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23 January 2022

Developing a progressive Taiwan policy

NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

TOP LINES

- Beijing has attempted to squeeze Taiwan's international space by poaching its few remaining diplomatic allies and blocking the country's participation in international organisations. It has also used coercive economic tools to punish the government in Taipei. Such measures are designed to demoralise the Taiwanese people and impress on them the supposed inevitability of unification.
- Taiwan matters to the UK. It is a fellow liberal democracy which has much to offer and teach the rest of the world, with its response to Covid-19 being a case in point. Its location in the first island chain makes it critical to the future order in the Indo-Pacific. Likewise, as a leading producer of semiconductors an armed conflict over Taiwan could cause severe disruption to the global economy.
- Calculating the risks of war is incredibly difficult. The balance of military power across the Strait has unquestionably shifted in China's favour. The Chinese military is also developing the capabilities to launch an amphibious landing of the main island. However, a decision to annex Taiwan will be a political one and as such an assessment of Xi Jinping's language and priorities is needed. The risk of armed conflict should not be overplayed, attention should instead be directed to supporting Taiwan with the problems it faces now.
- The Labour Party should treat Taiwan as a partner by stepping up engagement with government officials and Taiwanese civil society. It should also push the UK government harder to support efforts to allow Taiwan to meaningfully participate in international organisations and support efforts to enhance Taiwan's economic resilience.

BACKGROUND

Taiwan and cross-Strait relations have both received greater attention by politicians and the media across the world in recent years. To a large extent, this is the result of Beijing's intimidation tactics. As data from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense shows, approximately 950 People's Liberation Army (PLA) sorties crossed into the southwest of Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in 2021, up 380 from the previous year.¹ In response to these ongoing provocations, liberal democracies have underscored the

¹ Taipei Times, [Taiwan braces for more Chinese flybys next year](#), December 2021

importance of peace and stability across the Strait., through statements following G7 meetings and bilateral dialogues.

Figures in Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra have underlined their own interests in preserving the status quo while also expressing solidarity with a fellow liberal democracy. Japan's 2021 defence white paper concludes that cross-Strait developments should be viewed with a "sense of crisis".² These sentiments have been echoed by senior ministers and, most recently, former prime minister Shinzo Abe who said: "a Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-U.S. alliance".³ In a similar vein the Australian Defence Minister, Peter Dutton, has said that it would be "inconceivable" for his country not to support the US if it came to Taiwan's aid.⁴

It is no surprise that this year has also seen speculation about whether or not an armed conflict will erupt across the Strait - and, if so, when? The most widely reported prediction came from the outgoing Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson. In his testimony to the Senate's Committee on Armed Services he predicted a Chinese attempt to take Taiwan "during this decade, in fact, in the next six years".⁵

Section 2 of this briefing seeks to explain and clarify recent developments in cross-Strait relations and the wider dynamics between Taiwan, China, and the US. While the long term trends are worrying, reporting recent events without historical context can cause unnecessary alarm. Alarmism is not just bad analysis but can contribute to Beijing's efforts to demoralise the Taiwanese people by undermining confidence in Taiwan's government and presenting unification as a *fait accompli*. Moreover, in the UK context it could lead to the wrong questions and policies being pushed by parliamentarians as attention focuses on the possibility of conflict when, as section 3 argues, Britain should prioritise the problems Taiwan faces in the present, chiefly the country's continued international isolation.

1. OVERVIEW

1.1 Taiwan's predicament

In the late-1940s, the embattled Chiang Kai-shek and his nationalist forces fled to Taiwan, which until then had been a colony in the vanquished Japanese empire. From then onwards the rest of the world was forced to recognise only one of the "Two Chinas". The 1970s were a turning point in this struggle when, at the beginning of the decade, the Republic of China (ROC) was replaced by the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the United Nations. The US's decision in 1979 to switch recognition to Beijing further accelerated Taiwan's international isolation.

This isolation has not yet been reversed. However, in the intervening years other changes have occurred. The most significant of which was Taiwan's transition into a vibrant liberal democracy in the 1990s. While this has been an unqualified success for the Taiwanese people, it has further complicated cross-Strait relations. Democratisation has not only led to two

² Ministry of Defence (Japan), [Defence of Japan: 2021](#), July 2021

³ Reuter, [Former PM Abe says Japan, U.S. could not stand by if China attacked Taiwan](#), December 2021

⁴ Reuters, ['Inconceivable' Australia would not join U.S. to defend Taiwan - Australian defence minister](#), November 2021.

⁵ US Senate Committee on Armed Services, [OPEN/CLOSED: United States Indo-Pacific Command \(01:20:30\)](#), March 2021

vastly different political systems on either side of the Strait but allowed a long suppressed, Taiwanese identity to assert itself.

