting towards de-escalation. Moreover, Taiwan's internal political dynamics, particularly the policies of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), play a pivotal role in shaping conflict dynamics.⁶

In addition to traditional military and political factors, the advent of cyber warfare has introduced new dimensions to the Taiwan Strait Crisis. Similarly, Taiwan's pivotal role in the global semiconductor industry and the strategic importance of the Taiwan Strait for global maritime shipping underscore the catastrophic economic implications of a conflict.⁷

⁴ Cheng Enfu and Li Jing, "Changes in U.S. Grand Strategy in the Indo-Pacific and China's Countermeasures," *Monthly Review* 76, no. 3 (2024), <https://monthlyreview.org/2024/07/01/changes-in-u-s-grand-strategy-in-the-indo-pacific-and-chinas-countermeasures/>.

⁵ Kei Koga, "Regional Security Cooperation in the US-China Strategic Competition," *Issues & Insights* 23, no. 3 (2023): 59–64, https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Issues_and_Insights_Vol23_SR3.pdf.

⁶ John Curtis and Winnie King, "Taiwan: Relations with China" (UK: House of Commons Library, August 14, 2023), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9844/CBP-9844.pdf>.

⁷ Jinji Chen, Hong-yu Lin, and Yi-ting Lien, "Taiwan's Shifting Role in the Global Supply Chain in the U.S.-China Trade War" (Washington, DC: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2021), https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/KEI_JointUS-Korea_2021_3_14.pdf.

The central question that this paper seeks to address is whether the current dynamics in the Taiwan Strait are likely to lead to a direct military confrontation between the US and China, or if there are factors that could prevent such an escalation.

This paper argues that while several factors, such as transformations in the global order and Taiwan's internal politics, have the potential to escalate the conflict, there are equally significant de-escalating influences. These include regional alliances, economic interdependence, and global supply chains, which collectively act as powerful deterrents against a full-scale war. Moreover, the uncertain impact of cyber warfare and the upcoming US presidential elections add layers of complexity to the crisis, making the future trajectory of US-China relations over Taiwan both precarious and unpredictable.

By evaluating these factors, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the risks and potential outcomes of the Taiwan Strait crisis, offering insights into how the US, China, and other regional stakeholders might navigate this highly volatile geopolitical landscape.

2. THE TAIWAN STRAIT CRISES

The Taiwan Strait crises mark a string of tensions and confrontations between the PRC and Taiwan since the 1950s and into the 2020s. Since the end of the Chinese civil war (1945-49) and the settlement of Chiang Kai-shek's government and military force in Taiwanese islands, the Taiwan Strait has remained a significant flashpoint.⁸ The mode of confrontation has varied from the deployment of military capabilities for

⁸ Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC-Taiwan Cross-Strait Tensions* (London: Anthem Press, 2021).

demonstration and deterrence to active use of military forces in some instances. Although the conflict between the PRC and Taiwan continues, there are generally four distinct confrontations:

2.1 First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-55)

The first crisis erupted when the PRC began shelling the ROC-controlled islands of Quemoy (Kinmen) and Matsu, which are located near the Chinese mainland. The United States responded by signing the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty with the ROC and deploying the U.S. Navy to the area, effectively deterring further PRC attacks.⁹

2.2 Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (1958)

Similar to the first, this crisis was marked by renewed artillery bombardment of Quemoy and Matsu by the PRC. The United States once again intervened by providing military assistance to the ROC, including the deployment of naval forces and the provision of advanced weaponry.¹⁰ The confrontation ended without further escalation, but it underscored the volatility of the region.

2.3 Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-96)

This crisis occurred in the context of Taiwan's first democratic presidential election followed by the US granting tourist visa to the newly-elected democratic president Lee Teng-hui.¹¹ Tensions in the region escalated, marked by missile tests and

⁹ Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC-Taiwan Cross-Strait Tensions* (London: Anthem Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC-Taiwan Cross-Strait Tensions* (London: Anthem Press, 2021).

¹¹ Douglas Porch, "The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996: Strategic Implications for the United States Navy," *Naval War College Review* 52, no. 3 (1999): 15–48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44643008>.

military exercises near Taiwan. As a response, the United States deployed aircraft carriers to the region to demonstrate its support for Taiwan.¹²

2.4 Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis (2022-23)

The most recent crisis occurred from escalating tensions between the US and China following the visit of US Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022. China perceived the visit as strengthening bilateral relations between the US and Taiwan which would encourage Taiwan to assert its de facto independence. Aiming to uphold its territorial sovereignty according to the principles of Estoppel and Acquiescence under International Law, China responded with increased military activities, including large-scale naval exercises and firing missiles into Taiwan's coastal waters.¹³ In April 2023, following the meeting between Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and the US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California, reports from Western sources alleged an increase military activity near Taiwan. This included frequent incursions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ), forward naval exercises, and imposing a no-fly zone over a large area north of Taiwan.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Biden administration maintained its commitment to Taiwan's defence through deployment of carrier strike groups for strong naval presence and increased arms sales, further heightening the tensions between US and China.¹⁵

¹² Douglas Porch, "The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996: Strategic Implications for the United States Navy," *Naval War College Review* 52, no. 3 (1999): 15–48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44643008>.

