

# Taiwan and the “New Cold War”\*

**James Lee**

Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica  
E-mail: [jamesytlee@gate.sinica.edu.tw](mailto:jamesytlee@gate.sinica.edu.tw)

## Abstract

The concept of the “new Cold War” has featured prominently in recent debates about the present and future of U.S.-China relations. Meanwhile, tensions in the Taiwan Strait have sparked considerable debate on the United States’ relationship with Taiwan. There have not, however, been efforts to integrate these two debates to consider whether or not the Cold War analogy applies to great power competition in the Taiwan Strait. This paper

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analyzes the dispute over Taiwan in the Cold War era and the present day, highlighting both similarities and differences. Despite the vast changes in ideology and regime type in Taiwan, important aspects of this issue have remained consistent since 1949. Continuities include Taiwan's concern about abandonment; the United States' concern about entrapment; the United States' neutral position on Taiwan's sovereignty; the United States and Taiwan both positioning Taiwan as the ideological alternative to the PRC; and Beijing spuriously claiming that it has the support of Taiwan's people. Discontinuities also exist, including Taiwan's transition to a liberal democracy; changing national identity among the electorate; the decline in support for One-China; Taiwan's higher political importance for Beijing; the distribution of capabilities in the Taiwan Strait; economic interdependence between the United States, China, and Taiwan; and Taiwan's geoeconomic importance. Based on a comparison of these continuities and discontinuities, this article argues that the risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait is greater now than it was during the Cold War.

**Key Words:** U.S.-Taiwan-China relations, Cold War, great power competition

## I. Introduction

There has been considerable interest in the idea of a “new Cold War”: the claim that contemporary strategic competition between the United States and China is comparable, in its essential features, to the strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union in the decades after the Second World War. Members of the academic and policy communities have offered a range of perspectives on whether or not this is a helpful historical analogy, with some accepting it, some opposing it, and others accepting it with reservations (Bader, 2020; Brands & Gaddis, 2021; T. J. Christensen, 2021; Kaplan, 2019). Meanwhile, there has also been a lively debate on the risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait (Mastro, 2021; Odell et al., 2021). Arguing that the United States’ current policy of strategic ambiguity is not doing enough to deter the People’s Republic of China (PRC) from using force or coercion against Taiwan, Richard Haass and David Sacks (2020) have endorsed a policy of strategic clarity. Bonnie Glaser, on the other hand, favors keeping strategic ambiguity in place (Glaser et al., 2020). Charles Glaser (2015) favors reducing the United States’ support for Taiwan, arguing that the current policy runs a high risk of embroiling the United States in a conflict with the PRC.

To date, these conversations have proceeded on separate tracks: the discussions of the “new Cold War” have not focused on Taiwan, and the discussions of Taiwan have not focused on the “new Cold War.” This essay bridges those debates by examining the similarities and differences between the Cold War and the present era of U.S.-PRC great power competition as they relate to the dispute over Taiwan. Rather than focus on broad areas of comparison in the “new Cold War” analogy writ large (such as the geopolitical role of India), this article focuses on the most salient features of the dispute over Taiwan. A detailed comparison of the two periods provides insight into the validity of the historical analogy, which, in addition to its scholarly value, helps to inform contemporary policy. Whether or not the United States and Taiwan

should revive policies from the Cold War, such as economic containment and a security commitment akin to a Mutual Defense Treaty, depends on whether or not the current situation is in fact a “new Cold War” requiring similar policies for addressing similar strategic challenges.<sup>1</sup>

This essay argues that even though the Cold War analogy is not exact, there are distinct areas of continuity in the triangular relationship between Taipei, Washington, and Beijing in the two eras. Despite the vast differences in ideology, regime type, and leadership, Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek responded and Taiwan under Tsai Ing-wen is responding to the U.S.-PRC rivalry in broadly similar ways; and there are features of U.S. and PRC strategy toward the dispute over Taiwan that have persisted from 1949 to the present day. The continuities are Taiwan’s fear of abandonment, the United States’ fear of entrapment, Taiwan’s geographic importance for U.S. strategic interests, the United States’ neutrality on Taiwan’s political status, Taiwan as the ideological alternative to the PRC, and Beijing spuriously claiming that it has the support of Taiwan’s people. Some of these continuities have reappeared as the United States has adopted a more competitive posture toward the PRC, while other continuities have never disappeared in spite of the changes and fluctuations in the dispute over Taiwan over the course of the last half-century. But the continuities are there, and this essay will highlight them to show how the history of the Cold War can offer insights into contemporary issues.

There are also important differences between the Cold War and the present day. The ones that this essay will focus on are Taiwan’s democracy, changes in national identity among the public in Taiwan, the decline in support for One-China, the distribution of capabilities in the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan’s political importance for Beijing, levels of economic interdependence, and the strategic

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<sup>1</sup> For a cautionary argument against declaring a commitment that would be similar to reviving the Mutual Defense Treaty, see T. J. Christensen et al. (2022).

importance of Taiwan’s semiconductor industry. During the Cold War, the Kuomintang (KMT)–Republic of China (ROC) party-state was as adamant about maintaining One-China as the PRC was, thwarting all attempts by the United States to bring about a “two Chinas” solution to the Chinese Civil War and to pave the way for dual representation of the ROC and the PRC in international organizations (Bush, 2015: 85-123).<sup>2</sup> This aspect of the issue has fundamentally changed (as has the number of states that recognize the ROC).<sup>3</sup> The fact that the current administration in Taiwan does not accept One-China raises the sensitivity of political and military cooperation between the United States and Taiwan. But high levels of economic interdependence between Taipei, Washington, and Beijing significantly raise the cost of war and may serve as restraining factor in Beijing’s calculus. Meanwhile, the extraordinary rise of Taiwan’s semiconductor industry to a position of global pre-eminence has arguably made Taiwan a vital interest for the United

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, “One-China” refers to the position (held by the KMT) that Taiwan and the Mainland are both part of One China. In 1992, Taiwan’s National Unification Council stated that “the two sides of the Taiwan Strait both maintain the principle of ‘One China,’ but there are differences in the meanings invested by the two sides” (Mainland Affairs Information and Research Center, 1992), with Taiwan’s interpretation of “One China” referring to the Republic of China. Therefore, it is correct to say that the KMT accepted the One-China principle at a time when it was defined broadly enough to be compatible with an interpretation that identified the ROC as the “One China” (Chen, 2017: 69-100). But in contemporary political discourse, there has been a tendency to refer to the position that Taiwan and the Mainland are both part of One China as “One China” and to refer to Beijing’s interpretation of “One China” as “One-China principle” (see Mainland Affairs Council [2012] and Mainland [2024]). To avoid creating the misleading impression that the KMT endorses Beijing’s interpretation, this paper adheres to contemporary usage by using “One China” to refer to the position held by the KMT. I thank Yu-Jie Chen, Ja Ian Chong, and Chien-Huei Wu for informing me about contemporary usage.

<sup>3</sup> A current list of Taiwan’s diplomatic partners can be found at Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024b). I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the discontinuity between the Cold War and the present day in terms of the recognition of the ROC and the PRC.