While Beijing insists to this day that there is One China of which Taiwan is an alienable part, people in Taiwan increasingly disagree. According to National Chengchi University's Election Study Center, few in Taiwan regard themselves as Chinese or desire unification.⁶ Their latest survey results show a record low in 'Taiwanese and Chinese' and 'Chinese' self-identification, 31.4% and 2.7% respectively, while 63.3% describe themselves as 'Taiwanese'. On the question of unification versus independence, maintenance of the status quo remained the most favoured option. While the percentage of respondents wanting to "maintain the status quo, move towards independence" was 25.8% with another 5% wanting to "declare independence as soon as possible," the survey showed. Crucially, 1.5% of respondents preferred "unification with China as soon as possible," plus 5% who said "maintain the status quo, move towards unification".

Therefore, in rejecting Beijing's 'one country, two systems' model for Taiwan, President Tsai is reflecting the wishes of the Taiwanese people. Moreover, at the last two presidential elections a majority of Taiwanese voters rejected "One China", and alongside it the 1992 Consensus⁷, giving President Tsai a mandate to deviate from these concepts and formulas. Nevertheless, the PRC has decided to punish Taiwan while she holds office.

1.2 Beijing's squeeze

Since President Tsai's first election victory, Beijing has resumed squeezing Taiwan's already limited international presence. It has also taken trade measures designed to damage specific sectors of the Taiwanese economy. These measures seek to undermine faith in Taiwan's democratically elected government and demoralise the Taiwanese into accepting the supposed inevitability of unification. Since 2016, Beijing has:

- Poached Taiwan's diplomatic allies: undermining Taiwan's *de facto* sovereignty by encouraging the country's few remaining formal diplomatic allies to switch recognition. While Taiwan's non-officials relations remain of critical importance, chiefly its ties with the US, these allies frequently speak up for Taiwan in international organisations. Gambia broke ties with Taipei in 2013, and during Tsai's first term a further seven countries followed suit, and an eighth loss came in December 2021 as Nicaragua switched to Beijing. This has left Taiwan with only 14 diplomatic allies, the majority of which are located in the Caribbean, Central America, and Oceania.
- Excluded Taiwan from International Organisations: Following Tsai's election Beijing reneged on arrangements agreed with her predecessor which allowed for some form of Taiwanese participation in international fora. The case of the World Health Assembly (WHA), for which Taiwan was an observer under the name 'Chinese Taipei'

⁶ Taipei Times, [Survey shows 'Chinese' identity at a record low](#), July 2021

⁷ The "1992 Consensus" refers to talks, in 1992, between the Straits Exchange Foundation and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits, representing Taiwan and China respectively. The phrase was later coined in 2000 by the then Taiwanese Minister of the Mainland Affairs Council, Su Chi, in order to facilitate dialogue. Advocates of the term, such as Taiwan's former-President Ma Ying-jeou, argue that the talks in principle agreed to the idea of "One China" but acknowledged the different understandings of "One China" on either side of the Strait. However, while President Tsai and her supporters acknowledge that the talks took place they argue that no consensus was found let alone one which reflects the wishes of the Taiwanese people in the present, see: Tsai, I.W, [President Tsai issues statement on China's President Xi's "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan"](#), January 2019

from 2009 to 2016, is the most egregious example. The Covid-19 pandemic, like the 2003 SARS outbreak before it, demonstrated the practical problems of Taiwan's international exclusion. Taiwan's ability to obtain information crucial to the wellbeing of its citizens was hampered, as was its ability to share its knowledge and expertise with the wider world. Taiwan also remains out of Interpol and the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO); both of which also affect the Taiwanese government's ability to keep their citizens safe.

- Coerced Taiwan economically: Beijing began restricting the number of PRC citizens travelling to Taiwan for tourism in 2016, then ahead of the 2020 election prohibited all travel to Taiwan except for organised tours. Taiwan's agricultural sector has also been targeted through import bans.⁸ Taipei has refuted these measures and promised to take their complaints to the World Trade Organisation.⁹

1.3 The UK and Taiwan

The UK's relationship with Taiwan is complex. Despite its decision to switch recognition to the People's Republic of China in 1950, Britain was in the unique position of maintaining a consulate in Tamsui throughout the early Cold War.¹⁰ Following its closure trade matters were conducted by a private body until the 1993 opening of the British Trade and Culture Office (now called the British Office) in Taipei.¹¹

Crucial to understanding Britain's relations with Taiwan is its One China policy. This differs from Beijing's One China principle as the UK, in 1972 alongside the exchanging of ambassadors, merely acknowledged the PRC's claim to Taiwan - it did not accept their view. As such the British government, to use the words of the Foreign Office: "do[es] not deal with the Taiwan authorities on a government to government basis, and ... avoid any act which could be taken to imply recognition."¹²

Nevertheless, since the early 1990s, good economic, cultural and people-to-people ties have developed between the UK and Taiwan. Agreements with Taiwan have been reached in the areas of double taxation and prisoner transfers. In 2009 the UK became one of the first countries to lift visa requirements for short-term visitors from Taiwan.¹³ These initiatives demonstrate that bilateral relations do not have to be static just because the UK and Taiwan lack formal diplomatic relations with each other.

