

Transformation in the Strait: Prospects for Change in China-Taiwan-US Relations

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“Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China’s complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the Communist Party of China. It is also a shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation. We will uphold the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus, and advance peaceful national reunification. All of us, compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, must come together and move forward in unison. We must take resolute action to utterly defeat any attempt toward ‘Taiwan independence’ and work together to create a bright future for national rejuvenation. No one should underestimate the resolve, the will, and the ability of the Chinese...”

“We Chinese are a people who uphold justice and are not intimidated by threats of force. As a nation, we have a strong sense of pride and confidence. We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people.”

Xi Jinping, Speech on 100th Anniversary of CCP, 1 July 2021.

“As president of the Republic of China, I must solemnly emphasize that we have never accepted the ‘1992 Consensus.’ The fundamental reason is because the Beijing authorities’ definition of the ‘1992 Consensus’ is ‘one China’ and ‘one country, two systems.’ The speech delivered by China’s leader today has confirmed our misgivings. Here, I want to reiterate that Taiwan absolutely will not accept ‘one country, two systems.’ The vast majority of public

opinion in Taiwan is also resolutely opposed to 'one country, two systems,' and this opposition is also a "Taiwan consensus."

Tsai Ing-wen, President of the Republic of China. 4 January 2019.

"We made a sacred commitment to Article 5 that if in fact anyone were to invade or take action against our NATO allies, we would respond. Same with Japan, same with South Korea, same with - Taiwan. It's not even comparable to talk about that."

President Biden, 19/8/2021, interview with ABC news, in the context of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The State Department later clarified that the US position of 'strategic ambiguity' had not changed.

Hidden Barrels of Explosives

Rumours of war have swirled around the waters of the Taiwan Strait for many years. In the first Straits crisis of 1954-55, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) shelled Quemoy and the United States considered using nuclear weapons against China. In the second crisis of 1958, the PLA Navy attempted a landing on Dongding Island, and engaged in a naval battle with Republic of China (ROC) forces. In the third crisis of 1995-6, China fired missiles into the straits, to warn Taiwan against pursuing independence under the presidency of Lee Tseng-hui. We are now living through the fourth crisis. Tensions are acute again. In October 2021, the PLA Air Force sent a fleet of warplanes, including nuclear bombers, into the Taiwan Air Identification Zone, while the United States conducted naval exercises near the island and US and British warships passed through the Strait in defence of freedom of navigation.

When President Xi Jinping met President Joe Biden in their virtual summit of 15 November 2021, Xi warned Biden that the US would be 'playing with fire' if it supported Taiwanese independence. The warning followed a number of moves by both the Trump and Biden administrations that appeared to increase US support for Taipei. In Taiwan, public support for independence remains high, and China's treatment of Hong Kong has done little to foster an appetite for unification. Meanwhile both China and the US are ramping up their preparations for a possible military conflict.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the prior agreement on a new strategic partnership between Putin and Xi Jinping, have led to fears in east Asia that Beijing might carry out its threat to use force against Taiwan, further raising existing tensions in the region.

In this context, what are the prospects for averting war in the Strait? Can the underlying dispute over Taiwan be peacefully resolved? If not, can the relationships between China and Taiwan, and China and the US, be developed in such a way that their disputes can be managed in a more cooperative manner?

While the present positions of the Beijing and Taipei authorities seem implacably opposed, there have been periods in the past when the two sides have edged towards a settlement, or at least held talks to agree aspects of the relationship. For many years, too, the parties have been willing to live with the dispute in the interests of a more cooperative relationship, leaving a settlement for some time in the future. This led to a status quo which, however uneasy, has held for a long time. Some, especially in Taiwan, seem confident that the status quo can continue.

Leaving disputes unsettled, but developing cooperative relationships is a typical east Asian approach to conflicts. It has underpinned the long East Asian peace, which has held since 1979, despite the many territorial disputes left by the absence of an agreed peace settlement following the Second World War.

However, territorial disputes are like hidden barrels of explosives. They need not be dangerous if no-one lights the fuse. But leaving them to lie is not safe if the air is full of sparks and careless people are in charge.

In this paper, I argue that the Taiwan-China conflict *could* be peacefully managed if the parties step away from the course they are pursuing at present and accept a change of approach. I analyse the fault lines in the regional and international order that the conflict exposes and explore the wider contextual changes that may be necessary to manage it.

