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REASSURANCE IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT REVISITED

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Abstract

This policy brief [1] seeks to answer a critical question: What kind of reassurance can Taiwan give to Mainland China, and vice versa? It also points out two important questions with preliminary answers: What could be the reassurance measures given by major stakeholders in the region, and is reassurance possible given the identity politics in Taiwan and Mainland China? The brief first discusses the term 'reassurance' with reference to theoretical literature, then analyzes the recent deterioration of cross-strait relations, with no Track I dialogue, very little official communication, and a military standoff. Next, the brief provides a list with examples of possible reassurance measures that could be taken by the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Before concluding, the brief argues that United States' influence and the impact of Taiwan's identity politics need further discussion.

Introduction

Military deterrence between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait has been going on for many years. Although the advantage is tilted to the Beijing authorities, the two sides have not yet gone to war over the issue of reunification or independence. In addition to military deterrence, the high degree of economic and trade interdependence between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait makes any party think twice before using armed force against the other side.

However, there will be a risk of conflict so long as the People's Republic of China (PRC) government insists on achieving national reunification through non-peaceful means, and the Republic of China (ROC) government is trying its best to get United States (US) protection while at the same time implementing incremental Taiwan independence. Since mid-2016, the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s military activities and gray zone threats around the island of Taiwan can be said to be coercive actions by the Beijing authorities who have a strong sense of urgency to prevent Taiwan independence, which increases the possibility of military conflict. How should the parties concerned manage the rising political and military risks? Because the military almost always serves politics, political reassurance can be seen as a possible and feasible alternative to war.

[1] This policy brief is based on a paper presented to a Toda Research Cluster on 'Reassurance Around Taiwan,' held in Tokyo, 13–14 June 2025.

Brief theoretical review

Deterrence and reassurance have very different starting points or basic assumptions in terms of strategies when facing hostility. Janice G. Stein (1991, 432) pointed out that deterrence roots "the source of that hostility in an adversary's search for opportunity," while reassurance roots the source of that hostility "in an adversary's needs and weaknesses." Therefore, "reassurance strategies include not only the attempt to reduce miscalculation through verbal assurances but a broad set of strategies that adversaries can use to reduce the likelihood of the threat or use of force." For such strategies to work, decision-makers need to understand and empathize with their adversary.

Stein (1991, 432) suggests four basic practices of reassurance. First, "leaders can attempt through restraint not to exacerbate the pressures and constraints that operate on their adversary to use force." Second, leaders can "try informally to develop norms of competition to regulate their conflict and reduce the likelihood of miscalculated war." Third, leaders can "try to break out of habitual threat or use of force through less conventional methods of irrevocable commitments." Finally, leaders "attempt as well to put in place informal or formal regimes designed specifically to build confidence, reduce uncertainty, and establish acceptable limits of competition."

Reassurance can result in trust or confidence between conflicting parties. Tang Shiping (2010, 130) argues that "piecemeal cooperation builds trust, and more trust leads to more extensive cooperation" and that "[t]rust and cooperation have a feedback rather than a one-way relationship." In a similar way, one can consider that reassurance is related to confidence and security building measures (CSBMs), for the two are mutually inclusive in nature.

Andrew Kydd (2000, 326) proposes a "costly signaling" theory of reassurance. In short, even if the essence of the message is the same and the content is similar, the more attention you spend on the signalling cost, the greater the value of the message conveyed. Costly signals refer to "signals designed to persuade the other side that one is trustworthy by virtue of the fact that they are so costly that one would hesitate to send them if one were untrustworthy." Thus, the core components include costly signals and how receivers judge or weigh them. Yet, it seems nearly impossible that strategies of reassurance can be made via pure rational choice because the nature of trust and fear, two competing characteristics in cooperation building, have two dimensions that usually conflict with each other—the psychological or emotional one and the 'rational' and strategic one (Lewis & Weigert 1985, cited in Tang 2010, 130). This is where empathy can play a role.

