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Commentary

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All eyes on Taiwan: Preserving a hard-won liberty, the 2024 elections and beyond

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Introduction

Taiwan, the democratic island nation of 23.5 million people, is today receiving unprecedented levels of attention from the international community. It wasn't always so.

Less than a decade ago, very few people besides academics and Asia specialists within the think tank community were cognizant of what is at stake in the Taiwan Strait. Facing financial challenges, international media organizations needed to trim staff, and oftentimes this meant the reduction, or outright closure, of their Taipei bureaus and relocation of their staff elsewhere. Foreign diplomats, meanwhile, rarely ranked Taiwan at the top of their list of preferred postings abroad and often regarded deployment to China as a means to secure the experience they needed to boost their careers.

This has all changed. Taiwan's enviable handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ongoing disruptions to global supply chains and the Asian tiger's positioning as *the* key actor in the semiconductor industry, have engendered tremendous interest in – and concern over – Taiwan.

The fact that Taiwan is one of the most vibrant and consolidated democracies on the planet was never enough to focus minds abroad on why it is essential that the island nation ward off annexation by the People's Republic of China (PRC). War in Ukraine, where deterrence failed and an ultra-personalistic authoritarian leader did the unthinkable by launching as devastating war of conquest against a sovereign neighbour, has compelled a reassessment of Taiwan's value to the global system; many now realize that war in the Taiwan Strait would result in trillions of dollars in losses in global trade and a highly disruptive ripple effect on economies worldwide.

The other reason why the international community is now paying the attention that Taiwan deserves is the PRC itself. Under Xi Jinping, the world's other ultra-personalistic authoritarian leader, China has grown increasingly belligerent toward Taiwan over the latter's defiant resistance to annexation. In the past year, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has dramatically scaled up its level of activity around Taiwan, with thousands of intrusions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and violations of a tacit "median line" in the Taiwan Strait that, for decades, had played a role in reducing the risk of accidents and escalation. As this happens, Beijing has continued to invest heavily in the modernization of its armed forces and has conducted several live-fire exercises – the most recent sparked by then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 and President Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with Pelosi's successor, Kevin McCarthy, in April this year – "simulating" an invasion of Taiwan.

Fears of war in the Taiwan Strait have been fueled by speculation in some circles that Beijing's decision to resort to force to annex Taiwan could occur in 2027, or as early as 2025. Although there is no known intelligence proving that the Xi and his Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have set such a deadline for invasion (2027 is the year by which Xi has ordered the PLA to have *sufficient capabilities* to take action should it be ordered to do so), sustained Chinese military activity around Taiwan, added to extensive media coverage that often fails to resist the temptation of sensationalism, have contributed to a new sense of crisis in the region.

Taiwan's 2024 general elections

It is in this context that Taiwan will hold its presidential election in January 2024, an election that, given the stakes, will inevitably receive great coverage by international media, whose presence in recent years has grown by leaps due in large part to Beijing's refusal to renew visas for journalists it deems to have reported "unfairly" on an increasingly repressive – and paranoid – PRC. Due to constitutional limits, President Tsai of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) will not be able to seek re-election to a third consecutive term. Instead, her current vice president, William Lai, will run on the DPP ticket. Thus far, Lai has hewed closely to President Tsai's cross-Strait policy, one that seeks to preserve the "status quo" (and therefore de facto independent status for Taiwan under its official name the Republic of China) while portraying the election as a battle between democracy and authoritarianism.

Taiwan's main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), has yet to announce its candidate and is expected to do so on May 17 at the earliest. Since its defeat in the 2016 election, which followed eight years of KMT rule under a more China-amenable Ma Ying-jeou, the KMT has struggled to regain its footing and to propose an alternative to the DPP that has sufficient appeal with the Taiwanese public. In the 2016 election, it initially picked a candidate who had called for even closer engagement with China, only to switch her out at the eleventh hour, leaving her replacement candidate, current party chairman Eric Chu, little time to reorient the party's presidential campaign.

Tsai's election in 2016 was a turning point in cross-Strait relations, when Beijing concluded that incentives and "goodwill," which it had extended aplenty during the Ma years (2008-2016), were insufficient to sway the Taiwanese, who, when they perceived that relations had gotten too close, took action by launching the Sunflower Movement's occupation of the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, in March 2014. From then on, and notwithstanding President Tsai's extension of an olive branch to Beijing, the Chinese regime, concluding that Tsai had "failed her test," embarked on a punitive policy toward Taiwan through targeted economic sanctions, cognitive warfare, and greater reliance on military intimidation.