States; this is in distinct contrast to the Cold War era, when Taiwan was regarded as important but not vital.

## II. Continuities

### A. Taiwan's Fear of Abandonment

Taiwan's fears of abandonment date back to the tumultuous months before the Korean War, when the Truman administration publicly ruled out using military force to save the remnants of the Nationalist regime. Secretary of State Dean Acheson pointedly did not include Taiwan (or South Korea) in his description of the United States' "defensive perimeter" during a speech at the National Press Club. Even though the Truman administration did not welcome the fall of Taiwan to the Chinese Communists, it concluded that Taiwan was not strategically important enough to justify U.S. military intervention. The fact that the United States ultimately did intervene after conflict erupted in Korea reflected the domestic politics of mobilizing for the Cold War, and did not reflect a fundamentally new assessment of Taiwan's strategic importance (T. J. Christensen, 1996: 113, 133-137). Min Yong Lee (2011: 404-405) has shown that South Korea's exclusion from the United States' defensive perimeter left a "deeply ingrained fear of abandonment" even as late as the Park Chung Hee era, leading Park to dispatch combat forces to Vietnam in the hope of shoring up U.S. support. A similar concern took root in Taiwan, where the Nationalists, in spite of their deep influence in U.S. politics through the China Lobby, harbored doubts about the United States' commitment. When Chen Cheng (at various times the Premier of the ROC, the Vice President of the ROC, and the Provincial Governor of Taiwan) called for the reorientation of economic policy toward long-term economic development, he emphasized the importance of Taiwan becoming self-reliant by reducing its dependence on the United States (Lee, 2020a: 473).

In the 1950s, Taiwan's fear of abandonment was manifested most clearly in the crises over the offshore islands. The United

States’ willingness to defend Taiwan and Penghu was not in question, especially after the passing of the Formosa Resolution and the ratification of the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1955. The United States’ willingness to defend the offshore islands, however, was very much in doubt. These islands were important for the legitimacy of the Nationalist regime, since they served as a symbolic bridge between Taiwan and mainland China (T. J. Christensen, 1996: 229-233; Taylor, 2011: 472-482, 493-502). They were governed as separate provinces of the ROC, with Quemoy (Jinmen/Kinmen) and Matsu (Mazu) constituting Fujian Province and Yijiangshan and Dachen constituting Zhejiang Province (H. Cheung, 2020a, 2020b). As long as the Nationalists held onto some of the offshore islands, it could claim that the Republic of China was a larger political entity than Taiwan and Penghu. Unlike those islands, Quemoy, Matsu, Yijiangshan, and Dachen had never been ceded to Japan under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, and the United States’ position that the status of Taiwan was undetermined applied only to Taiwan and Penghu, and not to the offshore islands (Garver, 1997: 114-115). Since the legitimacy of the Nationalist regime was based on the claim that the Government of the Republic of China was the sole legal government of all of China (and that the ROC was not a government in exile, or a foreign regime that had seized control of Taiwan), the KMT considered it vital for the ROC government to maintain control of the offshores so that it could show that the territory under its control was not limited to Taiwan and Penghu only (T. J. Christensen, 1996: 229-233; Taylor, 2011: 472-482, 493-502).

The United States often pressured the Nationalists to abandon or evacuate from the offshores. U.S. officials were alarmed at the enormous concentration of Nationalist forces (which in 1957 reached as many as 100,000 soldiers), which were there not only to defend the islets from Communist attack but also to launch raids against the mainland, collect intelligence, and engage in what John Garver (1997: 115-117, 123-139) calls “limited-offensive actions”

against targets on the southeastern coast of China. After the People's Liberation Army (PLA) captured Yijiangshan in 1955, the Eisenhower administration offered to defend Quemoy and Matsu in exchange for a Nationalist withdrawal from Dachen; the Nationalists completed the withdrawal even though the United States quickly walked back from its promise of a commitment, but the Nationalists held on to Quemoy and Matsu tenaciously (Taylor, 2011: 473-482). During the crises, the Eisenhower administration even considered using tactical nuclear weapons to take out airfields in the Chinese mainland that the PLA was using to launch attacks against the offshores, but ultimately the United States decided to adopt a policy of strategic ambiguity toward Quemoy and Matsu even as it adopted strategic clarity toward Taiwan. This policy was formalized in the Mutual Defense Treaty, which was accompanied by a secret exchange of notes saying that the use of force in the Taiwan Strait would be subject to mutual agreement between the United States and the ROC (Garver, 1997: 57-59; Tucker, 2005: 188-191). The tensions over the offshore islands, along with the debates about the United Nations representation in the 1950s and 1960s, led Chiang Kai-shek to suspect that the United States was intent on pursuing a policy of "two Chinas" (Bush, 2015: 85-123).

Taipei began to fear that the United States might abandon even Taiwan and Penghu during U.S.-PRC rapprochement in the 1970s. In November 1969, the Nixon administration informed the ROC government that the United States would soon cease to patrol the Taiwan Strait, leading to concern in Taipei about the administration's support for Taiwan's security (Chang, 2005). Wary of the potential backlash in the U.S. Congress, where there were many supporters of the Nationalist regime, Nixon kept members of the China Lobby and officials from Taiwan informed about his administration's policies toward the Chinese Communists (Mann, 1999: 22). When Chiang Ching-kuo (then the Vice Premier) visited Washington in April 1970, Nixon assured him in a private meeting that the ongoing discussions with the Chinese Communists in



Warsaw would not come at the expense of Taiwan. Later during the visit, Chiang met with Henry Kissinger at Blair House, though there is no direct evidence of what they discussed (Taylor, 2011: 551-552). From the perspective of the development of the One-China policy, the most important U.S. attempts to assuage Taiwan’s fears came in the form of the “Six Assurances” of 1982; the United States:

- (1) has not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan;
- (2) has not agreed to consult with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan;
- (3) will not play any mediation role between Taipei and Beijing;
- (4) has not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act;
- (5) has not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan;
- (6) will not exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC. (Schultz, 2022. Numbers and semicolons are added by the author)

Along with the Taiwan Relations Act, the Six Assurances were meant to assuage the concern that the United States’ Joint Communiqués with the PRC would lead to pressure on Taiwan to negotiate a settlement with Beijing.

Taipei’s concerns about abandonment have persisted through the present day. Raymond Kuo (2021) has argued that those concerns have reflected the United States’ policy of strategic ambiguity, under which the United States has not declared if (or under what conditions) it would intervene in Taiwan’s defense in the event of a PRC attack. Just like how the Nationalists feared U.S. abandonment when the United States declined to state a commitment to defend the offshore islands in the 1950s, the United States ambiguity toward the defense of the main island of Taiwan has suggested the possibility that the United States might abandon Taiwan in the event of a cross-strait conflict. Steven Goldstein (2016) has argued that Taiwan has been “Asia’s orphan” ever since

the United States switched recognition from the ROC to the PRC in 1979.