Britain's One China policy has not stopped it supporting Taiwan's attempts to push back against its international isolation. UK Foreign Office ministers have consistently supported Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organisations for which statehood is not a prerequisite.¹⁴

⁸ For further details, see: New Bloom, [China's Wax and Custard Apple Ban Proves "Pineapple War" Redux](#), September 2021

⁹ Reuters, [Taiwan threatens to take China to WTO in new spat over fruit](#), September 2021

¹⁰ For an in depth study of this relationship see: Tsang, S., *The Cold War's Odd Couple: The Unintended Partnership between the Republic of China and the United Kingdom, 1950-1958*, (I.B. Tauris, 2006)

¹¹ UK-Taiwan relations between 1980 and 2010 are covered in two chapters in: Reilly, M., *The Great Free Trade Myth: British Foreign Policy and East Asia Since 1980*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp.67-104

¹² Foreign Affairs Committee, [Memorandum submitted by Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(Taiwan\)](#), October 2000

¹³ Taipei Times, [Taiwan wins inclusion in UK's visa-waiver program](#), February 2009

¹⁴ Recent examples include: Milling, A., [Taiwan: Sustainable Development](#), October 2021 and Ahmad, T., [Taiwan](#), July 2020

On cross-Strait tensions, the UK has long opposed the use of military force and called for both sides to engage in constructive dialogue. In recent months UK statements have more directly singled out Beijing. In October 2021, the Minister of State for Asia described Chinese military flights near Taiwan as “not conducive to peace and stability in the region”.¹⁵ Boris Johnson has not clearly outlined Britain’s position should Beijing attempt to annex Taiwan. However, in response to parliamentary questions on the Taiwan Strait, he has underlined the country’s commitment to defend international law and support for American global leadership.¹⁶

1.4 Why Taiwan matters

Taiwan may be far away but this does not mean its future is of no consequence to Britain. Taiwan is important to the UK and fellow liberal democracies in a number of respects.

- Taiwan is a vibrant liberal democracy which has been consistently ranked by Freedom House as “Free” and was singled out as a “star performer” and a “beacon of democracy in Asia” in the Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2020 Democracy Index.¹⁷ The annexation of Taiwan by China, with its antithetical authoritarian system, would be a human rights tragedy for the Taiwanese people and a loss to the world as an inspiring democratic success story and model for others.
- Taiwan is a partner for promoting open societies in the Indo-Pacific and contributes to the global good with its resources and expertise. The latter was proved during the COVID-19 pandemic: not only was Taiwan’s quick handling of the situation a model for other governments to learn from, but the country also used its fortunate position to help others by donating personal protective equipment and medical supplies.¹⁸
- Taiwan is critical to upholding order in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹ An annexation of Taiwan would be a fundamental assault of state sovereignty. Moreover, its loss would severely damage American leadership across the world and, due to the main island’s position along the first island chain, allow China to project its power further into the Pacific. This would also alarm other liberal democracies, including Japan who would feel more vulnerable as Beijing gains greater control over the sea lanes on which they rely.
- Taiwan is the world’s semiconductor epicentre with Taiwanese foundries accounting for 63% of the global market share.²⁰ Any disruption to the production or distribution of this product, vital to so many electronic devices, would have major ramifications to the global economy.

¹⁵ Milling, A., [AUKUS: Impact on Anglo-Chinese Relations](#), October 2021

¹⁶ Johnson, B., [Afghanistan](#), September 2021

¹⁷ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World: Taiwan](#), and The Economist Intelligence Unit, [Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health?](#), February 2021

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), [Taiwan and Europe: Cooperation and assistance to combat COVID-19](#), October 2020

¹⁹ “Order” refers to rules and norms which govern interactions between states. Chief amongst them is that of state sovereignty which safeguards territorial integrity and political independence. Regardless of Beijing’s claims, Taiwan possesses all the qualifications for statehood, including a permanent population, a defined territory, government and the capacity to enter into relations with other states, see: Lillian Goldman Law Library - Yale Law School, [Convention on Rights and Duties of States \(inter-American\)](#), December 1933

²⁰ Statista, [Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company - statistics & facts](#), July 2021

1.5 The Labour Party and Taiwan

The Labour Party has been largely silent over China's intimidation of Taiwan in recent years, despite growing criticism from parliamentarians of Beijing's treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and violation of Hong Kong's autonomy. Yet there are exceptions: Stephen Kinnock, the former shadow Asia minister, has raised on several occasions China's threat towards Taiwan, including the PLA's repeated incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ. Cross-Strait tensions have also received attention from former-Prime Minister Sir Tony Blair who recently said that if conflict is to be avoided "[China] have to understand that Taiwan is not the same as Hong Kong, and that there are very strong views on this in the West".²¹

Going forward, the Labour foreign affairs team should continue to condemn China's intimidation tactics and more loudly articulate Taiwan's value to the liberal democratic world. They should also challenge voices within the party, and on the left-, progressive-wing of the political spectrum whose approach is not conducive to Taiwan's security. These voices span Labour's broadchurch and include those who are either sympathetic to Beijing's position (to put mildly), insufficiently serious about deterring Chinese aggression, or overly cautious about engaging with Taiwan.