¹³ Arthur Ding, "Taiwan: Trouble in the First Island Chain," in *China Story Yearbook: Chains*, ed. Linda Jaivin, Esther Sunkyoung Klein, and Annie Luman Ren (Australia: ANU Press, 2023), 224–29.

¹⁴ Amanda Hsiao, "Assessing the Implications of the Taiwanese President's Trip to the U.S." (International Crisis Group, April 13, 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/taiwan-strait/assessing-implications-taiwanese-presidents-trip-us>.

¹⁵ Amanda Hsiao, "Assessing the Implications of the Taiwanese President's Trip to the U.S." (International Crisis Group, April 13, 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/taiwan-strait/assessing-implications-taiwanese-presidents-trip-us>.

Throughout the crises, despite the diplomatic promise of upholding One-China policy, the US governments have played a key role in supporting Taiwan against the PRC. Each crisis has highlighted the near-edge status quo, risking escalation into a direct military confrontation between the US and China and shaping the great power competition in the region.

3. KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING THE TAIWAN STRAIT CRISIS

3.1 Transformation of the Global Order: PRC's Historic One-China Policy and Recent Shifts in the US Strategic Posture

The PRC has historically maintained the One-China policy as the founding principle of its sovereignty and diplomatic relations with other states. The One-China principle advocates Chinese singular sovereignty over the PRC and Taiwan, with Taiwan functioning as an inalienable part of the PRC.¹⁶ Since the diplomatic relations established between the US and China in 1979 following the Shanghai Communiqué, the US acknowledges the One-China principle under which it recognises Beijing as the sole government of China and Taiwan as a part of China.¹⁷ Under the Taiwan Relations Act, the US “opposes unilateral changes to the status quo” but the US has long maintained unofficial relations with Taiwan.¹⁸ These unofficial relations have witnessed years of arms sales and political support provided to Taiwan to establish a democratic system and maintain strong defences.

¹⁶ Sheriff Ghali Ibrahim, Chubado Babbi Tijani, and Ahmet Arabaci, “The One-China Policy and Implications of U.S. Invariable Support for Taiwan,” *African Journal of Law, Political Research and Administration* 4, no. 2 (2021): 43, <https://doi.org/10.52589/ajlpra-xwxscxj8>.

¹⁷ Yana V. Leksyutina, “The U.S. And Its ‘One China’ Policy,” *Outlines of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law* 10, no. 5 (2017): 102, <https://doi.org/10.23932/2542-0240-2017-10-5-99-115>.

¹⁸ Yana V. Leksyutina, “The U.S. And Its ‘One China’ Policy,” *Outlines of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law* 10, no. 5 (2017): 103, <https://doi.org/10.23932/2542-0240-2017-10-5-99-115>.

Over the years, China has raised concerns over the US-Taiwan relations and the US support for Taiwan's independence but the US continues to insist that it adheres to the One-China principle.¹⁹ Interestingly, this difference between theoretical underpinnings and ground realities highlights the strategic ambiguity that the US has long maintained in its approach towards Taiwan. In recent years, however, with the increasing Sino-US rivalry, the US strategic posture has undergone some shifts, evident from President Biden's apparently mistaken statement in which he called Taiwan 'independent' and the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken referring to Taiwan as a 'country' on two different occasions.²⁰ This current strategic direction signals increasing contention between the US and China over Taiwan Strait despite repeated assurances from the US.

What further substantiates this shift is the increased US troop deployment in Taiwan islands under a permanent training mission and exhibition of naval prowess through deployment of aircraft carriers in the Western Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea.²¹ Whereas, under the Taiwan Relations Act, the US is not to defend Taiwan in event of a Chinese attack but might only supply Taiwan with defence equipment to enhance its self-defence capabilities.²² While China calls this show of power US' time-

¹⁹ James Lee, "The One-China Policy in Transition," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, November 7, 2022, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/11/07/the-one-china-policy-in-transition/>.

²⁰ James Lee, "The One-China Policy in Transition," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, November 7, 2022, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/11/07/the-one-china-policy-in-transition/>.

²¹ Nancy A Youssef and Gordon Lubold, "U.S. To Expand Troop Presence in Taiwan for Training against China Threat," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-expand-troop-presence-in-taiwan-for-training-against-china-threat-62198a83>; Seong Hyeon Choi, "US to Deploy 5 Aircraft Carriers in Western Pacific in Show of Strength to China," *South China Morning Post*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3251933/us-deploy-5-aircraft-carriers-western-pacific-show-strength-china>.

²² Yana V. Leksytina, "The U.S. And Its 'One China' Policy," *Outlines of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law* 10, no. 5 (2017): 103, <https://doi.org/10.23932/2542-0240-2017-10-5-99-115>.

tested tactic to assert its dominance and hegemonic influence, the US underpins it as its right and freedom to navigate and operate in the international waters.