In recent years, the concerns about abandonment came to the fore shortly after 2016, when Trump seemed to suggest that the One-China policy was open to negotiation. “I fully understand the ‘one China’ policy,” he said, “but I don’t know why we have to be bound by a ‘one China’ policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade” (as cited in Bohan & Brunnstrom, 2016). Although the immediate concern was that the United States might formally recognize Taiwan or support Taiwan’s independence, there was also a concern that Trump was using Taiwan as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Beijing. Trump’s remarks motivated Richard Bush, the former Chairman and Managing Director of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), to publish an open letter on the Brookings Institution website in which he stated that Taiwan “is not a ‘tradeable good’” and that “to enter into negotiations with China on the One-China policy is to create a zone of uncertainty that puts Taiwan at risk” (Bush, 2016). During the Biden administration, Beijing has tried to exploit Taiwan’s fear of abandonment by claiming that there is a parallel between the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan, as well as the United States’ decision not to intervene directly in the defense of Ukraine, and what the United States would do in the event of a crisis with the PRC over Taiwan (Chung, 2021; Dotson, 2023; Herzinger, 2021). According to the American Portrait survey by Academia Sinica, the proportion of respondents expressing a positive belief in U.S. credibility declined from 45.3% to 34% between September 2021 and November 2022, corresponding to the periods before and after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine (Lee et al., 2023). Because of the uncertainty surrounding the United States’ intervention in the event of a cross-strait conflict, Taiwan’s fear of abandonment is likely to persist.

## B. The United States’ Fear of Entrapment

The United States’ resistance to adopting strategic clarity is another area of continuity between the Cold War and the present day (Tucker, 2005). In the early years after the retreat to Taiwan, the KMT was in a heightened state of readiness for a counteroffensive against mainland China, but both the KMT and the United States knew that there was no prospect that a Nationalist counteroffensive could succeed without the support of the United States (Bush, 2015: 96-97; Cha, 2016; T. J. Christensen, 2011: 137-138; Garver, 1997: 73-75; Taylor, 2011: 496-497). The United States’ concern about entrapment was most evident during the First and Second Taiwan Straits Crises, when there was an alarming prospect that the Nationalists’ insistence on maintaining control of the offshore islands might embroil the United States in general war with the Communist bloc. Wary of entrapment, the Eisenhower administration refused to include the offshores in the territorial scope of the Mutual Defense Treaty and insisted on a secret exchange of notes that stipulated that the use of force in the Taiwan Strait would be subject to joint agreement. The policy of strategic ambiguity originated in the United States’ fear of entrapment and the resulting strategy of “dual deterrence” (Garver, 1997: 57-59; Tucker, 2005: 189-190). This strategy seemed to have succeeded by the 1960s: while observing that “most GRC [Government of the Republic of China] leaders now believe that their best chance of regaining the mainland would come in the wake of a war between the US and Communist China” (U.S. Department of State, 1996), a National Intelligence Estimate from 1961 concluded that “there is only a remote chance of their trying to provoke such a war” (U.S. Department of State, 1996).

The United States’ fears of entrapment came to the fore again after the Cold War, but this time in the context of Taiwanese nationalism. The KMT had long since abandoned its hopes of returning to mainland China, but with Taiwan’s transition to a liberal democracy came a rise in support for independence (or, more

accurately, a far greater freedom to express support for independence, which had been suppressed during the authoritarian era). Although the United States welcomed the end of martial law, the prospect of Taiwan moving toward independence raised challenges for U.S. strategy. During the presidencies of Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, who both made pointed references to Taiwan's separate status from mainland China, the United States pursued dual deterrence in order to prevent either side of the Strait from attempting to unilaterally change the status quo (Bush, 2017: 22; Wright, 2004). After the Chen administration endorsed a referendum on joining the United Nations as "Taiwan" (rather than the "Republic of China"), Thomas Christensen, then the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, delivered a speech to the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council in 2007 in which he said:

But as much as we oppose Beijing's threat to use force, we also take it seriously, and Taipei cannot afford to do otherwise. It is for this reason that Taiwan's security is inextricably linked to the avoidance of needlessly provocative behavior. This does not mean that Taipei should or can be passive in the face of PRC pressure. But it means that responsible leadership in Taipei has to anticipate potential Chinese red lines and reactions and avoid unnecessary and unproductive provocations. (T. J. Christensen, 2007)

To address U.S. fears of entrapment, the Tsai administration has emphasized pragmatism and support for the status quo. In a recent opinion piece in *Foreign Affairs*, Tsai (2021) wrote that "our position on cross-strait relations remains constant: Taiwan will not bend to pressure, but nor will it turn adventurist, even when it accumulates support from the international community." Although the Tsai administration's actions have been consistent with this position, the history of the tensions during the Chen administration have informed a cautious approach toward Taiwan policy among members of the U.S. policy community. Addressing the ongoing

debate on strategic ambiguity, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Task Force on U.S.-Taiwan relations has argued that “the current government in Taipei merits American confidence to justify a possible change in declaratory policy, but there is no guarantee where future governments may take cross-strait relations” (Green et al., 2020). The possibility of U.S. entrapment has been a persistent theme in U.S.-Taiwan relations since 1949.

### C. The Geographic Importance of Taiwan for U.S. Strategic Interests

Taiwan’s geographic importance for the United States’ strategic interests has been a consistent theme of U.S.-Taiwan relations since 1949. In 1948, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concluded that the fall of Taiwan to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would be “seriously unfavorable” for U.S. interests, both in the positive sense of how a non-Communist government in Taiwan could support U.S. strategy and in the negative sense of how the CCP could use Taiwan to project power in the region. Regarding Taiwan’s geographic importance in the positive sense, the JCS highlighted “the potential value to the United States of Formosa as a wartime base capable of use for staging of troops, strategic air operations and control of adjacent shipping routes” (Souers, 1974). Regarding Taiwan’s geographic importance in the negative sense, they concluded that “unfriendly control of Formosa and its immediately adjacent islands would be of even greater strategic significance” (Souers, 1974), because the Communist bloc would have the “capability of dominating to his advantage and our disadvantage the sea routes between Japan and the Malay area, together with a greatly improved enemy capability of extending his control to the Ryukyus and the Philippines” (Souers, 1974).<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> The JCS (December 1, 1948) memorandum is enclosed in Souers (1974).

geographic factor did not make Taiwan a vital U.S. interest, however. The Joint Chief's assessment indicated that Taiwan was important for the United States because it was important for other countries in the region, especially Japan and the Philippines. This implies that geography alone did not make Taiwan a first-order U.S. interest. Prior to the Korean War, the Truman administration concluded that Taiwan was not strategically important enough to justify U.S. military intervention, and that assessment did not fundamentally change even though the United States did intervene because of the domestic politics of mobilization for the Cold War (T. J. Christensen, 1996: 138-193). The Formosa Resolution of 1955 stated that "the secure possession by friendly governments of the Western Pacific Island chain, of which Formosa is a part, is essential to the vital interests of the United States and all friendly nations in or bordering upon the Pacific Ocean" (United States Congress, 1986).<sup>5</sup> But that was a reference to the vital importance of the whole first island chain, which included Japan and the Philippines; Taiwan was only a part of the first island chain, so the Formosa Resolution did not classify Taiwan itself as a vital interest. The United States considered Taiwan to be important, but not vital.