Realities

In the Taiwan Strait, the need for reassurance that promotes peace and stability between the governments of the ROC and the PRC focuses mainly on political and military matters. As for the economic ones, the Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed at the peak of cross-strait relations in 2010 contains some mechanisms for formulating rules for bilateral interaction. Those mechanisms have now been largely suspended, and some items favourable to Taiwan have also been unilaterally cancelled by the Beijing authorities.

Based on the experience of the Kuomintang (KMT, sometimes called the Nationalist Party of China), during the presidential terms of Lee Teng-hui (mainly in the 1990s) and of Ma Ying-jeou (May 2008–May 2016) in Taiwan, both sides of the strait attempted to get involved in external and security policies or practices helpful for building mutual confidence across the Taiwan Strait, whether unilateral or bilateral (Huang 2011, 5–16). If there were external third parties involved, it was mostly during the Lee period (1988–2000) when the Beijing

authorities were not as powerful as now, and the number of related cases was small. In addition, there was no Track I diplomacy with any third parties because the Beijing authorities always cited 'opposing interference from external forces' as an excuse against any internationalization of the so-called 'Taiwan issue'.

Like the sovereignty dispute in the South China Sea in the 1990s, where the will to shelve disputes as an important and feasible first step in peaceful conflict management could be found among some claimants (Tønnesson 1999), such a will was respectively expressed, either explicitly or implicitly, by the top leaders in Taipei and Beijing between the 1990s and 2016. Yet, such political ideas and practices have rarely been mentioned between the two sides after mid-2016 as the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) garnered power in Taiwan.

Moreover, unlike the era when Nien-Chung Chang Liao (2012) pointed out that costly signalling theory may be used to assist cross-strait trust-building, nowadays, the possibility of this has rapidly decreased, with changes in the international and cross-strait strategic situations.

Between May 2016 and May 2024, Tsai Ing-wen who won two presidential elections on behalf of the DPP abandoned the basis for efficient political communication between the two governments across the Taiwan Strait, namely the '1992 Consensus'. It was a move away from reassurance. The goodwill gestures of cross-strait interaction also gradually disappeared when Xi Jinping decided to use coercive actions to deter the growing trend of Taiwan independence during Tsai's terms. Now, Tsai's successor Lai Ching-te, who once claimed at the ROC Legislative Yuan in the capacity of the ROC premier that he is "a pragmatic worker for Taiwan Independence,"[2] probably thinks that Taiwan is facing a strategic opportunity in which the Joe Biden and Donald Trump (1.0) administrations in the US have drastically changed the US's long-term pro-Beijing policy. Meanwhile, the Lai administration appears to be tightening all kinds of exchanges with Mainland China, and it is strengthening the awareness of 'anti-China' and 'anti-united front' to consolidate its support and demonize opposition parties favouring healthy cross-strait exchanges. Therefore, the chance of willingness to reassure the Xi administration is extremely small.

[I]f the concession does not receive a positive response from [Tsai and Lai], it will be like a political poison for Xi, who is coping with a slow decline in economic momentum and other internal challenges such as those possibly arising from his anti-corruption campaigns.

Xi, whose party unwaveringly vows to oppose Taiwan independence and external interference in cross-strait affairs, will not easily make concessions to Tsai and Lai in the face of this changing situation. What's more, if the concession does not receive a positive response from them, it will be like a political poison for Xi, who is coping with a slow decline in economic momentum and other internal challenges such as those possibly arising from his anti-corruption campaigns.

Yet, as stated in a recent Track II dialogue report released by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP), "potential paths for de-escalation, mutually improved signaling, and confidence-building measures" are still very significant for the prevention of conflict in the Taiwan Strait (Thornton and Sparkman 2025).