An alternative narrative comes from the hard-Left of the party. This was recently demonstrated by a vote against AUKUS, which was branded "dangerous", at the 2021 party conference, in the name of anti-imperialism and in the pursuit of preventing a new Cold War. The risk is that this excuses the aggression of non-western dictatorships and ignores the rights of the peoples and nations which they threaten.

Another point of view argues for the UK to prioritise working with European partners to broker for de-escalation between Taiwan and China, as an alternative to working with the US.²² While not objectionable *per se*, this approach ignores the fact that the EU is a best divided over Taiwan, and that traditionally has been seen as overly cautious about engagement - so much so that Britain, prior to Brexit, was seen as one of the union's more pro-Taiwan members.²³ Moreover, efforts towards de-escalation over-estimate the UK and allies' ability to influence Beijing's thinking, which regards Taiwan as a core interest and purely domestic concern. During the first Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-55) London attempted to defuse the situation via the United Nations yet found Beijing, then significantly weaker than it is now, "absolutely uncompromising" on matters of China's sovereignty.²⁴ Lastly, allying more with Brussels rather than Washington underplays the centrality of US leadership in preserving the peace in the region through a carefully calibrated deterrent.

A related narrative presents any engagement with Taiwan as a provocation to China. In a recent talk with the Center for China and Globalization, Labour's former First Secretary of State, Lord Mandelson argued that the postponement of an upgraded trade cooperation framework with Taiwan by the European Commission signals that "Brussels does not want to

²¹ Bloomberg, [China Must Realize Taiwan Isn't Hong Kong, Tony Blair Says](#), November 2021

²² Labour Foreign Policy Group, [China's Place in a Progressive British Foreign Policy](#), November 2021

²³ For example the European Commission has been unwilling to negotiate a bilateral free trade agreement with Taiwan until it had done so with China. Prior to Brexit, the UK was one of the few member states to support such an agreement between the EU and Taiwan, see: Reilly, M., Jyun-yi Lee and Chih-mei Luo, 'Brexit and Taiwan: An Opportunity for a New Agreement or Wishful Thinking?', in David W.F. Huang and Michael Reilly, *The Implications of Brexit for East Asia*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp.159-175

²⁴ Tsang, S., *The Cold War's Odd Couple*, (2006), pp.121-139

provoke a breakdown with Beijing over Taiwan...".²⁵ This may well be an accurate explanation for the EU's behaviour, but such thinking is unnecessary or, at the very least, should be. Economic exchange with Taiwan, like cultural and people-to-people, are perfectly permissible within our own One China policy. As such British officials should not allow over-caution to further restrain the UK's dealings with Taiwan. Moreover, fears about upsetting China may be unfounded as they proved to be the case in 2009 when the UK became the first western country to lift visa requirements for short-term visitors from Taiwan. This move did not lead to a deterioration in relations between London and Beijing.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE CROSS-STRAIT CONUNDRUM

Predictions about a coming crisis across the Strait are currently in abundance. There are understandable reasons for this. The desires of the current Beijing Government and the Taiwanese people are irreconcilable, and long term trends, chiefly China's growing military capabilities, make maintaining the status quo increasingly precarious. However, there is a tendency for some politicians and commentators to unnecessarily sound the alarm bells of war, in response to PLA incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ or to events farther afield such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This has been followed by calls for the British Government to make grandiose commitments which lack credibility. While Britain should consider how it can bolster the deterrence against a Chinese annexation of Taiwan, it's contribution is unlikely to be decisive.

Aside from Taiwan, whose combination of restraint and resilience is essential in maintaining the status quo, it is the actions of the US and China which will determine whether there will be cross-Strait armed conflict. In assessing the prospects of China militarily invading Taiwan we have to consider both their capabilities and intentions. While the ability of Washington to deter aggression depends on its capacity to respond and its ability to signal to Beijing that it has the will to.

2.1 Modernising the PLA

The military balance across the Taiwan Strait has unquestionably shifted in China's favour, and ongoing modernisation of the PLA will see advantages over Taiwan's military continue to grow. PLA anti-access capabilities will also develop, which could be used against intervening US forces. A China capable of successfully invading Taiwan would fundamentally change the dynamics of cross-Strait relations - this was not the case the last time a crisis erupted, in the mid-1990s. The questions many are asking are: can China, and if not when could China, make a successful invasion?