One dissenting view was that of General Douglas MacArthur, who believed that Taiwan was strategically vital on the basis of its geography alone. In the weeks before the outbreak of the Korean War, MacArthur argued in a memorandum that "the strategic interests of the United States will be in serious jeopardy if Formosa is allowed to be dominated by a power hostile to the United States" (as cited in Jessup, 1976). His reasoning was that "Formosa in the hands of the Communists can be compared to an unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender"(as cited in Jessup, 1976) for projecting Communist power into the Pacific and preventing the United States from projecting power into continental Asia. The JCS

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Professor Cheng-Yi Lin for pointing out this reference in the Formosa Resolution.

had made similar points in 1948, but MacArthur concluded that these factors made Taiwan a vital interest that justified U.S. military intervention in the defense of the island. He urged the Truman administration to authorize “a survey of the military, economic and political requirements to prevent the domination of Formosa by a Communist power” (as cited in Jessup, 1976).

Similar assessments of the importance of Taiwan’s geography have been made recently in reference to the first island chain. In his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in December, Ely Ratner, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, stated:

As you know, Taiwan is located at a critical node within the first island chain, anchoring a network of U.S. allies and partners—stretching from the Japanese archipelago down to the Philippines and into the South China Sea—that is critical to the region’s security and critical to the defense of vital U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific. (Ratner, 2021)

Ratner’s description of Taiwan’s geographic importance is not entirely clear about whether he considers Taiwan itself to be vital or if, like the JCS in 1948, he considers Taiwan’s importance to be derivative of first-order priorities. Other U.S. assessments of Taiwan’s importance suggest that Taiwan’s geography alone makes it a second-order priority. Referring to the first island chain as a “critical defense perimeter,” Mike Gallagher (R-WI) has argued that “failing to defend Taiwan would threaten Washington’s most important allies in Asia as well as its own territory in the Pacific, including more than 1.5 million Americans in Hawaii and Guam” (Gallagher, 2022). This implies that Taiwan is not one of the United States’ most important allies in Asia. But Taiwan’s importance is not limited to its geography. The rise of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) has arguably elevated Taiwan’s importance to the level of a vital U.S. interest, and this is a major difference from the Cold War period that a subsequent section will discuss.

## D. The United States' Neutrality on Taiwan's Sovereignty

Another continuing theme in U.S. strategy toward the dispute over Taiwan is the United States' position that the status of Taiwan is undetermined. First enunciated by President Truman on June 27, 1950, this neutral position on Taiwan's sovereignty has been a central feature of the United States' efforts to safeguard Taiwan's security without seeming to support Taiwan's independence. In the original formulation, Truman said that "the determination of the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations" (Truman, 1976). In a subsequent letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations, U.S. Ambassador Warren Austin elaborated on the explanation for the new U.S. position:

The action of the United States was expressly stated to be without prejudice to the future political settlement of the status of the island. The actual status of the island is that it is territory taken from Japan by the victory of the Allied forces in the Pacific. Like other such territories, its legal status cannot be fixed until there is international action to determine its future. The Chinese Government was asked by the Allies to take the surrender of the Japanese forces on the island. That is the reason the Chinese are there now. (Truman, 1950)

In other words, the fact that ROC forces took control of Taiwan in 1945 and accepted the surrender of the Japanese colonial authorities in Taipei did not mean that Japan had transferred Taiwan's sovereignty to the ROC or any other Chinese government. No "international action" has ever been taken to determine the status of Taiwan, so the United States continues to maintain that the status of Taiwan is undetermined; and as long as the United States continues to maintain that position, intervening in Taiwan's defense will not constitute a violation of Chinese sovereignty. Although



Japan surrendered sovereignty over Taiwan as one of the provisions of the San Francisco Peace Treaty and confirmed that surrender in the ROC-Japan Peace Treaty, the Truman administration exercised its influence to ensure that there was never an explicit transfer of sovereignty from Japan to China. This policy sought to ensure that if the United States switched recognition from the ROC to the PRC, that change in recognition would not require the United States to recognize PRC sovereignty over Taiwan (Bush, 2017: n. 20).<sup>6</sup>

This strategy proved to be far-sighted. When the opportunity came for the United States to pursue rapprochement with the PRC in the 1970s, the negotiations that led to the establishment of official diplomatic recognition did not lead the United States to recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.<sup>7</sup> Nixon privately assured Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai that he personally considered Taiwan to be part of China, but the possibility of a backlash on Capitol Hill made Nixon and Kissinger resist PRC pressure to recognize Taiwan as part of the PRC in the Shanghai Communiqué (Office of the Historian, 2006). In the Normalization Communiqué, the United States only said that it “acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China” (American Institute in Taiwan, 2022). The PRC negotiators translated “acknowledges” as *chéngrèn* (承認), which means “recognizes” and conveys acceptance of the Chinese position. After the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing noticed this difference, “an argument ensued and dictionaries were consulted” (Romberg, 2003: 100), as Alan Romberg observes; but the Liaison Office acquiesced in the translation after dictionaries seemed to support the PRC claim that *chéngrèn* was an acceptable translation of “acknowledges” (100).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Bush (2015: 85-123) examines the details of this history at length. Further arguments in favor of the position that Taiwan’s sovereignty is undetermined can be found in Chen (2016: 80-82).

<sup>7</sup> The history of U.S.-PRC normalization is discussed at length in Romberg (2003: 19-104).

<sup>8</sup> *Chéngrèn* is only an accurate translation of “acknowledges” in sentences in which the object of “acknowledges” is a clause, such as “the United States acknowledges

Believing that the argument had been resolved, the Liaison Office decided not to report the argument to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance or National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Shortly after the establishment of diplomatic relations, Michel Oksenberg at the National Security Council (NSC) wrote a memorandum explaining how the United States should respond if the PRC ever claims that the United States is bound by the Normalization Communiqué to recognize Taiwan as being part of China:

Should this line of attack materialize, our response should be three-fold: (1) Both Peking and the U.S. worked from the English text, which uses the same language as the Shanghai Communiqué; (2) in any case, we have signed no documents, and our view is expressed in the English; (3) even were we to accept the Chinese language rendition, “cheng jen” is the wording used in other joint communiqués, such as by the British, and the British also translate “cheng jen” as “acknowledge.” (Oksenberg, 1979)

Even though the translation conveys a substantially different U.S. view of the political status of Taiwan, the United States only accepts the authority of the English version because that was what Washington and Beijing had negotiated over and that was the only language in which the United States ever expressed its views. In other words, the United States considers the English version to have precedence over the Chinese version in the case of discrepancies, such as the one over *chéngrèn* and “acknowledges.”

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that Taiwan is part of China.” *Chéngrèn* is not an accurate translation for “acknowledges” in sentences in which the object of “acknowledges” is a noun, such as “the United States acknowledges the position that Taiwan is part of China.” The sentence in the Normalization Communiqué belongs to the second type, but the fact that *chéngrèn* overlaps with “acknowledges” in sentences of the first type is why the Chinese-English dictionaries in the U.S. Liaison Office suggested that the PRC translation of the Normalization Communiqué was accurate.