The US has repeatedly emphasised on these freedoms in the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIP) introduced in 2019 as it grew increasingly wary of China's expanding influence and strategic outreach in the region.²³ Under the FOIP, the US aims at China's containment through stronger regional presence, alliances, and forward military posture. The FOIP is widely regarded as the new American grand strategy to protect its declining hold over the liberal international order and prevent China's ascendance to the top in the new global hierarchy taking shape.²⁴

When the US started considering China the 'principal' threat, Taiwan Strait conflict became its best bet to contain China and protect the liberal international order. Consequently, Taiwan became a significant part of the US National Security Strategy²⁵ and a key to maintain its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region in order to uphold its hegemonic influence and the unipolar order. What further adds to Taiwan becoming a pawn in the US grand strategy is President Xi's outright assertion of Taiwan's unification as an essential component of China's great rejuvenation.²⁶ As the US seeks to undermine China's upward trajectory and its ascendant position in the global power

²³ U.S. Department of State, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision" (Washington, DC, 2019).

²⁴ Cheng Enfu and Li Jing, "Changes in U.S. Grand Strategy in the Indo-Pacific and China's Countermeasures," *Monthly Review* 76, no. 3 (2024), <https://monthlyreview.org/2024/07/01/changes-in-u-s-grand-strategy-in-the-indo-pacific-and-chinas-countermeasures/>.

²⁵ The White House, "National Security Strategy" (Washington, DC, October 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

²⁶ The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office, "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era" (Washington, DC: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, August 2022), http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202208/t20220810_10740168.htm#:~:text=National%20reunification%20is%20an%20essential,the%20people%20on%20both%20sides.

heirarchy, the Taiwan Strait has become an increasingly important factor in the transforming global order under the US-China great power competition.

In 2021, the US Admiral Philip S. Davidson, former head of the US Indo-Pacific command, underscored that China will acquire enough capabilities to force Taiwanese reunification in the next six years, raising the possibility of a conflict between the US and China.²⁷ Three years into that statement, the US under the Biden administration has been working towards strengthening Taiwan's defences and maintaining a stronger regional presence.²⁸ Increased American presence in the Indo-Pacific waters receives strong criticism from the CCP which views the US as an interventionist power seeking to disturb the status quo and threaten regional stability.²⁹

Now, ever since the Russia-Ukraine war started, the US is setting a narrative that "China is watching how the nations of the world respond to Russia and considering a potential invasion of Taiwan".³⁰ According to Avril Haines, the US Director of National Intelligence, "President Xi is scrutinising Putin's playbook in the international response."³¹ On the other hand, President Xi has repeatedly emphasised on China's peaceful coexistence policy and the win-win approach but also strongly maintains that China would not hesitate from employing "all measures necessary" to protect its

²⁷ Christina Lai, "US-Taiwan Relations and the Future of the Liberal Order," *Parameters* 54, no. 1 (2024): 51, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3272>.

²⁸ The White House, "National Security Strategy" (Washington, DC, October 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

²⁹ David Wei Feng Huang and Wen-Chin Wu, "Taking Sides with the US against China? —an Analysis of the Taiwanese Choice," in *China-US Competition: Impact on Small and Middle Powers' Strategic Choices*, ed. Simona A. Grano and David Wei Feng Huang (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 275–305.

³⁰ Kyle Amonson and Dane Egli, "The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing's Calculus for Invading Taiwan by 2030," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2023): 40.

³¹ Kyle Amonson and Dane Egli, "The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing's Calculus for Invading Taiwan by 2030," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2023): 40.

sovereignty and territorial integrity.³² Such comments and statements on both sides indicate a potential escalation of the Taiwan Strait crisis if diplomating handling fails.

However, there is another important aspect to consider. With the US Presidential election in November 2024 and Donald Trump as a potential candidate, the US policy towards Taiwan might witness a change with the resurgence of America First strategy. In a speech during his election campaign, Trump asserted, “Taiwan should have to pay for its defences,”³³ highlighting that if Trump secures another term, the US would not be willing to shoulder the burden of its allies despite considering China the only real threat to the US. This is mainly because Trump, as in his previous term, aims at confronting China through economic coercion and not military engagement. This would largely mean no US intent of direct involvement in Taiwan Strait Crisis. So, while transformations in the global order appear as an escalating factor in the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the US foreign policy strategy following November 2024 elections remains an uncertain variable.

3.2 Regional Alliances and Dynamics

As the conflict in the Taiwan Strait becomes increasingly imaginable, regional alliances and partnerships are important factors – they can either escalate or prevent the war. The US is grappled with a dilemma – how to leverage regional alliance to deter a military escalation and in case deterrence fails, how to win the war against China. The US looks towards its security alliances in the region to make up for disadvantages of its

³² Kyle Amonson and Dane Egli, “The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing’s Calculus for Invading Taiwan by 2030,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2023): 38.