Oriana Skylar Mastro, a specialist on Chinese military and security policy, notes the presence of military advisors around Xi who have increasing confidence that China can "regain" Taiwan.²⁶ However, documents published by both Taiwan's and the US' defence ministries do not share this assessment. Both reports detail a variety of options at the PLA's disposal from missile strikes to blockages. To quote from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense: "at present, the PLA is capable of performing local joint blockade against our critical harbors, airports, and outbound flight routes, to cut off our air and sea lines of communication and impact the flow of our military supplies and logistic resources as well as our sustainability for operations."²⁷

²⁵ Center for China and Globalization, [China-Europe relations in an increasingly cold world: risks and opportunities for global businesses \(26:00\)](#), November 2021

²⁶ Mastro, O.S., [The Taiwan Temptation: Why Beijing Might Resort to Force](#), July/August 2021

²⁷ Ministry of National Defense (Taiwan), [ROC National Defense Report 2021](#), October 2021, p.44

Moreover, on the question of a large-scale amphibious invasion of the main island of Taiwan, the Pentagon has repeated its 2020 assertion that such a move would “strain [the] PRC’s armed forces” and notes the accompanying challenges they would face.²⁸ However, their recent annual report also acknowledges that China currently has the capabilities of taking the off-shore islands of Matsu and Jinmen, and “continues to make modest gains in amphibious warfare”.²⁹

Relevant to this is Xi’s new 2027 milestone for PLA modernisation which was announced in October 2021. If realised this would, in the words of the Pentagon’s report, “provide Beijing with more credible military options in a Taiwan contingency.”³⁰ Moreover, it notes that PRC media, citing a military source, have connected the PLA’s 2027 goals with the development of capabilities to counter the US military in the Indo-Pacific, and compel Taiwan’s leadership to the negotiation table. This six-year time frame appears to be taken seriously by a number of senior US military officials. However, although the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff agrees with this assessment, he has stressed that capabilities are not the same as intent. In October 2021, Taiwan’s Minister of National Defense Chiu Kuo-cheng gave his own more urgent assessment, stating that China will be capable of mounting a full scale invasion by 2025.³¹

Even as China’s capabilities strengthen, there are still challenges and risks associated with an invasion of Taiwan. As a recent Taiwan’s Ministry of Defense report, *seen by Reuters*, for Taiwanese legislators, notes the Strait, which is 100 miles wide, makes landing and supplying of troops across the Strait as particularly difficult.³² This is in addition to the complexities of urban warfare and counterinsurgency.

2.2 Fulfilling Xi’s China dream

The balance of power is not destiny. If the PLA launches an invasion of Taiwan it will be because political leaders in Beijing have decided to. Therefore, any assessment of the likelihood of war has to consider the priorities of Xi and his inner circle, priorities and their ability to assess risk and willingness to take it.

This should be done, as Michael Cole argues, with a heavy amount of humility. We cannot read the mind of Xi and the decision making process in Beijing is opaque at the best of times. We should also recognise the limitations of the evidence available.³³ As a general rule, those who argue the chances of Xi starting a conflict are low tend to focus on his public cross-straits pronouncements; while less sanguine analysts point to the General Secretary’s more assertive foreign policy agenda and his accumulation of power at home.

Arguably, the former could be accused of being too narrowly focused and perhaps even taking Xi too much at his word. Yet their detailed analysis of his speeches and their use of history to place his remarks in context proves persuasive. Bonnie Glaser, a leading voice for this school of thought, notes that Xi has not only not devoted great attention to Taiwan in his public

²⁸ Department of Defense (USA), [Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China](#), November 2021, p.117

²⁹ Ibid, pp.117,120

³⁰ Ibid, p.1

³¹ Focus Taiwan, [China capable of full scale Taiwan invasion by 2025: Defense minister](#), October 2021

³² Reuters, [Taiwan says confident Chinese invasion would be very hard](#), December 2021

³³ Cole, J.M., [Taiwan Deserves Clear-Eyed Assessments of the Potential for War](#), July 2021

pronouncements but that he has not deviated from his predecessors.³⁴ This is despite him ditching the cautious ‘hide and bide’ strategy which had governed China’s interactions with the rest of the world since Deng Xiaoping.

All Chinese leaders, these scholars correctly point out, have insisted that there is One China and Taiwan will be “reunified” with the mainland. Xi is no different in this respect. Nor has Xi openly abandoned his predecessor’s approach of publicly calling for peaceful reunification. The fact that he has not ruled out the use of military force also should not be presented as a break from convention. In 2005, the National People’s Congress passed the Anti-Secession Law which formalised the use of “non-peaceful” to resolve the situation.³⁵

Xi has, however, made a few comments which have rightly caused concern. In 2019, repeating remarks made in 2013, he said that political differences across the Strait should not be “passed down from one generation to the next” and tied this goal to his overarching ambition to rejuvenate the Chinese nation.³⁶ The question is to what extent these statements indicate an impatience to alter the status quo. The scholars arguing that conflict is low probability would highlight the continuities outlined above to show that this impatience does not appear to be escalating. They, as Richard C. Bush has written, would also argue that Xi has been careful not to state a hard deadline even though 2049, the year in which the CCP will fulfil the China Dream, seems to be implicit.³⁷

Those analysts who portray such remarks as more ominous point to other actions taken by Xi which demonstrate his willingness to exert power to uphold China’s sovereignty, often in the face of western criticism. Such behaviour could be a harbinger for future Taiwan policy. Yet such analysis must be caveated. The high risks and costs associated with an invasion of Taiwan make it incomparable with many other situations Xi has faced, including Hong Kong.