The United States’ position that the status of Taiwan is undetermined has never changed. In a recent summary of the dispute over Taiwan produced by the Congressional Research Service, Susan V. Lawrence, the Specialist in *Asian Affairs*, states that “the U.S. government’s long-standing position has been that Taiwan’s political status remains unresolved” (Lawrence, 2021: 1). In 2020, when David Stillwell (then the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs), stated at a virtual meeting of the Heritage Foundation that “the U.S. takes no position on sovereignty over Taiwan” (Stillwell, 2020). This position was reiterated by State Department spokesperson Ned Price in September 2022 (“No Position,” 2022).

## E. Taiwan as the Ideological Alternative to the PRC

One of the most important ways in which the “new Cold War” concept applies to Taiwan is in how Taiwan has positioned itself as the ideological alternative to the People’s Republic of China. During the Cold War, the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China were locked in an intense ideological rivalry: each government claimed that it was the sole legal government of China (and claimed that Taiwan was part of China), and each government refused to recognize the other. In recent years, this rivalry has resurfaced. Although the Tsai administration has declined to accept the “1992 Consensus” or any other formulation of One-China, the Taiwan government and the U.S. government have portrayed Taiwan as the ideological alternative to the PRC. The United States formulates policy toward Taiwan in the context of the U.S.-China relationship, as shown by how the United States’ Taiwan policy is called the “One-China policy” and how Taiwan features prominently in the U.S.-PRC Joint Communiqués. Although Taiwan’s position in the first island chain and TSMC’s prominence in geoeconomics provide compelling reasons for why Taiwan is important to the United States, Taiwan also has ideological value for the United States’ grand strategy of great power competition with

the PRC. Taiwan may no longer call itself “Free China” as it did in the days of Chiang Kai-shek, but Taiwan’s democracy still serves an alternative to the authoritarian system in the PRC.

During the Cold War, one of the most important changes in the grand strategy of the ROC was the decisive shift from military to non-military instruments of statecraft over the course of the 1950s. Achieving this shift had been a major objective U.S. strategy throughout the decade. A study by the NSC Staff, which served as the basis of NSC 146/2, stated that the United States’ interest in the survival of the ROC “extends also to its importance as an essential weapon in the continuing political struggle with the Communist world, especially the Chinese segment of it” (National Security Council. [NSC], 1985), because the ROC was the only viable alternative to the PRC (NSC, 1985). While U.S. officials were aware of the sensitivity of the Nationalists toward accepting foreign advice, they succeeded in persuading Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists to emphasize the idea of a “counteroffensive” in more ideological terms, including economic development. Chen Cheng, one of the Nationalist leaders who oversaw this change, expressed the new strategy in these terms:

In this period of “waiting,” although it is impossible to engage in a military counteroffensive, a “political counteroffensive,” an “economic counteroffensive,” and a “cultural counteroffensive” can be done pretty well—why not refer to these counteroffensives as a counteroffensive in spirit? ... if our government is more democratic, if our economy is more prosperous, if our culture is more advanced, if the livelihood of our people makes daily progress toward wealth and prosperity, then our mainland compatriots will look to Taiwan as [those experiencing] a great drought look to rain clouds. (as cited in Lee, 2020a: 474)

James Lee (2020a) focuses on how this “economic counteroffensive” took the form of an export-oriented growth strategy that marked a new emphasis of the ROC government on

long-term development. Previously, the KMT had been so focused on a military campaign against mainland China that it resisted the idea of long-term development out of the concern that it would signal a lack of commitment to a counteroffensive. With the new conceptualization of the counteroffensive in non-military terms, economic development became part of the KMT’s political warfare against the CCP.

The idea of a “cultural counteroffensive” also took off at the same time. The KMT had long claimed a historic mission of defending China’s traditional culture even as it pursued economic and political modernization (Roy, 2003: 78-79). This mission continued in Taiwan in many forms, including the preservation of Peking opera and the elevation of that art form to the status of “national opera” (國劇), and the KMT pursued it in earnest in the 1960s (Guy, 1995). As perhaps the most prominent and enduring symbol of the KMT’s dedication to Chinese tradition, the National Palace Museum was built in 1965 to showcase the greatest works of art that had previously been held at the Palace Museum in Beijing. Unusually for a national museum, the National Palace Museum was built in the mountains at some distance from the center of the capital; this decision reflected the KMT’s concern that the museum might be targeted by the PLA Air Force in the event of a CCP invasion of Taiwan (Selya, 1995: 220-221). The United States provided considerable support for this museum. The Asia Foundation provided funding to open an exhibition hall in 1957, while the Nationalists had previously kept the art packed in crates (probably with the expectation that they would soon accompany the Nationalists in their return to the mainland). After the KMT decided to plan for a long-term future on Taiwan, the United States continued to support the preservation of traditional Chinese culture, with the CIA providing funds for the National Palace Museum to open in 1965 (Tucker, 1994: 84).

After Mao declared the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, which aimed at overturning China’s traditional culture and

replacing it with revolutionary socialism, Chiang Kai-shek declared the beginning of the Chinese Cultural Renaissance in 1967 to serve as the antithesis to the cultural movement of the Chinese Communists. As summarized by the historian Wang Shou-nan (1987), the purpose of the Chinese Cultural Renaissance was to restore “traditional Chinese culture as well as to create something new by absorbing foreign learning” (22), continuing the program of self-strengthening that had begun in the Qing Dynasty and continued in the May Fourth Movement. As a sign of the personal importance that he ascribed to the movement, Chiang Kai-shek was president of 11 of its committees (H. Cheung, 2019). The Chinese term for “cultural renaissance” (文化復興) can also be translated as “cultural rejuvenation,” which reveals the irony of the CCP now endorsing a slogan of pursuing the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2022). When Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, the memorial anthem that the KMT released included the words, “for the sake of justice he opposed Communism and pursued the rejuvenation of the [Chinese] nation” (為正義而反共，圖民族之復興) (“Transitional Justice,” 2017).

In recent years, the governments of Taiwan and the United States have both portrayed Taiwan as the ideological counterweight to the PRC. With U.S.-PRC tensions affecting Mandarin education for U.S. students, the United States and Taiwan have announced new initiatives to have teachers from Taiwan teach Mandarin in the United States and to have more U.S. students studying Mandarin in Taiwan. After Jeremy Cornforth (the Deputy Director of AIT) announced in January 2022 that the U.S.-Taiwan Education Initiative would promote Mandarin education in the United States with teachers from Taiwan, Harry Tseng (the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs) remarked on how language education would highlight the “Taiwan model.” Hsu Szu-Chien, the Deputy Secretary-General of Taiwan’s National Security Council, said that

Mandarin language teachers from Taiwan would help to spread Taiwan’s culture and values (as cited in Lin, 2022). In the context of the PRC’s controversial Confucius Institutes closing across the United States, William Brent Christensen (the former Director of AIT) said at a symposium:

We have all read news stories about the closing of many of the PRC’s [People’s Republic of China] Confucius Centers [*sic*] in the U.S. Now is the time for Taiwan to step forward and help fill this gap—not only to teach Mandarin and learn English, but to more fully tell Taiwan’s story to their American students. (W. B. Christensen, 2021)

In the area of supply chain security, W. B. Christensen also referred to Taiwan as a “like-minded partner” with “shared values” (as cited in Lin, 2020). Moreover, Taiwan has continued to establish Sinology resource centers abroad as part of a policy of promoting “Chinese culture with Taiwanese characteristics” (“Taiwan Opens,” 2022). These kinds of statements and initiatives are modest in comparison with the ideological rivalries of the Cold War. Even so, they highlight an aspect of the Cold War that has reappeared in recent years: in times of great power competition between the United States and the PRC, Taiwan stands out as an ideological rival to Beijing that has the support of the United States.