An Intensifying Conflict

It has long been the position of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that Taiwan must eventually be reunified with the mainland. While Taiwan was under the control of the Kuomintang (KMT), this principle was not in conflict, since the KMT also believed in reunification, though with China under its own rather than communist party control. However, as a sense of Taiwanese identity grew in the 1990s, and with the coming to office of the pro-independence Democratic People's Party (DPP) in 2000, relations between Taiwan and China became increasingly tense.

For the PRC, reunification with Taiwan has been an abiding goal since 1949. After Mao failed to achieve it by force, Deng Xiaoping proposed unification through diplomacy, on the basis of his 'one country, two systems' formula. He was willing to accept the status quo pending a negotiated path to unification. But China has always insisted that there is only one China, that Taiwan and the mainland are both part of China, and that Chinese sovereignty is indivisible. Consequently, Beijing consistently warned that it would have to intervene if Taiwan formally declared independence and put this warning into legislation in the 2005 Anti-Secession Law.

The Chinese military has been given particular responsibility for achieving unification. In 2019 the Chinese Defence Minister General, Wei Fenghe, declared, 'China must and will be reunified...If anyone dares to split Taiwan from China, the Chinese military has no choice but to fight at all costs for national unity.'

The US position is shaped by the Taiwan Relations Act, which the US Congress adopted in 1979, following the decision to switch recognition from the ROC to the PRC. The Act states that the peace and stability of the Western Pacific is a security interest of the United States and that normalization of relations with Beijing was based on the expectation that the Taiwan issue would be peacefully resolved by the Chinese parties. The Act gives Congress a say in US policy on Taiwan, by requiring the President to report to Congress any threat to the security of Taiwan and consult with Congress on the response to any danger to US interests arising from such a threat. The Act avoids a formal US commitment to come to the defence of Taiwan but leaves open the possibility that the US might do so in the event of the PRC resorting to the use of force.

In the negotiations leading to the US switch of recognition from the ROC to the PRC, Deng Xiaoping gained the impression that US arms sales to Taiwan would continue for only one year. In practice, in the absence of agreement on a peaceful resolution, arms sales have continued to this day, and have increased substantially in recent years. The Chinese have always been unwilling to drop the threat of the use of force, while the situation is unresolved, and arms sales continue.

Up until 2020, Beijing and Taipei both by and large respected the Taiwan Strait Median Line, an unofficial dividing line proposed by the United States 60 years ago. In March 2019, Beijing violated the line for the first time in 20 years, and in 2020 PLA aircraft crossed it on 49 occasions. China has carried out large-scale exercises on the mainland as well as naval exercises on Taiwan's side of the strait. These serve to remind Taipei that the threat to invade might be real.

US and allied warships also regularly transit the Taiwan Straits, as part of the US commitment to a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. The US continues to sell arms to Taipei, and a strong pro-Taiwan lobby in Congress argues for closer ties between the US government and Taiwan.

These military exercises reflect the growing capacity of Chinese and US forces in the region, and the strategic importance of Taiwan to military planners on both sides. This gives the Taiwan conflict a significance that goes beyond the dispute over sovereignty and puts it at the heart of the geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific. China began its naval modernisation in response to the intervention of US carrier groups in the third Straits crisis of 1995-6. The PLA built up its naval, air, submarine, and missile forces, with the aim of developing a capacity to overwhelm Taiwan's forces and thwart US intervention. Concerned by the vulnerability of their sea-borne trade routes, with two thirds of China's foreign trade passing through the Malacca Straits, Chinese planners saw naval power as essential to defend this economic lifeline. At the same time, they saw Taiwan as a crucial part of the first island chain, controlling the access routes to the open oceans for nuclear submarines.¹ On the other side, US military planners are also concerned about the potential threat of Chinese naval expansion to the freedom of navigation in the Malacca Straits, which is also vital for Japanese, Southeast Asian and world trade. They prefer to keep the Chinese forces bottled

¹ Taylor, Brendan, 2018. *Dangerous Decade: Taiwan's Security and Crisis Management*. London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 43-59.

up on the mainland than have an ocean-going Chinese navy contesting control of the seas and asserting expansive claims in the East and South China Seas. Consequently, the struggle over Taiwan has become a lynchpin in a wider strategic contest.