³³ Helen Davidson, “Trump Says Taiwan Should Pay the US for Its Defence as ‘It Doesn’t Give Us Anything,’” *The Guardian*, July 17, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/17/donald-trump-taiwan-pay-us-defence-china-national-convention>.

geographical distance. However, despite US bases in several regional countries and security pacts with multiple partners at bilateral and trilateral level, there remains a huge uncertainty as to if, and to what degree, these allies would provide military support in case of an escalation. On one hand, providing full support and military involvement in a war would open the US allies to Chinese retribution; on the other, staying on the sidelines would put security alliances with the US in jeopardy.

At bilateral level, the US maintains security relations with Japan, Philippines, South Korea, and India. Japan, given its geographical proximity to Taiwan, a security treaty with the US in place, 54,000 US troops on ground, two US bases in Okinawa, and hosting the US largest overseas Navy Fleet and the only forward-deployed carrier strike group, is the most critical ally.³⁴ With Japan's national security strategy witnessing significant shifts from passive to active defence and its Self Defence Forces (SDF) possessing advanced, cutting-edge warfare capabilities, Japan can act as a crucial ally in preventing Chinese win in a war.³⁵ Moreover, what makes Japan the most potentially willing ally to side by the US in a war is the perceived Chinese threat of capturing disputed islands, known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan and Diaoyu Islands in China.³⁶

Another US ally with close geographical proximity to Taiwan is Philippines. Under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (ECDA), Philippines has allowed the

³⁴ David M Sacks, "Mapping the Unknown and Thinking the Unthinkable: How the US Allies Might Respond in a Crises over Taiwan?" (Washington, DC: East-West Centre, January 2024), https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/OP%203_Sacks_01092023.pdf.

³⁵ Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, "National Security Strategy of Japan," December 2022, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

³⁶ David M Sacks, "Mapping the Unknown and Thinking the Unthinkable: How the US Allies Might Respond in a Crises over Taiwan?" (Washington, DC: East-West Centre, January 2024), https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/OP%203_Sacks_01092023.pdf.

US to upgrade infrastructure and its military installations and has recently entered into negotiations for a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Japan.³⁷ However, what largely determines Philippines' active role on the US side depends on its relations with China at the time. Sentiments towards China within Philippines vary from one political party to another and are also greatly impacted by Philippines' economic dependency on China for trade, loans, and investment.³⁸

South Korea, despite being a close US ally, has several factors to take into consideration in case of Taiwan contingency. Firstly, military escalation in Taiwan might embolden North Korea and security in the Korean Peninsula remains South Korea's first strategic priority.³⁹ Secondly, direct involvement in a war against China would invite Chinese economic retaliation as evident from the THAAD deployment episode.⁴⁰ So, while the US-China war in Taiwan Strait might be a litmus test for the US-ROK security alliance, these factors largely undermine South Korea's involvement in combat operations against China.

Next, when it comes to Australia, it has been a long-standing US ally and now enjoys the trilateral AUKUS agreement with the US and UK. While Australia's geographical distance of 4,000km from Taipei might not be decisive factor, its

³⁷ Nian Peng, "Is the Philippines Ready for a Taiwan Conflict?" (China: Research Centre for Asian Studies, August 19, 2023), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377494930_Is_the_Philippines_Ready_for_a_Taiwan_Conflict.

³⁸ Andrea Chloe Wong, "Regional Voices on Escalating Tensions in the Taiwan Strait" (The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2022), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/regional-voices-on-escalating-tensions-in-the-taiwan-strait/>.

³⁹ Sungmin Cho, "Regional Voices on Escalating Tensions in the Taiwan Strait" (The National Bureau of Asian Research, December 5, 2022), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/regional-voices-on-escalating-tensions-in-the-taiwan-strait/>.

⁴⁰ Sungmin Cho, "Regional Voices on Escalating Tensions in the Taiwan Strait" (The National Bureau of Asian Research, December 5, 2022), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/regional-voices-on-escalating-tensions-in-the-taiwan-strait/>.

submarine capabilities under AUKUS can offer huge advantage over China.⁴¹ However, it is pertinent to note here that Australia will begin to receive the US nuclear-powered Virginia-class attack submarines in the 2030s.⁴² Thus, in case a war escalates before 2030, Australia stands in no position to be a useful military ally. Moreover, Australia has also begun to sought better relations with China, particularly due to its economic dependence on Chinese markets – a factor that largely undermines the risk of direct confrontation.

Furthermore, while India is not a treaty ally, it is a significant security partner of the US with increasing defence and military cooperation. However, India has long maintained its historic policy of non-alignment and do not have any direct stakes in the Taiwan Strait.⁴³ As far as the struggle of regional hegemony against China is concerned, Chinese military capabilities outpace Indian capabilities and there exists huge economic discrepancy between both economies. Moreover, the recent strategic posture of India in the Russia-Ukraine war has outrightly elucidated India's sole interest in enjoying economic benefits of an outside war from a distance.