This ideological rivalry is even more pronounced in the contrast between Taiwan’s democracy and the PRC’s authoritarianism. In a speech at the Hudson Institute in 2018, then–Vice President Mike Pence criticized the PRC’s actions to limit Taiwan’s international space and said “while our administration will continue to respect our One China Policy, as reflected in the three joint communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act, America will always believe that Taiwan’s embrace of democracy shows a better path for all the Chinese people” (The White House, 2018). This statement deviates from U.S. policy and would likely find skeptics in Taiwan, since it implies that the people of Taiwan are part of the people of China, and hence that Taiwan is a part of China. That detail

notwithstanding, it shows how U.S. officials have emphasized the contrast between democracy in Taiwan and authoritarianism in the PRC. Embracing this theme (though expressing greater reserve about the Chinese character of Taiwan), Tsai Ing-wen wrote in *Foreign Affairs*:

Vibrantly democratic and Western, yet influenced by a Chinese civilization and shaped by Asian traditions, Taiwan, by virtue of both its very existence and its continued prosperity, represents at once an affront to the narrative and an impediment to the regional ambitions of the Chinese Communist Party. (Tsai, 2021)

Under the Biden administration, U.S. officials have continued to highlight the contrast between Taiwan and the PRC. In his testimony before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in December 2021, Ely Ratner (Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs) explained the importance of Taiwan by saying that “Taiwan has proven the possibilities of an alternative path to that of the Chinese Communist Party” (Ratner, 2021). Although there is much greater reluctance to characterize Taiwan as “Free China” than there was during the Cold War, the ideological aspect of contemporary competition echoes the Cold War in how Taiwan has become the democratic rival of Beijing. This is not to say that the United States and China have viewed Taiwan strictly through an ideological lens, or to assess the continuity with the Cold War in the broader ideological competition between Washington and Beijing, but to highlight that Washington and Taipei have taken a tactical approach on ideology that exhibits continuity with the Cold War era.

## F. The PRC’s Spurious Claims on Support for Unification in Taiwan

The PRC often claims that the people of Taiwan support unification, or at least that they do not support independence.



Explaining why Beijing refuses to renounce the use of force in the Taiwan Strait, the 2019 Defense White Paper states that “this is by no means targeted at our compatriots in Taiwan, but at the interference of external forces and the very small number of ‘Taiwan independence’ separatists and their activities” (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). The PRC’s 2022 White Paper on Taiwan says that the people of Taiwan “revere their ancestry and love their homeland” (The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2022), which it claims to be China. Neither of these claims finds support in the evidence. In a survey conducted by the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University (NCCU) in December 2021, 25.1% of respondents indicated that they were “inclined toward independence” (偏向獨立) (though only 5.8% of respondents indicated support for “independence as soon as possible” [儘快獨立]). The majority of respondents did indicate a preference for maintaining the status quo (with 28.4% indicating “maintain the status quo, decide later” [維持現狀再決定] and 27.3% indicating “maintain the status quo forever” [永遠維持現狀]). But non-support for independence hardly amounts to support for unification: only 6% of respondents indicated that they were “inclined toward unification” (偏向統一), and still fewer, at 1.4%, indicated support for “unification as soon as possible” (儘快統一) (Election Study Center, 2024a). Moreover, a survey by NCCU on national identity found that only 2.8% of respondents identified as being exclusively Chinese (2024b).

There is a long history of the PRC spuriously claiming that the people of Taiwan support the government in mainland China, and that the government in Taipei is suppressing the will of its people. For much of the Cold War, the CCP claimed that the 228 Incident in 1947 had been a movement in support of Communism among the people of Taiwan. The KMT made similar claims that the Incident had been fomented by Communist agents in Taiwan, but there is very little evidence of Communism having been a significant factor

behind the uprising (Roy, 2003: 73, 146). Instead, the people of Taiwan mobilized in 1947 against economic mismanagement, corruption, violations of civil liberties, and abuse of police authority. What the Settlement Committee demanded from the provincial authorities was not a system that resembled Communism, but a more liberal and democratic government that would respect local autonomy (69). Yet the CCP claimed that the Incident had been a spontaneous uprising in support of the Communist revolution, which put additional pressure on the KMT at a time when the legitimacy of the ROC government was still tenuous. The PRC held annual remembrances of the 228 Incident until 1981; this only ended when Deng Xiaoping tried to bring about a reconciliation across the Strait that would lead to Chiang Ching-kuo to accept “One Country, Two Systems” (Taylor, 2000: 366-367).

The claim that the people of Taiwan support unification has evolved over time and taken on various guises in response to changing conditions in the Taiwan Strait. After Lee Teng-hui succeeded Chiang Ching-kuo to the presidency of the ROC, the CCP issued a white paper on Taiwan in which it stated that “They [Taiwan compatriots] are radically distinct from those handful of ‘Taiwan independence’ protagonists ... the Chinese government is convinced that Taiwan compatriots want national reunification and that this is also true with most of the political forces in or out of office in Taiwan” (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 1993). During the presidency of Chen Shui-bian, there was even an attempt to connect the 228 Incident with “One Country, Two Systems.” In 2003, the websites of PRC embassies posted a story with the title, “Scholars say ‘One Country, Two Systems’ Best for Taiwan,” which included quotes from scholars and journalists in the PRC saying that the uprising in 1947 had been in favor of “One Country, Two Systems” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, 2003). Contrary to this claim, a recent public opinion poll carried out by Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council found that almost 80% of respondents now disapprove of

“One Country, Two Systems” (Mainland Affairs Council, 2019). The story from 2003 on the PRC embassy website was the last overt attempt to infer the present wishes of the people of Taiwan based on an event that happened in 1947, but there is still a continuity with present policy in that the CCP continues to spuriously claim that the people of Taiwan support unification.