Both the US and China appear to be hardening their positions. The Trump Administration declared that the US was in a 'strategic rivalry' with China. It imposed tariffs on Chinese trade and increased contacts with Taiwanese officials. The Biden Administration has pursued a similarly tough line. It added new sanctions and increased funding for military programmes which are relevant to East Asia. These include the \$1.5 trillion nuclear modernisation programme, new low-yield nuclear weapons, and 145 new B-21 stealth bombers. China's recent strategic partnership with Russia will add fuel to this growing hostility.

China and the US each show signs of devolving more of their policy over Taiwan to their respective militaries. In China, Xi Jinping tasked the armed forces with doing whatever is necessary to prepare for the reunification of Taiwan. Similarly, the US pivot to Asia and the huge US military modernisation plan has given the US armed forces the prime role in developing the military aspects of the US position.

In short, the US and China are engaged in an arms race, with Taiwan, the barrel of hidden explosive, as the prize.

The Changed International Context

The invasion of Ukraine, on 23 February 2022, has drastically changed the international context. Despite the obvious differences between Ukraine and Taiwan, the media pointed up the similarities between the two authoritarian great powers, apparently willing to use overwhelming force to achieve their objectives. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met at the Winter Olympics, before the invasion, and pledged to strengthen their partnership 'with no limits'. They agreed to increase trade in goods, energy, food and arms, and to cooperate on space exploration. China agreed to buy Russian wheat, oil, and coal, reflecting its concerns about the security of supplies by sea routes. Putin affirmed Russia's support for China's position on Taiwan. Beijing expressed support for Russia's opposition to NATO expansion.

There are some important similarities between the two powers. Both are accused of human rights violations and reject western criticisms. Both regard democratic movements as a threat to their regimes. Both also feel threatened by US strategic forces and the forward deployment of US and allied forces.

But there are also significant differences. China stands for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, development, and security. Its relations with Ukraine before the invasion were good and it was investing in Ukraine through the Belt and Road Initiative. While Beijing was careful not to condemn the invasion, it also did not approve it, abstaining in the key vote in the UN Security Council.

The US has been clear that it will not intervene militarily in Ukraine, while reinforcing defences in NATO member countries close to Russia. Will Xi and his colleagues conclude

that the US is unlikely to intervene in Taiwan? It would be incautious to do so, as Biden has given every indication—in his statement quoted at the start of this paper and elsewhere—that intervention would be likely. This is also the clearly expressed mood in Congress. Nevertheless, Beijing has already made public its view that the US is a declining power, beset by domestic divisions. It may calculate that the new world situation opens a window of opportunity for a move on Taiwan, or that one may open soon, if US domestic politics become still more fractious and gridlocked.

The invasion of Ukraine has cast a pall over international relations. It darkens the prospects for peace everywhere, in east Asia as well as Europe. Notwithstanding these ominous signs, the need for a peaceful approach to the conflicts in both regions is clearer than ever.

Prospects for Conflict Transformation in Taiwan

Any conflict can be transformed if the course the parties are on changes radically enough. This can happen if the parties change their positions, if they redefine or reframe their goals, if the interests underlying their positions change, if the actors themselves change, if the structure of the conflict changes or if there is change in the context of the conflict. What are the prospects for such changes, bearing in mind the past history of efforts to resolve, negotiate, and manage the conflict?

The core issue at present is the clash over the status of Taiwan. This could be resolved if the PRC revised its claim to sovereignty over Taiwan or if the Taiwanese authorities revised their rejection of the one China principle.

Both of these changes seem unlikely at present.

Yet it is remarkable how the positions of the parties have changed in the past. In its early years the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) expressed no interest in Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan and did not see the Taiwanese as part of the Chinese nation. Mao Zedong even wrote that he was in favour of Taiwan's independence (from the Japanese).² It was not until 1942 that this view began to change. After the Cairo Declaration of 1943, in which the allies offered to return Taiwan to the Republic of China, the fate of the island became caught up in the struggle between the Nationalists and the Communists. From 1949 on, the CCP saw the KMT as imperialist lackeys, allowing the US to use the island as a springboard to attack the mainland. Mao was deeply concerned about the vulnerability of the Chinese coastline to potential US attack. Taiwan was seen as 'an unsinkable aircraft carrier' in US hands. Thus, in the Chinese perception, the US presence in and support for Taiwan was the key to the conflict. From the Chinese point of view, if the US agreed to stick to the three joint communiques of 1972, 1979 and 1982 (including winding down arms sales) then 'it will not be difficult to settle the Taiwan question that has been left over by history.'³

² Wachman, Alan, 2007. *Why Taiwan? Geostrategic rationales for China's territorial integrity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 84-87.