[2] *The Diplomat,* https://web.archive.org/web/20240520145617/https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/with-lai-ching-te-inauguration-taiwan-has-a-new-president/

Suggestions for workable reassurance

Based on the foregoing academic review and the current situation on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, the following table points out the potential reassurance measures that the Lai and Xi administrations might adopt in the time ahead. This policy brief assumes that almost all unilateral measures that are faits accomplis will have no signs of change at present, such as the PLA's fighter planes and ships crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait—a line of separation that has not been publicly delineated but used to be subject to a tacit understanding between the militaries of the two sides. Regarding non-political and non-military faits accomplis, there may be a slightly better chance for more benign changes, but one shouldn't feel optimistic.

It needs to be noted again that offering reassurance does not mean surrendering to the other side. Rather, reassurance is aimed at reducing tension and cultivating basic mutual trust.

Measures in association with reassurance in the Taiwan Strait can be divided into five categories:

1) Self-restraint to avoid spurring the use of force,
2) Norm-building for non-violent competition,
3) Irrevocable or binding commitments in favour of creating cooperative regimes or non-violent solutions,
4) Confidence and security building measures, as well as
5) Costly signals that enhance trustworthiness.

Based on them, the following table illustrates some exemplary measures, sometimes a little idealistic, that could be considered or carried out by either one or both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

	TAIWAN Lai Ching-te (William)	**MAINLAND CHINA** Xi Jinping
Self-restraint to avoid spurring the use of force	• *No use of force to solve cross-strait tensions* • *Peaceful resolution of the cross-strait issue* • *Pursuit of only private and/or low-profile military exchanges with the US* • *No demonstration of "Taiwan independence" in political and legal statements*	• *Peaceful resolution of the cross-strait issue* • *No military or coast guard operations within or near the 12 nautical miles range (sea and air) of Taiwan's territorial sea plus another 12 nautical miles range of the contiguous zone* • *Gradual reduction in the frequency and size of military drills and gray-zone operations near Taiwan (and Penghu), Kinmen, Matsu, Pratas and Itu Aba (Taiping dao)* • *No demonstration of non-peaceful or military means for national reunification in political statements*
Norm-building for non-violent competition	*Almost impossible due to the discontinuation of cross-strait political foundation and official communication after May 2016, thus accumulating no positive cases or practices for norm-building.*	

	TAIWAN Lai Ching-te (William)	**MAINLAND CHINA** Xi Jinping
Irrevocable or binding commit-ments to favour cooperation regime creation and non-violent solutions	• *Pledges of abiding by the Constitution of the Republic of China ('one China' represented by the ROC), as well as the Act Governing Relations between the People of Taiwan Area and Mainland Area ('one China, two areas' defined by the ROC)*	• *Pledges of abiding by the Anti-secession Law that, for the purpose of promoting peaceful national reunification and maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, specifies the potential areas for future cross-strait consultations and negotiations:* *1) officially ending the state of hostility between the two sides;* *2) mapping out the development of cross-strait relations;* *3) steps and arrange-ments for peaceful national reunification;* *4) the political status of the Taiwan authorities;* *5) the Taiwan region's room of international operation that is compatible with its status; and* *6) other matters concerning the achievement of peaceful national reunification*
Confidence and security building measures	• *Pledges of promoting the peaceful development of cross-strait relations* • *Reiteration of the desire for 'seeking common-alities while shelving disputes'* • *No further unnecessary limitations of cross-strait people-to-people exchanges* • *No first strike on Mainland China* • *Exchanges of police officers and/or military surgeons for professional purposes that benefit people*	• *Pledges of promoting the peaceful development of cross-strait relations and attaining peaceful resolution to the 'Taiwan question'* • *Continuation of a spirit of 'seeking common ground while setting aside differences'* • *Consultationsand negotiation for cross-strait party-to-party exchanges (i.e., with the non-pro-Taiwan independence parties in Taiwan)* • *No first strike, including nuclear attacks, on Taiwan* • *Exchanges of police officers and/or military surgeons for professional purposes that benefit people*
Costly signals that enhance trust-worthiness	• *Public claims that exclude (practical) 'Taiwan independence' in related government policies* • *Policy adjustments from 'pro-US and anti-China' to 'pro-US and peace and prosperity with Mainland Chinese people'* • *Statements about the ROC's sovereign rights in the South China Sea and the waters around the Diaoyutai/Diaoyu Islands (which from a legal, historical, and political perspective shows the continuation of 'China')*	• **Public claims that aim to enhance cross-strait mutual understanding and do not consider national reunification an urgent task that needs to be tackled as soon as possible* • **Abolishment of use of force against Taiwan if it gives up the move toward independence* • **Demonstration of the willingness of accepting third party mediators in the Taiwan Strait, for the ultimate goal of China's peaceful national reunification*