Another US security partner and major non-NATO ally in the region is Pakistan with great strategic significance and geographical proximity of the Indian Ocean Region to the Taiwan Strait. Although the US-Pakistan ties have been turbulent during the war

⁴¹ Miftah Ichwani Gumantiara, Halifa Haqqi, and Andika Drajat Murdani, "Regional Security Complex Analysis in Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) Viewpoint to the Rivalry between United States and China in Taiwan," *Formosa Journal of Sustainable Research* 3, no. 3 (2024): 541–54, <https://doi.org/10.55927/fjsr.v3i3.8144>.

⁴² Miftah Ichwani Gumantiara, Halifa Haqqi, and Andika Drajat Murdani, "Regional Security Complex Analysis in Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) Viewpoint to the Rivalry between United States and China in Taiwan," *Formosa Journal of Sustainable Research* 3, no. 3 (2024): 541–54, <https://doi.org/10.55927/fjsr.v3i3.8144>.

⁴³ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Regional Voices on Escalating Tensions in the Taiwan Strait" (The National Bureau of Asian Research, December 5, 2022), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/regional-voices-on-escalating-tensions-in-the-taiwan-strait/>.

on terror, defence relations have been improving following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, evident from the renewal of the Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) in August 2023.⁴⁴ However, it is pertinent to note here that Pakistan is also a close strategic partner of China, is home to BRI's linchpin project CPEC, and strongly upholds the One-China Policy.⁴⁵ Therefore, Pakistan remains broadly interested in maintaining regional stability for its security and economic interests, and preventing a direct conflict between the US and China.

At multilateral level, as part of the US FOIP, the US has strengthened its regional partnerships. For instance, the US, Japan and South Korea signed a trilateral security pact in August 2023.⁴⁶ The pact comes as a deterrence measure against the perceived North Korean nuclear adventurism and the perceived Chinese threats in and around the South China Sea.⁴⁷ This trilateral security arrangement would serve two-pronged objectives if a conflict escalates. First, it would deter China in the Taiwan Strait and secondly, it would contain North Korea's potential to take advantage of the war and launch an offensive in the Korean Peninsula. However, whether these objectives translate into success largely depends on Japan and South Korea's approach in the case of conflict escalation as well as Taiwan policy of the next US administration.

⁴⁴ Kamran Yousaf, "Cabinet Gives Nod to Security Pact with US," *The Express Tribune*, August 3, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2429062/cabinet-gives-nod-to-security-pact-with-us>.

⁴⁵ Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan Firmly Upholds One-China Principle: President," May 23, 2024, <https://moib.gov.pk/News/61918>.

⁴⁶ The White House, "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States" (Washington, DC, August 18, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>.

⁴⁷ The White House, "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States" (Washington, DC, August 18, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>.

This is a critical dynamic because while Japan and South Korea enjoy a trilateral security pact with the US, relations are also improving on the Chinese front given recent China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Summit in May 2024.⁴⁸ It does not only highlight China's active diplomacy in the region but also the attempt of regional powers to maintain solid relations on both sides and prevent becoming pawns in the US-China confrontation.

Additionally, be it a bilateral security pact or a multilateral arrangement, US allies in the region would factor in the overall foreign policy approach of the next US administration in order to determine their stance on Taiwan. Summing up the above discussion, it would not be wrong to assert that regional alliances and dynamics are largely a de-escalating factor as each regional actor, whether a US treaty ally or security partner, would generally prefer preventing a war between the US and China, and if it seems too inevitable, they would attempt to avoid direct involvement in the conflict given the risk of Chinese retaliation.

3.3 DPP's Internal and External Policies

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of Taiwan has been in power since 2016 and won its third consecutive term in January 2024 elections. Under the DPP, Taiwan's political strategy has largely revolved around strengthening Taiwan's economic and self-defence capabilities, bolstering relations with regional countries, and putting an end to Taiwan's international isolation.⁴⁹ President Lai Ching-te aims to

⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Joint Declaration of the 9th ROK-Japan-China Trilateral Summit," June 1, 2024,

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202406/t20240601_11368781.html.

⁴⁹ Ryan Hass, "What Is Taiwan's Plan to Protect Itself against Chinese Pressure?" (Brookings, August 19, 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-is-taiwans-plan-to-protect-itself-against-chinese-pressure/>.

pursue DPP's China policy which largely rejects China's "one country, two systems" approach and instead calls for maintaining regional status quo through joint negotiation efforts, equality and mutual respect.⁵⁰

To enhance its strategic outreach, DPP implemented the New Southbound Policy (NSP) in 2016 to strengthen trade and economic ties with ASEAN countries, South Asia, New Zealand and Australia.⁵¹ However, the NSP has not been able to reduce Taiwan's economic dependence on China which remains one of the major factors shaping cross-strait relations. Taiwan also seeks to become a part of regional trade agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in order to reduce its economic dependence on China, diversify its trade partners, and strengthen its resilience against Chinese sanctions.⁵² While China persistently opposes Taiwan's membership of international organisations and regional institutions, the US supports Taiwan's integration into regional and international networks to strengthen the liberal international order, but has been unsuccessful.⁵³

At the same time, there exist partisan differences within Taiwan in approach towards China. As the DPP did not win legislative majority in 2024 elections⁵⁴ and the

⁵⁰ John Curtis and Winnie King, "Taiwan: Relations with China" (UK: House of Commons Library, August 14, 2023), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9844/CBP-9844.pdf>.