It is worth reiterating that Hong Kong had been under Chinese sovereignty since 1997. Crushing dissent in the territory carried none of the military risks of failure associated with an invasion of Taiwan. Moreover, serious casualties and deaths were never a prospect in Hong Kong and, to a lesser extent, neither were serious economic repercussions.

Even if Xi was impatient to take Taiwan, he would, assuming he was a rational actor, still have to consider whether the economic costs of confrontation with the world’s leading superpower are worthwhile. This would undermine a core element of Xi’s China Dream. Such failings could threaten his leadership and legacy. Moreover, should the PLA fail, the legitimacy of the CCP would be challenged. It is also worth mentioning a point made by Britain’s former *de facto* ambassador to Taiwan, Michael Reilly, that an invasion in itself would be an admission of failure given that for decades the CCP have told the Chinese people that those on the other side of the strait are their “compatriots”.³⁸

³⁴ Glaser, B.S. and Matthew P. Funaiole, [China’s Provocations Around Taiwan Aren’t a Crisis](#), May 2021

³⁵ Embassy of PRC in the USA, [Anti-Secession Law](#), March 2005

³⁶ Xi, J.P, [Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China’s Peaceful Reunification](#), January 2019

³⁷ Bush, R.C., [From Persuasion to Coercion: Beijing’s Approach to Taiwan and Taiwan’s Response](#), November 2019

³⁸ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Oral evidence: Implementing the Integrated Review: Tilt to the Indo-Pacific \(HC 684\)](#), November 2021

Finally, it is worth highlighting the risk of an armed conflict breaking out accidentally following a small scale collision or misfire which escalates. The risk of this increases as Beijing steps up its military manoeuvres around Taiwan.

2.3 Understanding ADIZ activity

The increasing scale and frequency of the PLA's incursions into Taiwan's southwest ADIZ have driven speculation about a looming crisis. These flights serve a military purpose, including training, intelligence gathering, overstressing the Taiwanese military and even salami slicing (accentuating the element of surprise should Beijing ever attack). They are significant as a political tool too³⁹.

Firstly, ADIZ activity should be understood as a means for Beijing to signal its displeasure and deter what it regards as moves towards independence. Manoeuvres have been conducted around the time of actions taken by Taipei which have enhanced its global presence, such as its application to join the CPTPP, and by its friends when they engage in pro-Taiwan activities. For example, in late-2021 PLA sorties flew into the southwest ADIZ following delegations from the US Congress and EU Parliament. Secondly, these moves should be seen as part of a broader effort to undermine the will of the Taiwanese people and to instil in them a feeling that both unification is supposedly inevitable, and resistance futile.

Finally, it should also be noted that some of these manoeuvres may have been conducted with wider regional goals in mind. Analysts have noted that these flights head towards the Bashi Channel, a critical waterway connecting the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁰ Command over this area would help guarantee the safety of Chinese strategic submarines and block the movements of US military assets in the region.

2.4 Is the US shifting towards clarity?

Contrary to misunderstanding in some quarters, the US has no commitment to defend Taiwan. Rather the Taiwan Relations Act, which has governed Washington's approach to Taiwan since 1979, commits the US to maintaining its own capacity to resist a Chinese use of force and to selling Taipei arms for self-defence. Successive administrations have been deliberately ambiguous about whether or not it would deploy such force.

At some points Washington has appeared less ambiguous. For example in 1996 the US sent two aircraft carriers near the Strait in reaction to Beijing firing missiles towards Taiwan. Certain administrations have also been seen as more pro-Taiwan than others. In 2001, early into his first term, President George W. Bush reiterated comments he made during the campaign trail in which he committed to do whatever it took to defend Taiwan, remarks which were later rowed back on.

Joe Biden was one leading voice who criticised George W. Bush's undermining of existing US policy at the time. Given his understanding of the situation and the need for precise language it is surprising that since becoming president, Biden has made several remarks which have brought strategic ambiguity into question. When asked if the US would defend Taiwan, at a public meeting in October 2021, he replied "yes, we have a commitment to do that," and two months before listed Taiwan alongside Japan, South Korea and NATO as "sacred" defence

³⁹ Cole, M.C., [A Primer on China's Aircraft Intrusions into Taiwan's ADIZ](#), October 2021

⁴⁰ Commonwealth Magazine, [Why the Chinese Military Has Increased Activity Near Taiwan](#), November 2011

commitments.⁴¹ On both occasions US officials followed up by stating that there is no change in policy. Thus creating the impression that the US has, to use Biden's phrase from his article criticising Bush, a policy of "ambiguous strategic ambiguity".⁴²

Yet an exclusive focus on these comments would miss broader shifts. The Biden Administration, in the footsteps of its predecessor, has taken deliberate actions to clearly signal a strengthening in the US-Taiwan relationship. This includes: the unprecedented step of inviting the Taiwanese representative to the US to his inauguration, the relaxation of guidance on US officials meeting their Taiwanese counterparts, and, most recently, the inclusion of Taiwan at the Summit for Democracy. The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a Coast Guard Working Group between the US and Taiwan, in March 2021, was also a significant step in enhancing cooperation between both countries.⁴³ Furthermore, senior members of his cabinet have continued to underline the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and warned Beijing that aggressive revisionism on their part would have consequences, all of which provide greater clarity.