Some points that need further explanation

Beyond the table above, what is the influence of the US in cross-strait reassurance? How do identity politics affect reassurance in the Taiwan Strait? These are two important questions that cannot be dealt with in detail in this policy brief.

The only regional stakeholder that really matters is the US. Given the Trump administration's roller coaster-like or dramatically changing foreign security and economic policies, its 'best' reassurance may be its reiteration of the 'one China' policy honoured by the various administrations since 1979, when the US formalized its relations with the Beijing authorities. Neither Taipei nor Beijing is satisfied with such a policy, but they would agree to whatever favours them and choose not to challenge US 'strategic ambiguity'.

One reassurance measure the US has provided to the Beijing authorities, at least orally and in official papers, since 1979 is to stick to its unofficial relations with Taiwan, aimed implicitly at encouraging the Beijing authorities to endeavour to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Despite the growth in Washington–Taipei relations on many fronts, for Washington, 'unofficiality' may help ease some of its tension with Beijing while doing no harm to its current relations with Taipei. Equally important is: the US should consider urging the Lai administration to stay away from any Taiwan independence moves, whether incremental or 'pragmatic', that would trigger further threat of conventional or gray-zone use of force by the Beijing authorities.

The US can also reassure the Lai administration by continuing to offer the latter weapons of a defensive nature and promoting the latter's meaningful participation in international organizations when appropriate. The cases of the World Health Assembly and the International Civil Aviation Organization Assembly were good examples.

Identity politics in Taiwan, if mostly mingled with Taiwan instead of the ROC as a sovereign independent country, will likely limit the opportunities for the leaders to extend an olive branch in a timely manner.

Specifically, identity politics in Taiwan can refer either to the gradually increasing Taiwan identity in a territorial (non-political) sense or to Taiwanese as a nation different from Chinese in an ethnic sense. If it is the former, the Taiwan identity is not necessarily related to a quest for formal independence but to a regional feature manifested by the geographic and (sub-)cultural nature. If the latter, the term Taiwanese leads to the concept of a new Taiwan nation, which could lead to cross-strait confrontation, in particular a scenario where the creation of a new Taiwan nation is seen to openly challenge the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' which is part of the 'Chinese Dream' vowed repeatedly by Xi (Wang 2025).

It is important to note that for those in Taiwan who agree about 'the Chinese (Chunghua/Zhonghua) nation on the two sides of the strait' and the '1992 Consensus' or 'one China, respective interpretations', these terms appear as effective political reassurance measures. Yet, identity politics are sometimes used by some political leaders in Taiwan to differentiate between 'Taiwan' and 'China' as two nations in political and legal terms. For example, they stress the infiltration and subversion schemed by the Chinese communists and see relatively weaker needs for reassurance measures. They probably think that the distinction between 'Taiwanese' and 'Chinese' and the salient yet controllable tensions in the strait may serve the purpose of wooing more political support in internal politics, particularly from those who consider themselves Taiwanese only or dislike 'China'. Then, a low priority of offering reassurance to Mainland China can be better justified.

A simple inference that should be reasonable at present is that as Taiwan's identity politics develops more toward Taiwanese as a nation or 'one country on each side', the potential reassurance options containing the concept of 'one China' in the table above would be less favoured by leaders in Taiwan. This could narrow the scope of any possible attempt by Taiwan to approach Mainland China with a peace agenda.

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