Xi, the architect of all this, had little patience for the more evolutionary approach of his predecessors. Under him, China – or the CCP, to be more precise – had grown more ideological, self-assured and, ironically, also more paranoid. Having shut the door on dialogue with Taiwan, which insisted on negotiations

as equals, Beijing endeavored to break the will of the Taiwanese, erode their support for and belief in democracy, and foster a sense of inevitability. After four years of such belligerence, the Chinese side ostensibly hoped that President Tsai's main opponent in the 2020 presidential elections, the populist Han Kuo-yu, would succeed in ensuring that Tsai would be limited to a single four-year term in office.

Instead, and assisted by the CCP's crackdown in Hong Kong, not only did Taiwanese voters re-elect Tsai to a second term, but they did so with a record-breaking number of votes, an outcome that, for Beijing, must have highlighted the many shortcomings of its Taiwan policy. Although the CCP has not abandoned altogether non-kinetic efforts to "soften" and "balkanize" Taiwan through co-optation and other "grey zone" measures, and while the Chinese leadership continues to regurgitate the notion that it is committed to "peaceful unification," there are signs of an emerging view, if not consensus just yet, in Beijing that ultimately Taiwan's annexation will have to be accomplished by force (in part because of the perception that the KMT itself isn't committed to unification).

1996 all over again

With Ukraine serving as a stern reminder that we cannot bank on rational decision-making when one's opponent is someone like Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping, Taiwan's opposition parties are catalyzing the threat of Chinese aggression for electoral purposes. As with the 1996 presidential elections – the year when, for the first time, the Taiwanese were given the ability to select their president at the polls – the shadow of the Chinese military looms over Taiwan, and the parties which oppose the Taiwan-centric policies of their main opponent have no compunction in using fear – fear of military conflict – to influence voters' decisions. (Taiwanese politics are invariably complex: the pro-Taiwan candidate in the 1996 elections, Lee Teng-hui, ran on the KMT ticket and his election was in part attributed to the refusal of the Taiwanese people to be coerced by Beijing, which admittedly did not have the military capabilities it has today.)

This time around, the KMT's narrative (and to a large extent that of the Taiwan People's Party, whose chairman, former Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je, will join the contest for the presidency) is that a vote for the DPP in 2024 will be tantamount to sending one's children to the slaughterhouse. Terry Gou, the

founder of Foxconn/Hon Hai who is seeking the KMT's nomination, has sought to position himself as a pragmatic candidate who can avoid war in the Taiwan Strait by de-emphasizing politics (and democracy) and instead focusing more on economic development (Gou has also stated that arms purchases are a waste of money). Others in his circle, meanwhile, have argued that given the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan has no choice but to agree to negotiate with Beijing to ensure "peace" – in other words, to capitulate.

There are, however, problems with this approach.

Firstly, given the CCP's worldview, it is nearly impossible that Beijing would approach such negotiations as a trade-in between equals. Taipei would inevitably be the lesser party in negotiations and the side that would have to make the greatest concessions. Such concessions would entail the loss of liberties and freedoms that generations of Taiwanese people spilled blood and sweat to achieve after half a century of authoritarian rule under the KMT's White Terror. This giving away of hard-earned liberties would perforce have to be done over the heads of the Taiwanese people, meaning that millions of them would refuse to subjugate themselves to its ramifications. Peace thus achieved, therefore, would be illusory and result in years of pacification and crackdown on a population that refuses to subjugate itself to an external regime.

Proponents of a negotiated "peace" with Beijing should be reminded that *peace is not merely the absence of war, that conflict can exist below the threshold of military force.* They should also be reminded of the nature of the CCP under Xi, which has little appetite for concessions and is instead maximalist in its worldview. As such, and as the deplorable fate of Hong Kong has made clear, any "peace" deal with Beijing would be the first step toward outright capitulation, and with that a gradual further erosion of freedoms and liberties, until the reason why Taiwan is anathema to the CCP – its very existence as a democratic alternative – is extinguished.

Knowing what we know about longstanding attitudes of Taiwanese and their attachment to their democracy, it is difficult to imagine that they would allow a government to sacrifice their freedoms in such a manner – not to mention the fact that, though this often isn't fully acknowledged, both supporters of Taiwanese independence and those from the KMT who are proud citizens of the ROC, are united in their refusal to be governed by the PRC, whose system of governance is diametrically opposed to the values that define Taiwan/the Republic of China today.