⁵¹ Tian He and Michael Magcamit, "The CPTPP, Cross-Strait Tensions, and Taiwan's Recognition for Survival Strategy under the Democratic Progressive Party," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 24, no. 2 (2024): 227, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcad013>.

⁵² Tian He and Michael Magcamit, "The CPTPP, Cross-Strait Tensions, and Taiwan's Recognition for Survival Strategy under the Democratic Progressive Party," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 24, no. 2 (2024): 219, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcad013>.

⁵³ Christina Lai, "US-Taiwan Relations and the Future of the Liberal Order," *Parameters* 54, no. 1 (2024): 52, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3272>.

⁵⁴ Brian Hioe, "Taiwan's DPP Wins Presidency, Falls Short in Legislature," *The Diplomat*, January 14, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/taiwans-dpp-wins-presidency-falls-short-in-legislature/>.

other two dominant political parties i.e., Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP) have historically maintained a more pro-Chinese stance,⁵⁵ it would be difficult for the DPP to mobilise the public towards pro-independence movement. Moreover, according to a survey of recent elections by ROC's national news agency, Taiwanese people also appear to be more inclined towards preserving the status quo instead of voicing for pro-independence or anti-unification stances.⁵⁶ Such internal dynamics, together with a highly uncertain external environment with regards to US policy and response of regional powers, strengthen the de-escalation viewpoint where a direct US-China military confrontation is less likely.

3.4 Cyber Warfare

In a relationship highly characterised by strategic mistrust, cyberspace has turned into one of the most contentious areas of Sino-US rivalry. Factors such as ideological differences, strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region, and attempts to undermine one another's global influence have largely restricted US-China cooperation, leading to failure of a formal bilateral dialogue on cyberspace initiated in 2013.⁵⁷ On 18 April 2024, FBI Director Christopher Wray asserted that China is diligently employing cyber warfare to devastate US' critical infrastructure,⁵⁸ which would undermine American capabilities to assist Taiwan in the event of conflict as communication lines

⁵⁵ Gang Lin and Weixu Wu, "External and Internal Factors Shaping the Outcomes of 2024 Elections in Taiwan," *China Review* 23, no. 4 (2023): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48750779>.

⁵⁶ "Over 80% of Taiwanese Favor Maintaining Status Quo with China: Survey," *Focus Taiwan*, February 23, 2024, <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202402230019>.

⁵⁷ Scott Warren Harrold, Martin C. Libicki, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, "The 'Cyber Problem' in U.S.-China Relations," in *Getting to Yes with China in Cyberspace* (Rand Corporation, 2016), 1–16.

⁵⁸ "Chinese Government Poses 'Broad and Unrelenting' Threat to U.S. Critical Infrastructure, FBI Director Says," *FBI*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/chinese-government-poses-broad-and-unrelenting-threat-to-u-s-critical-infrastructure-fbi-director-says#:~:text=FBI%20Director%20Christopher%20Wray%20on,infrastructure%20is%20a%20prime%20target.>

and flow of military resources would be compromised. Just like the US, Taiwan has also repeatedly called out China for targeting critical military networks, spreading disinformation, and disrupting its political system.⁵⁹ The US believes that China might leverage offensive cyber operations as a coercive measure should it perceive efforts accelerated towards de jure independence.⁶⁰

According to security analysts, neither China nor US would go to such an extent with cyber warfare so as to provoke a harsh response from the adversary or escalate the conflict.⁶¹ Both sides are likely to employ cyber tactics for managing escalation and retaliation. However, while a run of controlled, small cyber attacks provide the targeted side time to respond effectively, a series of destructive assaults could lead to a more aggressive response by the defender. In this scenario, there is an increased risk of accidental escalation which might translate into mobilisation of military resources and a direct confrontation between the US and China in the Taiwan Strait. In order to ensure restraint, there is a need to actively work towards a joint cyber non-aggression pact like the one Russia and China have in place since 2015.⁶²

⁵⁹ Andrzej Kozłowski, "The 'Cyber Weapons Gap': The Assessment of the China's Cyber Warfare Capabilities and Its Consequences for Potential Conflict over Taiwan," in *On Their Own Paths: Japan and China Responses to the Global and Regional Challenges* (University of Lodz, 2015), 161–73.

⁶⁰ "Chinese Government Poses 'Broad and Unrelenting' Threat to U.S. Critical Infrastructure, FBI Director Says," *FBI*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/chinese-government-poses-broad-and-unrelenting-threat-to-u-s-critical-infrastructure-fbi-director-says#:~:text=FBI%20Director%20Christopher%20Wray%20on,infrastructure%20is%20a%20prime%20target.>

⁶¹ James Andrew Lewis, "Cyberattack on Civilian Critical Infrastructures in a Taiwan Scenario" (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 11, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/cyberattack-civilian-critical-infrastructures-taiwan-scenario>.