### III. Discontinuities

#### A. Democracy

Arguably the most important difference between Taiwan in the Cold War and Taiwan today has been the transition from a one-party police state to a liberal democracy. Whereas Taiwan’s Polity score was -8 in 1949, it has been 10 since 2005 (Marshall, 2014). According to the Economist Intelligence Unit’s most recent ranking of democracies in 2022, Taiwan was number 8 in the world and number 1 in Asia (while the United States was ranked number 26) (Tsao & Ko, 2022). In a certain sense, this transition has marked a continuity: as the previous section discussed, Taiwan’s democratic system has enabled it to continue positioning itself as the ideological alternative to the PRC. But in a wider sense, this transition has marked a profound change. During the Cold War, Taiwan’s policies on cross-strait relations and U.S.-Taiwan relations were determined by a narrow circle of Chinese Nationalist officials who used martial law to suppress dissent and support for Taiwan independence. U.S. officials did not endorse KMT repression on Taiwan during the period of the “White Terror,” but they also did not exert much pressure on the Nationalist regime to liberalize, and the United States’ own policies showed little sensitivity to the aspirations of the people under Nationalist rule. Richard Bush (2015) has noted the “tendency of American presidents in both the 1940s and the 1970s to ignore the views of the people of Taiwan as they made decisions on U.S. policy that had a fundamental impact on the future of the island” (40). Since the Cold War, the United States has been more

forthright about the importance of honoring those views when formulating its policy toward the dispute over Taiwan (2017: 4-5). This means respecting the fact that, according to recent public opinion surveys, most respondents expressed support for the status quo, and very few expressed support for unification under the “One Country, Two Systems” model (Election Study Center, 2024a; Mainland Affairs Council, 2019).

## B. National Identity

Another major change between the Cold War and the present day is the change in national identity among the public in Taiwan. Contrary to Beijing’s claims that the majority of people in Taiwan identify as Chinese, there has been a consistent decline in Chinese identity in Taiwan and a consistent rise in Taiwanese identity. As of December 2022, 60.8% of respondents in an authoritative survey by NCCU indicated that they identified as exclusively Taiwanese; 32.9% indicated that they identified as both Chinese and Taiwanese; and only 2.7% indicated that they identified as only Chinese. This is in distinct contrast to the Cold War era, and even to the early post-Cold War era: in 1992, the first year in which the NCCU survey was conducted, 17.6% of respondents indicated that they identified as exclusively Taiwanese; 46.4% of respondents indicated that they identified as both Chinese and Taiwanese, and 25.5% indicated that they identified as only Chinese (Election Study Center, 2024b). There has been a major shift in identity among the electorate, which indicates a significant discontinuity between the Cold War and contemporary great power competition.

## C. Decline in Support for One-China

Another critical difference between the Cold War and the present day is the decline in support for “One-China.” During the Cold War, the KMT-ROC party-state adamantly maintained One-China and even coordinated with the CCP to prevent a “two

Chinas” solution to the Chinese Civil War (Taylor, 2011: 454-502, 547-588). Because of that context, the United States could recognize the ROC and conclude the Mutual Defense Treaty without the risk of creating the perception that the United States was supporting Taiwan’s independence. That has changed considerably since democratization. Although Tsai Ing-wen has been a pragmatic and cautious leader, the fact that her administration has not accepted One-China or the 1992 Consensus means that U.S. cooperation with Taiwan has the potential to suggest U.S. support for independence. A recent trend toward closer U.S. relations with Taiwan, such as visits of senior U.S. officials to Taiwan, have raised doubts about the United States’ adherence to the One-China policy. Daniel Russell at the Asia Society Policy Institute, for example, has pointed to the concern that the United States is “edging closer and closer to the line that separates unofficial relations with official relations, which, in effect, could hollow out America’s One-China policy” (as cited in Asia Society, 2021). This concern has become so serious that Kurt Campbell, the Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs on the National Security Council, decided to clarify in July 2021 that “we support a strong unofficial relationship with Taiwan. We do not support Taiwan independence” (as cited in Moriyasu, 2021). During the Cold War, there was far greater cooperation between the United States and Taiwan, but because the government of Taiwan at that time adamantly supported One-China, the dispute between Taiwan and the PRC did not create limits on the extent of the United States’ strategic, military, and political support for the island. Even if a future administration in Taiwan decides to accept One-China, it is likely to be a much more moderate interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On the debate in Taiwan surrounding One-China and the cross-strait tensions surrounding this issue, see Derek Grossman (2020).

## D. Distribution of Capabilities in the Taiwan Strait

Another major discontinuity is in the distribution of capabilities in the Taiwan Strait, in which Beijing's capabilities have increased in both relative and absolute terms. During the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, a National Intelligence Estimate concluded that "in view of the US commitment, the Chinese Communists do not have the capability to seize Taiwan" (Intelligence Advisory Committee, 1986). Today, however, Beijing possesses the capability to seize Taiwan even if the United States intervenes. Vice Admiral Robert Thomas (ret.), the former Commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, has argued that "China can bring Taiwan to unification by force today, at significant cost, but with probable success" (Thomas, 2022). He points to the significant growth in China's military capabilities since the late 1990s. Comparing the present situation to even the early post-Cold War era, Thomas concludes that "China continues to accumulate advantages over its neighbors, and gone are the days when the US Seventh Fleet could be dispatched to contain bad behavior in the Taiwan Strait" (Thomas, 2022).

## E. Economic Interdependence

There is another significant discontinuity in terms of economic interdependence. The PRC's levels of trade and investment with Taiwan and the United States are much higher than they were during the Cold War (T. J. Christensen, 2021).<sup>10</sup> After Beijing's intervention in the Korean War, the United States "maintained a total trade and shipping embargo against Communist China" (Intelligence Advisory Committee, 1985). Trade restrictions were so severe that the United States even prohibited imports of chicken eggs from Hong Kong that had been laid in the PRC (U.S. foreign service officers were not sure what to do about eggs laid in Hong Kong by

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<sup>10</sup> I also thank anonymous reviewers for emphasizing the importance of this discontinuity.

chickens brought from the PRC: “is that then a communist product?”) (Richard E. Johnson, Economic Officer, Consulate General, Hong Kong, 1951-1954, as cited in Tucker, 2001: 109). At the start of rapprochement in 1971, there was such little trade between the United States and China that, with rounding, it accounted for 0.0% of total U.S. trade (Harding, 1992: 364). Restrictions on trade between Taiwan and China were similarly high. Today, levels of trade and investment between Taiwan and China are substantial, in spite of the political tensions between Taipei and Beijing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024a). This translates to Beijing having some degree of political influence over Taiwan, and it also significantly raises the cost of any conflict (Kastner, 2022: 24-26, 45-46). U.S. trade with China is also much higher than it was during the Cold War: in 2021, the PRC was the third-largest trade partner of the United States, accounting for 8.6% of total U.S. exports and 17.9% of total U.S. imports (Bureau of Industry and Security, 2021).

## F. Taiwan’s Political Importance for Beijing

Although the dispute over Taiwan has always been highly significant for Beijing, Taiwan is arguably more important now for the PRC under Xi Jinping than it was for the PRC under Mao Zedong. Compared to economic development, national security has assumed a greater importance for Xi than it did for his recent predecessors (T.-M. Cheung, 2020). Even compared to Mao, Xi has attached a greater importance for Taiwan. Mao’s priority was establishing the PRC’s position in the international communist movement, with Taiwan assuming secondary importance for his regime. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that Mao decided to support Kim Il Sung’s invasion of South Korea in June 1950 even while he was preparing an invasion of Taiwan. Seeking to elevate the PRC’s standing in the international communist movement, Mao supported Kim instead of proceeding with his plans to invade Taiwan (T. J. Christensen, 2011: 430-431). For Xi, on the other

hand, Taiwan has assumed an elevated strategic importance, as demonstrated by the fact that opposing Taiwan's independence has been written into the CCP's party constitution ("China Bakes Rejection," 2022). Although this does not mean that Xi has decided to start a war over Taiwan, his emphasis on preparedness for conflict shows that Taiwan has assumed a relatively greater importance under his regime (Pomfret & Pottinger, 2023).