³ Wachman, *ibid*, 114.

Similarly, the position of the Taiwanese authorities has changed drastically over time, from the assertion of a 'one China' policy by the Kuomintang (KMT), to the rejection of 'one China' by the Democratic People's Party (DPP).

The US has been equally inconsistent. After the war, its position was that Taiwan's status was undetermined. In 1972, President Nixon switched position and told Zhou Enlai that the US accepted that 'there is only one China and Taiwan is part of China.' Later, in the face of Congressional objections, the US government asserted that its 'one China' policy meant that the US recognised the PRC and acknowledged its view of 'one China', not that the US accepted that Taiwan was a part of China.

It is possible, then, for positions to change, as circumstances alter, and underlying interests shift. Conflict parties frame their positions in relation to a mental map of perceived interests and goals. Since this framing is a construction that a party chooses to adopt, it is possible in principle to reframe interests and shift positions.

Xi Jinping has made reunification with Taiwan a centrepiece of his project of national rejuvenation. He sees the mission of the CCP as the creation of a modern nation state, unifying all of China, raising living standards, and regaining ground lost in the century of humiliation.

However, Xi Jinping has also stuck to his predecessors' formula of 'peaceful reunification' and 'one country, two systems', first propounded by Deng Xiaoping.

When Xi became General Secretary in 2012, he set out three key goals. The first was 'to unite and lead people of the entire Party ... while continuing to work for the great revival of the Chinese nation, in order to let the Chinese nation stand more firmly and powerfully among all nations around the world and make a greater contribution to mankind.', The second was to meet the expectations for 'better education, more stable jobs, better income, more reliable social security, medical care of a higher standard, more comfortable living conditions and a more beautiful environment.' The third was 'to be resolute in ensuring that the Party supervises its own conduct, enforces strict discipline, effectively deals with the prominent issues within the Party...so that our Party will always be the firm leadership core for advancing the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics.'

Accompanying these were the two centennial goals – by 2021, to become a 'moderately prosperous society in all respects', and by 2049, to build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious.'⁴

It is not clear that any of these goals necessarily require an early and forceful reunification with Taiwan.

No definite deadline has been set for China's peaceful unification. Xi has linked the 2049 date with the goal of achieving national rejuvenation and also linked the achievement of peaceful unification with national rejuvenation. However, his speech at the Party's

⁴ Brown, Kerry, 2018, *The World According to Xi*, London: I.B.Tauris, 29-30.

centennial was clearer about opposing independence than about the how and when of peaceful unification.

Xi Jinping's speeches do not suggest that he is immediately threatening an armed takeover of Taiwan. The use of force, which has not been ruled out, is limited to the contingencies of a declaration of independence by Taiwan, or 'major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China', or the exhaustion of opportunities for peaceful unification.

It is not clear that elite opinion in China would necessarily support a forceful attempt to take over Taiwan, short of a declaration of independence by the Taiwanese authorities or a foreign intervention. Undoubtedly Xi's appeals to nationalism strike a populist chord. The patriotic education that has been a feature of Chinese schooling has helped to shape a nationalist mood. But the fear of foreign intervention and the sense of caution which marked China's peaceful rise is still a powerful factor encouraging patience among the Communist Party elite.

Previous CCP leaders maintained the claim to Taiwan but chose not to actively pursue it. Deng Xiaoping insisted on unification but prioritised opening up China and China's peaceful rise. Jiang Zemin proposed a peace accord first and a gradual process of realising peaceful unification afterwards. Hu Jintao put the emphasis on opposing independence rather than forcing unification. The implication was that peaceful reunification would await the improvement of cross-strait relations. In 2005 Hu aimed for a peace accord and a platform for contacts with the KMT, then the governing authority in Taiwan.⁵

It would be open to the CCP to continue to press for peaceful unification, but to return to the policy of seeking a negotiated agreement. This would be more plausible if the Taiwanese authorities also moved away from their current intransigent approach and agreed to open negotiations on a long-term framework for peace with China, and if the US supported such a move.