Complete clarity, in the form of a defence commitment, has not been given to for two reasons: Firstly, such a change in policy may spark a violent reaction from Beijing. Secondly, this assurance may encourage a future leader in Taiwan to indulge in pro-independence adventurism *à la* mid-2000s Chen Shui-bian.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is far from clear that greater clarity would meaningfully enhance the US's ability to deter. As Oriana Skylar Mastro puts it:

"...the main problem is not US resolve, since Chinese leaders already assume the United States will intervene. What matters to Xi and other top Chinese leaders is whether they think the PLA can prevail even in the face of US intervention. For that reason, successful deterrence requires convincing China that the United States can prevent it from achieving its military objectives in Taiwan..."⁴⁵

3. RECOMMENDATIONS: LABOUR'S APPROACH TO TAIWAN

Labour parliamentarians should push the government to take actions which will tangibly benefit Taiwan by enhancing the country's resilience vis-a-vis China and reducing its international isolation. These priorities make sense given that war does not appear imminent and that even if it was, Britain's role would be, at most, secondary.

This is not an argument against vigilance or for inaction. British officials, both publicly and privately, should consistently remind China of the UK's interest in the preservation of peace and stability across the Strait and urge Beijing to end its campaign of coercion against Taiwan. Moreover, given Britain's ability to rally like-minded countries, as seen in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and human rights abuses in Xinjiang, it could lead diplomatic and economic sanctions in the event of Chinese aggression towards Taiwan. In the military sphere

⁴¹ BBC, [Biden says US will defend Taiwan if China attacks](#), October 2021

⁴² Biden, J.R., [Not So Deft On Taiwan](#), May 2001

⁴³ American Institute in Taiwan, [AIT and TECRO Sign MOU to establish a Coast Guard Working Group](#), March 2021

⁴⁴ During the presidency of Chen Shui-bian (2000-2008) US-Taiwan relations soured as Chen sought, for domestic political reasons, to consolidate Taiwan's independent status via public statements and national referenda. Such moves were seen in Washington as provocative towards Beijing and helpful, especially as the US shifted its focus to fighting the War on Terror in the Middle East. For further details see: Swaine, M.D, "Managing Relations with the United States", in *Presidential Politics in Taiwan: The Administration of Chen Shui-Bian*, eds. Steve M. Goldstein and Julian Chang (Manchester: Eastbridge Books, 2017), 171-201.

⁴⁵ Mastro, O.S., [The Taiwan Temptation](#), July/August 2021

there may be a greater role for the UK to coordinate with the US, Japan and Australia as it tilts to the Indo-Pacific. Alternatively, as one former US official has suggested, Britain could take greater responsibility for European security to ensure that Russia does not take advantage while the US diverts its attention and resources to a Straits crisis.⁴⁶

The following suggestions seek to tackle the problems outlined in the first section, relating to Beijing's squeezing of Taiwan's international space and its use of coercive economic tools. All of these recommendations are compatible with Britain's pre-existing One China Policy. Many of them are done by other countries who also do not have formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. For example New Zealand affords Taiwan's representative offices in the country with some legal status and has, like Singapore, signed a free trade agreement with Taipei. In addition, many liberal democracies support, in principle, Taiwan's participation in international fora. Indeed Beijing itself permitted observer status at the WHA for Taiwan from 2009 to 2015. The fact that it has reversed its position takes us to the second area of concern which may arise from greater interaction with Taiwan.

The case of WHA observer status may lead politicians to wonder whether or not a certain action will upset China. As previously noted, with the lifting of visa restrictions in 2009, this mindset is not very helpful nor is it always warranted. Although not all of the suggestions below are as uncontroversial as this move. Moreover, the recent backlash following the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania makes such concerns more legitimate. However, lessons can be drawn from this. Beijing displayed particular displeasure with the Lithuanian government for choosing the term "Taiwanese" in the title rather than the term "Taipei", which is used by other Taiwanese representative offices around the world. This reflects Beijing's discomfort with steps which imply statehood or seem a forerunner for formal recognition. Therefore, if one was inclined to tread on eggshells, a whole hemp of terminology can be deployed to avoid this impression. Moreover, politicians should stress the practical benefits of interacting with Taiwan and should avoid using Taiwan as a card to play against China (there's no need to rub it into Beijing's noses). For example, (shadow) cabinet-level exchanges can be limited to functional issues such as education, health, environmental protection, and technology. Moreover, these visits do not need huge fanfare and can be present as efforts to address practical problems which are in the UK's interest. They should simply become routine.