## G. Taiwan's Geoeconomic Importance

The importance of TSMC for global semiconductor supply chains is another significant difference between the Cold War era and the present day. TSMC currently earns over 50% of global revenue in contract chipmaking and almost 90% for the most advanced chips (defined as being under 10 nm) (Hille, 2021). Rick Switzer at the U.S. Air Force Office of Commercial and Economic Analysis has estimated that the PRC would control almost 80% of semiconductor manufacturing capacity in the world if Taiwan were forcibly unified with the mainland (Gallagher, 2022). Steve Blank (2020) at Stanford University has estimated that if the PRC were to cut off the supply of chips from TSMC's fabs, it would take the United States' civilian and military electronics industries at least 5 years to recover. This means that Taiwan's strategic importance is far greater now than it was during the Cold War. As Wasser et al. (2022) have written in a recent study for the Center for a New American Security, "secure access to the output of Taiwan's semiconductor industry is therefore a strategic necessity" (1). During the Cold War, assessments of Taiwan's strategic importance centered on its geographic position in the first island chain. Today, the geographic element still holds, of course; but the geoeconomic element compounds that importance to arguably elevate Taiwan to the level of a vital interest of the United States in contemporary great power competition.



## IV. Conclusion

This essay has connected the debate on the concept of the “new Cold War” with the debate on Taiwan’s security and U.S. strategy toward the dispute over Taiwan. It has identified areas of continuity: Taiwan’s fear of abandonment, the United States’ fear of entrapment, Taiwan’s geographic importance for the United States, the United States’ neutrality on Taiwan’s sovereignty, Taiwan as the ideological alternative to the PRC, and the PRC’s spurious claims about support for unification in Taiwan. The article has also identified areas of discontinuity: Taiwan’s democracy, declining support for One-China in Taiwan, the change in national identity among the public in Taiwan, the distribution of capabilities in the Taiwan Strait, economic interdependence between the United States, China, and Taiwan; Taiwan’s higher political importance for Beijing, and Taiwan’s geoeconomic importance.

Considered as a whole, these similarities and differences suggest that the Cold War analogy has considerable merit as a framework for understanding contemporary great power competition in the Taiwan Strait, though the similarities are mostly at the level of broad themes and not at the level of detail. On the other hand, the differences are also important. Taiwan’s democracy and non-acceptance of One-China mean that there is very little common ground between the two sides of the Strait.<sup>11</sup> It also means there will be greater constraints on the United States’ ability to pursue strategic and political cooperation with Taiwan, since bilateral relations are unofficial and the United States is careful to avoid suggesting support for Taiwan’s independence. The change in the distribution of capabilities in the Taiwan Strait, compounded by Taiwan’s higher political importance for Beijing, means that the PRC is now more likely to unilaterally change the status quo even if the United States intervenes to defend Taiwan. Taiwan’s geoeconomic importance, meanwhile, highlights the overall importance of

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<sup>11</sup> For recent survey results that support this conclusion, see Pan et al. (2022).

Taiwan policy for U.S. interests. The concept of the “new Cold War” is valid within certain limits, and the task of this article has been to define those limits.

On balance, this analysis suggests that the discontinuities outweigh the continuities insofar as they relate to the risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait. The decline in Chinese identity among Taiwan’s electorate, the decline in support for One-China in Taiwan, Taiwan’s higher political importance for Beijing, and the PRC’s growing military capabilities mean that Beijing is more likely to use force to seize control of Taiwan, though the high economic cost of conflict may serve as a restraining factor. Meanwhile, the strategic importance of Taiwan’s semiconductor industry means that the United States is more likely to intervene in Taiwan’s defense (Lee, 2021). Therefore, even though the dispute over Taiwan has been an enduring flashpoint in the international relations of East Asia, the likelihood of conflict is greater now than it was during the Cold War. The history of the Cold War offers a precedent for diminishing strategic competition in U.S.-China relations in the face of a common threat—the Soviet Union in the Cold War, climate change today—but the strategic competition in the Taiwan Strait is intensifying and not abating.<sup>12</sup>

Preventing conflict will involve controlling the narrative about which side is status quo and which side is revisionist, as Delury et al. (2022) have argued. Given the rise in the PRC’s military capabilities, the United States and Taiwan can offset the PRC’s relative strengths by seeking the support of allies and partners, who are more likely to provide their support if they perceive Beijing as a challenge to the rules-based international order (Lee, 2022). Creating the perception that the United States and Taiwan are upholding the status quo will also involve a clear articulation of what the status quo is. For example, the United States’ neutrality on Taiwan’s sovereignty does

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<sup>12</sup> On the role of the Soviet threat as a catalyst to US-PRC rapprochement during the Cold War, see Harding (1992: 33-38). On the potential role of the threat of climate change as a catalyst to US-PRC cooperation today, see Lee (2020b).

not entail recognition of Beijing having sovereignty over Taiwan, and Washington and Taipei should push back against Beijing’s attempts to conflate the United States’ One-China policy with Beijing’s version of the One-China principle (Bush, 2017). A major discontinuity between the Cold War and contemporary strategic competition is the fact that the security of Taiwan is being increasingly seen as a global issue, not only as a regional flashpoint or a dispute between the United States, China, and Taiwan (Chiang & Lee, 2023; Hou & Matthew, 2023). The United States and Taiwan should encourage this trend to offset Beijing’s growing military capabilities, and they should seek to create the perception in Beijing that using force or coercion against Taiwan would not only fail, but also leave the PRC weakened and isolated.

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## 臺灣與「新冷戰」

李語堂

中央研究院歐美研究所

E-mail: jamesytle@gate.sinica.edu.tw

(邵允鍾譯)

### 摘 要

「新冷戰」的概念近年來在關於中美關係現狀和未來的辯論中備受矚目。在此同時，臺灣海峽的緊張局勢亦引發了美臺關係的廣泛討論。然而至今為止尚未有文獻將上述兩者整合起來，以評估冷戰類比是否適用於發生在臺灣海峽的大國競爭。本文分析了冷戰時期和當前關於臺灣議題的爭論，指出其相同和不同之處。儘管臺灣的意識形態和政權型態發生了巨大變化，但自1949年以來，此一問題的重要面向仍未改變，包括臺灣對被拋棄的憂慮、美國對自陷爭議無法脫身的擔憂、美國對臺灣主權問題的中立立場、美國和臺灣都將臺灣定位為對中華人民共和國意識形態的另類選擇，以及北京妄稱得到臺灣人民的支持。變易之處則包括臺灣已轉型為自由民主國家、選民國家認同的變化、對「一中」的支持下降、臺灣對北京的政治重要性增加、兩岸軍力差距擴大、美中臺的經濟相互依賴，以及臺灣的地緣經濟重要性。藉由比較這些變與不變之處，本文主張當前臺灣海峽的衝突風險較冷戰時期來得高。

**關鍵詞：**美臺中關係、冷戰、大國競爭