It has previously been suggested that one possible formula to launch a conflict resolution process would be for Taiwan to formally give up the aspiration for independence and for China to formally renounce the use of force. This could be followed by functional agreements to promote cooperation and people-to-people links across the Straits, as well as confidence building and crisis management measures.⁶

The current Taiwanese position, as stated by Tsai Ing-wen, is to reject the 'one China' formula, to reject 'one country, two systems', and to assert that Taiwan is already a de facto independent state, while avoiding a formal declaration of independence. This position was reached following the dangerous confrontation with China that developed when Tsai's predecessor, President Lee Tseng-hui, planned to hold an independence referendum –

⁵ Goldstein, Steven M., 2015, *China and Taiwan*, Cambridge: Polity, 117.

⁶ Saunders, Phillip and Scott Kastner, 2009, '[Bridge Over Troubled Water? Envisioning a China-Taiwan Peace Agreement](#)', *International Security*, vol. 33, no.4, 87-114.

leading to a furious reaction in both Beijing and Washington. Tsai has been more circumspect, but her 'de facto' independence claim clearly enrages Beijing.

Public opinion in Taiwan has swung strongly in favour of independence. Decades ago, Chiang Kai-shek's dictatorial role provoked resistance and led to a rebellion against KMT and Chinese rule, a rebellion that Chiang harshly suppressed. Chiang's son introduced democratisation, opening the way for a pro-independence party. The DPP has benefitted from the growing sense of a Taiwanese identity. In 1992, a poll found that 25% of respondents identified as 'Chinese', 46% as 'both Chinese and Taiwanese' and 18% as 'Taiwanese'. In 2019 only 4% identified as 'Chinese', 36% as 'both Taiwanese and Chinese' and 57% as 'Taiwanese'.⁷ The Taiwanese identity is particularly strong among the young. These changes need to be acknowledged in formal negotiations. Beijing can no longer assume that most Taiwanese identify as Chinese. There are multiple identities at stake.

At the same time, 85% of people in Taiwan prefer the status quo to continue, favouring neither a formal declaration of independence nor unification with China.⁸

This has affected the prospects for peace-making on the Taiwanese side. In 1992, the KMT government promoted an effort to negotiate an agreement with Beijing. Both Taipei and Beijing issued parallel statements, saying they were in favour of 'one China'. The Taiwan National Unification Guidelines stated that 'both the mainland and Taiwan areas are parts of China', and supported cross-Straits exchange, cooperation, and consultation with a view to establishing a democratic, free and prosperous China in the future. This was a different interpretation of 'one China' from the CCP's. Nevertheless, Beijing promoted the KMT's and CCP's acceptance of the 'one China formula' as the '1992 Consensus'. The two sides proceeded to develop transport and trade links, as well as cross-Straits investment. These intensified after Hu Jintao's offer of a peace accord in 2008. Closer links allowed more family visits and more active involvement in the mainland economy by the Taiwanese business community. Two events brought these developments to an end. The first was the Sunflower Movement of 2014, which mobilised students and others against a trade in services agreement with the mainland. The second was the KMT's defeat in the 2014 local elections. When the DPP came to power in 2016, Tsai Ing-wen repudiated the 'one China' formula and overturned the KMT plan to liberalise trade with the mainland. Instead, she prioritised trade with non-Chinese partners. Taiwan was left out of the RCEP regional trade pact.

In principle, given political change on both sides, a 'one China' framework might still offer an approach towards a settlement. There is a basis for it in culture, since the people of China and Taiwan evidently share a common Chinese civilization and Chinese language (although even the written language has diverged, as Taiwan did not follow the mainland in simplifying the characters). Some version of a 'one China' formula could allow for a settlement of the sovereignty issue while acknowledging the presence of different governing authorities and systems. Taiwan could continue to exist as a non-state entity under the democratic control of its own authorities, and Beijing could simply declare that

⁷ Taylor, *ibid*, 19.

⁸ Taylor, *ibid*, 22.

the 'one China' principle had been established. Any steps towards political unification would have to be based on agreement and presumably would predicate long-term changes in the political system on one or both sides of the Straits.

For some such solution to work, there would have to be assurances that 'one country, two systems' could actually mean the continuation of democratic government. To make this plausible, Beijing could revoke its security law in Hong Kong and return to a more collaborative and pluralist approach to political order among the Chinese speaking areas of the 'one China' area.