⁶² Government of the Russian Federation, "On Signing the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in Ensuring International Information Security" (Moscow, April 30, 2015), https://cyber-peace.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/RUS-CHN_CyberSecurityAgreement201504_InofficialTranslation.pdf.

3.5 Global Supply Chains & Economic Interdependence

According to the World Bank 2019 report, the US, Japan and Germany were the three traditional hubs of global value chains (GVC).⁶³ With China's entry into the WTO in 2001, the chain of supply centres gradually restructured and by 2017, China replaced Japan as the regional supply hub in the GVC network, extending its outreach to the Americas and Europe. Taiwan, being traditionally close to the US and Japan, served as a critical center of R&D and key technologies of both countries, leading to its emergence as the top manufacturer in global semiconductor industry.⁶⁴ With the growing emphasis on, and significance of, advanced technologies, Taiwan's advanced semiconductor chips are one of the primary traded merchandise today, making it vulnerable to any disruptions in the global supply chains.

As a US-China military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would largely hamper the semiconductor industry, stakeholders such as chip manufacturers and exporters as well as technological giants are playing an important diplomatic role in preventing conflict escalation. Since the US remains highly dependent on Taiwan's semiconductors, it realises the devastating implications of the Chinese invasion of Taiwan for the country's billion dollars semiconductor industry.

In addition to that, Taiwan Strait accounts for roughly 44% of the global maritime shipping and according to expert estimates, a Taiwan Strait conflict would incur

⁶³ World Bank and World Trade Organisation, "Global Value Chain Development Report 2019 : Technological Innovation, Supply Chain Trade, and Workers in a Globalized World" (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2019), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/384161555079173489/global-value-chain-development-report-2019-technological-innovation-supply-chain-trade-and-workers-in-a-globalized-world>.

⁶⁴ Jinji Chen, Hong-yu Lin, and Yi-ting Lien, "Taiwan's Shifting Role in the Global Supply Chain in the U.S.- China Trade War" (Washington, DC: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2021), https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/KEI_JointUS-Korea_2021_3_14.pdf.

approximately \$10 trillion costs to global economy.⁶⁵ China, too, is highly dependent on the Taiwan Strait for its global trade as is Japan and other regional powers. The US, Taiwan, China and other regional stakeholders are well aware of the mutual economic dependencies in global trade routes and supply chains, which is largely a deterring factor in military escalation.

The following table summarises factors influencing the Taiwan Strait Crisis and their potential impact on escalating or preventing direct US-China military confrontation:

Factors	Escalating	De-escalating	Uncertain
Transformations in the global order	✓		
US Presidential Elections November 2024			✓
China's One-China policy	✓		
Regional alliances		✓	
DPP's pro-independence policy	✓		
Opposition parties in Taiwan		✓	
Cyber warfare			✓
Global Supply Chains and Economic Interdependence		✓	

Table 1: Escalating, De-escalating and Uncertain Factors in the Taiwan Strait Crisis (Table by author)

4. EVALUATING THE RISK OF MILITARY ESCALATION

Based on the above table, the Taiwan Strait crisis remains a highly complex and dynamic issue, shaped by a multitude of escalating, de-escalating, and uncertain

⁶⁵ Jude Blanchette, Ryan Hass, and Lily McElwee, "Building International Support for Taiwan" (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 13, 2024), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/building-international-support-taiwan>.

factors. While transformations in the global order make the US and China falling into the Thucydides Trap highly likely, regional alliances and dynamics inclined towards multipolarity and interdependence act as de-escalating factors. Similarly, while the internal and external policies of DPP in the ROC call for independence and anti-unification, opposition parties are working towards maintaining the status quo and resolving the conflict with the PRC at bilateral level. Additionally, while cyber warfare is another potentially escalating factor, economic interdependence and global supply chains favour de-escalation and peaceful resolution of conflict.

The risk of escalation also largely depends on the upcoming Presidential elections in the US and Taiwan policy of the new administration which would then have a direct impact on strategic directions of regional allies and partners. However, since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and as evident from the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza war, the US policy has shifted to no direct involvement in a war but only secondary engagement through arms sales, financial assistance, and veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Therefore, the chances of US fighting Taiwan's war further diminish.

4.1 Three Potential Future Scenarios

All in all, current developments suggest a delicate balance where a slight miscalculation or provocation could lead to heightened tensions. This brings us to three potential future scenarios, ranging from peaceful resolution or continued status quo to significant military confrontation:

- i. **Idealist scenario:** Under the idealist lens of IR theory, Taiwan Strait would witness peaceful resolution and cooperation where the US, China and Taiwan

resolve their differences through negotiations and diplomatic measures, recognise the benefits of stability and mutual economic growth, reduce incentives for aggressive actions, and allow regional countries and international community to play a constructive role in dialogue and de-escalation. However, an idealist approach has never played out successfully in this world shaped by realist interests.