A strategy for Taiwan's future

What, then, can Taiwan do if the choice appears to be a binary one between capitulation and war? In the short term, its strategy, along with that of its allies within the international community, should be to bolster its deterrence. This has a military component – augmenting Taiwan's overall defense capabilities, and prepositioning U.S. and allied force elements close enough to the Taiwan Strait to ensure early intervention, combined with clearer signals of commitment to Taiwan's defense – as well as a non-military one, including warnings that an attack on Taiwan would result in crippling sanctions against the Chinese economy. The aim – though admittedly, due to the nature of the regime in Beijing, has no guarantee of success – should be to influence Beijing's calculations as it weighs the costs and benefits of this course of action.

Beyond deterrence, much greater energy should be put into convincing the Chinese public that it isn't in their interest for war to occur in the Taiwan Strait. Using strategic narrative efforts, public diplomacy and psychological warfare, the aim should be to widen the gap between the CCP's narrative on Taiwan – (Taiwan as a "core" interest, annexation as a essential element of the "great rejuvenation" of China, and war as an unavoidable consequence of Taiwanese recalcitrance) – and the aspirations of the Chinese people. Although it is nearly impossible to conduct opinion polls on sensitive issues in a closed system such as the PRC's, it is doubtful that the 1.4 billion ordinary Chinese are obsessed about the need to "reunify" Taiwan, or that they would be willing to sacrifice their future, and that of their children and grandchildren, for the sake of annexing Taiwan. The Chinese people should be left with no doubt that CCP adventurism and its frivolous ambitions over Taiwan would very likely result in thousands, if not tens of thousands, of their sons and daughters – most of them the single children given the CCP's decades of enforcing a one-child policy – ending up at the bottom of the Taiwan Strait, not to mention countless others killed or maimed in subsequent efforts to pacify Taiwanese resistance in very difficult terrain.

War over Taiwan would have a tremendous impact on China's international reputation, with serious ramifications for its ability to engage in business as usual with members of the international community. All of this would have serious consequences for China's economic development, at a time when its economy enters a more challenging phase coupled with a rapidly aging population and serious challenges posed by environmental degradation. Despite decades of

indoctrination whose effects are hardly failsafe, the Chinese people are not unlike people the world over: parents who want a better future for their sons and daughters, and a good and productive life. Consequently, Taiwan and its allies should put much greater emphasis on connecting with the Chinese people to let them know that the CCP's ideology poses the greatest threat to their noble aspirations and the better angels of their nature.

In the wake of China's controversial zero-covid policy and the willingness of the Chinese public to criticize Xi and the CCP, as well as skepticism over the wisdom of allowing Xi to grant himself a third term, there is also good reason to believe that while Xi has firm control over the party, his image with the Chinese public has been tarnished, which leaves him in a weakened position – hence the ongoing tightening of restrictions and controls within China.

Conclusion

As Ukraine's travails have made clear, there is no guarantee that deterrence will work, and the Taiwanese must also recognize that China's non-use of force in past decades is no guarantee that it will not eventually make recourse to such means in future, and that a regime's ultimate decision to use force stems from the coincidence of *intent plus capabilities*. Even though the CCP may have intended to use force all along, it simply did not have the capabilities to do so.

Still, this does not mean that the Taiwanese should conclude that resistance is futile and that forces greater than they will determine their future. Nothing is inevitable, and between capitulation and war the Taiwanese have agency and room to decide their own fate. Besides deterrence, which buys time, and if maintained long enough could allow for the emergence of more enlightened leadership in Beijing, Taiwan and its partners must also start exploring more unconventional means by which to counter the CCP's narrative and the grip the party has on the Chinese population.

It may well be that Xi's greatest weakness, his fatal foible, lies with the Chinese people. MLI

About the author

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In his previous roles in Taiwan, he was co-founder and editor-at-large for the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy's "Taiwan Democracy Bulletin," deputy coordinator for the Forum 2000/International Coalition for Democratic Renewal's China Working Group, chief editor of Taiwan Sentinel, senior staff at the Thinking Taiwan Foundation, a think tank founded by Tsai Ing-wen, currently the president of Taiwan, and deputy news chief at the Taipei Times.

Prior to relocating to Taiwan in 2005, he was an intelligence officer with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), working primarily on the Middle East and threat assessment. He has a master's degree in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada, the International Diploma in Humanitarian Assistance (IDHA) from the Center for International Health and Cooperation, and the CX-77 diploma in peacekeeping from the Lester B. Pearson International Peacekeeping Center.

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