Such a solution might appeal to the KMT but would almost certainly be rejected by the DPP. However, the DPP's policy of pursuing independence becomes increasingly dangerous as China's nationalism grows more assertive and Chinese military capacity grows. The issue the Taiwanese people face is whether it is prudent to press their continuing assertion of de facto independence and refusal to negotiate if it involves the risk of a war with China, which could devastate the island (and the wider world if it spread).

Short of an agreement on a 'one China' framework, the two sides could formally or tacitly agree to sustain the status quo, though this would surely be more acceptable if accompanied by agreement to negotiate in good faith with a view to finding an acceptable framework for a future relationship. Taiwan could commit itself to not declaring independence and China could commit itself to not using force. This would need to be accompanied by provisions for demilitarisation and de-escalation to reduce the strategic significance of the island.

Although it seems unlikely that either Xi Jinping or Tsai Ing-wen would agree to such a framework, there is the possibility that in time different actors might come forward with different policies. The CCP has always had factions that champion different courses of development, reflecting the interests of different regions within China. The struggle between factions, when it breaks surface, is brutal. Xi has used his anti-corruption campaign and Party discipline campaign to sweep possible opponents aside, and to surround himself with people who depend on his patronage. But the Shanghai faction representing the coastal cities and the Communist Youth League faction representing the left-behind inland areas remain significant groupings. If we believe Cai Xia, a former professor in the elite Central Party School, recently expelled from the CCP, discontent with the Party is widespread, especially among middle and higher-level officials who came up in the period of Deng and his successors. "Those within the party have experienced the last 20, 30 years and they understand which direction is right and which is a dead end," she said.⁹ In Taiwan, with a democratic system, regular elections make changes of political leadership likely from time to time.

The conflict presents in the form of a secession conflict, or a clash between states, depending on which side is framing it. A structural solution could be to devise a new set of structures which help to overcome conflicts of this kind. In Europe, the problems created by clashes between sovereign states have been at least partially overcome by creating a supranational

⁹ *The Guardian*, 18.8.2020, '[China's Xi Jinping faces widespread opposition in his own party, insider claims](#)'; *The Diplomat*, 9.10.2020, '[Behind Xi Jinping's Steely Façade, A Leadership Crisis is Smoldering in China](#).'

level of sovereignty and encouraging transnational relations at the substate level. A supranational 'one China' structure encompassing both the PRC on the mainland and a subnational democratic jurisdiction in Taiwan might be one way of avoiding a clash of incompatible state projects.

Finally, changes in the wider context of the China-Taiwan dispute could mitigate the conflict. In particular, an improvement in US-China relations holds the key to dampening and de-escalating the conflict.

It is vital to explore the prospects of an improvement in US-Chinese relations, which is required for other reasons, and could be transformative in the Taiwan context. This is, of course, a change in direction from the present trend towards an adversarial relationship based on 'strategic competition'. However, in the event of a new great power bargain between China and the USA, as envisaged by Buzan and Goh,¹⁰ both sides would have much to gain – in their economic relationship, in the vital need to manage climate change cooperatively, in their response to pandemics, and crucially in reordering east Asian in a way that avoids war. They have potentially shared interests in resolving the Korean situation. The US could play a vital role in brokering a reconciliation agreement between China, Japan and South Korea, to begin to address the history problems that poison the relationships in the region. An agreement could contribute to a more functional UN Security Council, agreements on rules for world order, and potentially better management of international affairs.

An essential element of this agreement would need to be a winding down of the arms build-up by both sides. The US would agree to draw down its forward defences in east Asia, in return for China drawing down the forces it is preparing aimed at Taiwan. Taiwan could declare itself a neutral zone, or even a peace park, with a winding down of arms sales from the US built into the de-escalation and demilitarisation agreement. With no strategic threat to Taiwan from either side, the chances of the territorial dispute triggering a wider explosion would be reduced.

This would be a sharp change of course from the present policy, in which the US uses deterrence and the threat of military intervention to protect Taiwan. It may be that deterrence has affected Chinese calculations about the use of force in the past. The danger of the deterrence policy is that it is unstable. It creates real threats, which encourage a military response, and drives a continuing process of armaments and escalation on both sides. This has led to shorter warning times and more risk of escalation and inadvertent war. While absolutely nothing justifies Putin's aggressive and inhumane invasion of Ukraine, the historical record shows that the West's policy of enlargement of NATO and modernisation of NATO nuclear forces created a perceived sense of threat in Putin and in the Russian state that contributed to his decision to lash out as he did.