Lastly, countries can only be so cautious when interacting with Taiwan. Some steps carry more risk of upsetting China than others. The calculation politicians and governments need to make is how far they are prepared to allow a fellow liberal democracy, whose location in the Indo-Pacific and whose production of semiconductors are so vital to the UK and its allies' interest, to be marginalised and intimidated. Sometimes the right and necessary steps carry a cost.

3.1 Labour should treat Taiwan as a partner, not a problem

As consequential as cross-Strait developments are for the rest of the world, our dealings with Taiwan should not be limited to this issue. Instead Britain should look to Taiwan as a partner who can help solve an array of global challenges through cooperating with and learning from Taiwanese officials, NGOs and civil society.

⁴⁶ Colby, E., [How America can defend Taiwan](#), November 2021

- Encourage the British Office in Taipei to step up its engagements with the Global Cooperation and Training Framework, a US-Japan-Taiwan led platform. As part of this network the UK has already hosted two workshops on disaster relief and public health. Other fields covered in the GCTF which both countries have an interest in, and therefore would be beneficial to explore together, are women's empowerment, energy efficiency, and cybersecurity.
- Encourage the UK Government to continue regular ministerial visits to Taiwan and send, for the first time, a minister from Cabinet-level. The Secretary of State for Health would be an appropriate choice as they could, following the lead of their previous US counterpart who visited in 2020, learn about the country's success in combating Covid-19 through effective contact tracing and quarantines. The Shadow Health team should also look to Taiwan for inspiration.
- Encourage the UK government to learn from Taiwan's handling of Chinese disinformation. Under the leadership of Minister Audrey Tang, Taiwan has gained plaudits for the creative methods it has deployed to counter efforts by Beijing to interfere in Taiwanese politics and elections. British security services could also liaise with their Taiwanese counterparts to better track PRC entities who seek to influence through shadowy financial transactions.
- Labour MPs should meet with Taiwanese politicians and civil society groups as doing so, in a small way, also contributes to easing the country's international isolation. Although the DPP is part of the Liberal International it has amongst its membership and elected officials social democrats. In addition, parliamentarians may wish to engage with Taiwanese trade unions, environmental groups, and, given that Taiwan was the first country in Asia to legalise same-sex marriage, LGBT groups.⁴⁷ To facilitate such dialogues, they could join and use the British-Taiwanese All-Party Parliamentary Group as a platform and also consider establishing their own Labour Friends of Taiwan group.
- Alongside increased cooperation and dialogue Taiwan should be treated more like a partner. To do so the Taipei Representative Office in the UK should be afforded some form of legal status as it currently receives none of the privileges or immunities afforded to other embassies. Likewise, restrictions on high-level Taiwanese officials travelling to the UK could be eased.

3.2 Labour should prioritise Taiwan's ability to participate in international organisations

British ministers have repeatedly reaffirmed their support for Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organisations, for which statehood is not a prerequisite, including the WHA. However, what has not been laid out is concrete steps for achieving this or dealing with the consequences for exclusion.

- Ask the UK Government to outline the steps it is taking to help Taiwan gain entry into international organisation, this includes fulfilling wider goals such as reducing Beijing's influence with such bodies.

⁴⁷ Suggestions for environmental groups include: Taiwan Environmental Protection Union, Citizen of Earth, Wild at Heart Defence Lawyers and Green Citizens Action Alliance. Suggestions for LGBT groups include: Taiwan Equality Campaign and The Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights.

- Encourage the Foreign Office to more proactively respond to Taiwan's exclusion from international organisations and work closely with like-minded countries to produce joint statements. In particular, given that October 2021 marked the fiftieth anniversary of UN General Assembly Resolution 2758, British officials working at the UN should push back against Beijing's attempt to use this resolution to legally justify Taiwan's exclusion from the UN system.
- Ask the UK government to push for Taiwanese representation in multilateral groupings which China is not a member of, and thus unable to veto such moves. The G7, and its array of side meetings, would be suitable forums for Taiwanese civil society and industry leaders to contribute especially as the grouping expands its geographical scope with invites to other Indo-Pacific countries.

3.3 Labour support effort measures to enhance Taiwan's economic resilience

As noted above Beijing has sought to leverage its economic links with Taiwan, in particular by targeting the tourism and agricultural sectors. It has also been successful in excluding Taiwan from regional trade blocs and preventing other countries from signing trade deals with Taiwan.

- If the Conservative Government is successful in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) then the UK should use its position to advocate Taiwan's inclusion. In September 2021, Taiwan formally applied to join the CPTPP. If successful in its bid it is estimated that the Taiwanese economy will grow by 2%, according to Taiwan's National Development Council Minister Kung Ming-hsin.
- Push the UK Government to explore deepening economic and trade cooperation with Taiwan via a bilateral investment agreement and further to this a free trade agreement.

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