- ii. **Neo-realist scenario:** Under the neo-realist lens of IR theory which favours anarchic nature of the international system, Taiwan Strait would face managed tensions with periodic crises where flare-ups do occur due to ongoing Sino-US strategic competition and unresolved challenges but a major military conflict is prevented. In this scenario, confidence building measures such as not closing crisis communication channels and developing an agreement for military conduct would prove fruitful.
- iii. **Realist scenario:** Under the realist lens of IR theory, escalating tensions between the US and China would lead to a direct military confrontation with devastating consequences for Taiwan and the broader region. Factors such as heightened nationalism, irrational decision making, accidental attack, pre-emptive actions, strategic miscalculations, and crisis mismanagement can lead to this scenario, resulting in severe regional instability and far-reaching global consequences for trade, security, and international relations.

5. POTENTIAL OPTIONS FOR US-CHINA COOPERATION

The US and China could adopt following measures to enhance cooperation and prevent a direct military confrontation:

5.1 Establish a Crisis Management Mechanism

The US, China and Taiwan can work towards creating a formal crisis management mechanism involving representatives from all three countries. This mechanism should be built around dedicated communication hotlines, regular crisis simulation exercises, and joint workshops to address potential escalation scenarios and ensure that diplomatic relations are not cut off at any cost. The goal should be to have all parties on the table at all times for de-escalation and coordination in event of heightened tensions.

5.2 Implement a Mutual Restraint Agreement

As an attempt for proactive diplomacy, the US and China should develop and implement a mutual restraint agreement that outlines specific actions and behaviours to avoid during periods of heightened tensions. This agreement could include provisions such as limitations on military exercises near Taiwan, restrictions on provocative statements, and agreed-upon protocols for quick de-escalation.

5.3 Develop a Joint Cyber Non-Aggression Pact

The US and China should develop a joint cyber non-aggression pact to reduce the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation in the Taiwan Strait Crisis. By establishing clear norms and communication channels on cyber activities, both nations can prevent cyber operations from becoming a source of conflict, thereby fostering stability and reducing the likelihood of direct military confrontation.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As far as Pakistan is concerned, following are some policy recommendations to play a role in maintaining the status quo and gradually strive towards peaceful conflict resolution and cooperation:

6.1 Enhance Multilateral Cooperation

The key regional players should strengthen multilateral cooperation through security diversification, free trade agreements, investments, and joint naval exercises. Mutual security and economic reliance can act as a stabilising factor, reducing the likelihood of conflict by highlighting the high costs of military confrontation for all parties.

6.2 Facilitate Track II Diplomacy

Pakistan must act responsibly by promoting global awareness of the Taiwan Strait Crisis. By supporting informal dialogues among stakeholders, it can help bridge gaps and pave way for negotiations that complement official diplomatic efforts. This approach can create additional pathways for conflict resolution and reduce tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

6.3 Organise Multilateral Maritime Safety Workshops

Pakistan should host a series of maritime safety workshops involving the US, China, and regional naval forces. These workshops can focus on protocols for safe navigation, communication strategies during maritime encounters, and joint maritime security operations. The aim should be to enhance understanding and coordination among naval forces in the Taiwan Strait and reduce the risk of accidental confrontations.

7. CONCLUSION

China's increasing military capabilities, the shift in the US' strategic ambiguity policy, and Taiwan's foreign policy behaviour as a sovereign, independent country raise the risk of military escalation in the Taiwan Strait. While a direct military confrontation between the US and China is least likely, it does not rule out the slightest chance of military escalation in the Taiwan Strait in the changing international dynamics of this increasingly multipolar world where states are not hesitating to resort to violent military means to achieve their national security objectives. While China's principal interest is no peripheral instability as it strides towards its great rejuvenation, the US policies for Chinese containment in the Taiwan Strait and the broader Indo-Pacific appear somewhat proactive as they were in the periphery of Russia with NATO. To prevent a similar scenario facing eastern Europe, the US must continue to maintain its no direct involvement approach, which would serve as a significant deterrent for China, considering historic Chinese precedents of non-invasion, mutual co-existence, respect for sovereignty, and pursuit of win-win relations.

Overall, the situation remains precarious, shaped by a multitude of factors that collectively influence the risk of military escalation. The escalating factors, such as China's assertive military posture, the US's strategic support for Taiwan, and Taiwan's own political trajectory, reflect deep-rooted historical grievances, national ambitions, and strategic imperatives that could push the region towards confrontation. Conversely, significant de-escalating factors, including the deterrent effect of regional alliances, economic interdependence, and the mutual understanding of the catastrophic consequences of war, provide a counterbalance.

The uncertain factors, notably the internal political developments in Taiwan, the evolving cyber warfare landscape, and the unpredictable impact of upcoming US presidential elections, further add to the volatility of the situation. As the region stands at a crossroads, proactive diplomacy, strategic restraint, and a commitment to dialogue can play pivotal roles in maintaining the status quo. The path forward necessitates a delicate balance of power, prudent policymaking, and an unwavering focus on peace and stability, underscoring the critical importance of international cooperation and comprehensive crisis management strategies.

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