Nuclear deterrence assumes rational decision-makers. Putin's behaviour in Ukraine casts doubt on that assumption. Xi Jinping, no doubt, is a more cautious leader. Yet, in a context

¹⁰ Buzan, Barry and Evelyn Goh, 2020. *Rethinking Sino-Japanese Alienation: History Problems and Historical Opportunities*, Oxford: OUP.

of deteriorating relations, with an arms race underway and a dangerous unresolved territorial conflict, it would be prudent to prefer agreement and accommodation to the grave and unpredictable risks of nuclear deterrence.

The winding down of the Cold War, which the events in Ukraine has sadly reversed in Europe, still offers lessons for the avoidance of Cold Wars that are relevant today. Mutual security assurances, trust building between leaders, de-escalation and disarmament, as well as helpful interventions by minor powers and the crucial role of people power and civil society, all contributed to the historical transformation.

A starting point for an accommodation between China and the US should be the principle that Gorbachev and Reagan used in trying to end the Cold War – the idea that a nuclear war can never be won and should never be fought. This principle applies as much to war over Taiwan and would be worth stating again. The two great powers could also give negative security assurances, that neither will use armed force to bring about change in Taiwan, so long as Taiwan does not formally declare independence.

Exchange of security assurances could be followed by further measures including confidence-building and crisis management measures to reduce the risks of inadvertent war arising from incidents at sea or in the air. Both sides could wind down their provocative military exercises and reduce their forces surrounding the island. With the dispute no longer so militarised, the prospects for peaceful negotiation would be better.

Building on these measures and an agreement to end the state of hostilities over Taiwan, the parties might feel disposed to develop wider security arrangements, that could give a basis for cooperative security in the region. These could be based on the Helsinki models, or new forms appropriate to the region. Following orchestrated apologies and the start of a regional reconciliation process, the region's security architecture could develop away from bipolar confrontation, towards mutual cooperation in a common security framework.

The smaller powers in the region should play a supporting role. ASEAN, for example, has strong motives for extending its own cooperative traditions to the troubled areas of east and northeast Asia, and is crucial for the economy of the region. And Taiwanese people, under whatever institutional forms can be agreed, have an important role to play along with Chinese in the wider development of the region.

Finally, people power must prevail in east Asia if great power conflicts are to be avoided. It is in the interests of the people of the region that developments should be peaceful, Civil society actors and ordinary people can play a vital role in preventing a drift to war and searching for a basis for peace in the region.

Conclusion

The risks of armed conflict in Taiwan have been growing, and the war in Ukraine has sharpened awareness of the risks. The parties to the conflict—the PRC, the Taiwan authorities and the US—are currently on a collision course. This paper has sketched an alternative path they could take if they decided to try to resolve or limit their conflict.

The parties do not have to pursue incompatible goals. They can move away from contradictory positions. Changes in how they define their goals and frame the conflict are possible. The history of past negotiations suggests there have been times when the parties were close to agreement, and there have been long periods when they have been prepared to accept the status quo. It is not unthinkable that, if the parties committed themselves to negotiations, they could find a mutually acceptable way forward. The Taiwan authorities could abjure a formal declaration of independence and agree to negotiations. The Chinese government could formally give up the threat to use force. The US could formally declare that it will not intervene in Taiwan or China. What raises the stakes of the conflict and poisons the atmosphere for its settlement is the military and strategic confrontation that surrounds it. If the US and China would embark on a process of de-escalating and demilitarising their strategic rivalry, and instead cooperate on the superordinate issues where their interests intersect (for example, in combating climate change), the prospects for settling the Taiwan conflict or at least living with the status quo would be enhanced. Lessons can be learned from the way that the Cold War ended to prevent a new Cold War between the US and China. The measures that contributed to that historic process included trust-building, confidence building, disarmament initiatives, cooperative security agreements and unilateral gestures. The failure to sustain that process and to develop an agreed post-Cold War order in Europe have contributed to the catastrophe in Ukraine. It is time now to be proactive in seeking a basis for an agreed order in east Asia and to try for peaceful accommodation in Taiwan.

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