

# Taiwan's Triangle: US, China, and Geopolitical Chessboard

Samim Ahmad Khan<sup>1\*</sup> and Mussaib Rasool Mir<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This paper explores how the interactions between China, the USA, and their allies shape Taiwan's politics, as both nations contest each other's narratives, denying Taiwan an independent agency. It aims to expand our understanding of Taiwan's role in the escalating conflict between China and the USA, shedding light on deeper issues in the Asia-Pacific Region due to mismanaged relations. The paper argues that the U.S. and China prioritize power politics and national interests over moral considerations, influencing their international behavior and dominance over Taiwan. Taiwan is seen as a global hotspot, analyzed for its geopolitical, geo-strategic, and geo-economic impact on the Asia-Pacific Region. The historical context of Taiwan's formation is briefly explored, setting the stage for dissecting the triangular relationship. The third section summarizes the highs and lows of the U.S., China, and Taiwan relationship, emphasizing Taiwan's role in the power struggle. The paper concludes with suggestions for the research community and leaders to promote peace and discourage aggressive behaviour. Throughout, terms like Taiwan, ROC, China, and PRC are used interchangeably.

**Keywords:** Taiwan, Geopolitical Hotspots, National Interest, Power Politics

## Introduction

In the cold light of a geopolitical dawn, what if the world awakens to the ominous specter of a Chinese war over Taiwan, a long-contested island that Beijing claims as its rightful territory, seeking its integration with mainland China. Would a third world war be fought between the U.S. and China with an alliance structure built up by the USA to save Taipei from the Red Army? The answer is a resounding capital 'NO' as the U.S. or any other state or any coalition of states would not risk a war with China over Taiwan despite all the rhetoric open in the air. Our claim is substantiated by analyzing the behavior of the U.S. in its response to the wars in Crimea and Ukraine of 2014 and its reaction to some extent in its support of its West Asian right arm, Israel. It did not enter a direct war in the name of its allies, although its backdoor support throughout illustrates that any future war over Taiwan would not see its direct interference but indirect support militarily, strategically, economically, and politically. Although the costs of the war for China, Taiwan, and the USA and its impact would be high, far, and wide, the USA would not directly battle the Chinese state as the costs of war outweigh the gains of winning such a war. On the other hand, to incur excessive costs from the Chinese, it would utilize every option possible in its strategic arsenal and provide everything needed to save the state of Taiwan if not defeat the PRC. Such a pessimist thinking about the invasion of Taipei has been emboldened by the Russian war with Ukraine since 2014. Who would have thought that Putin would invade Ukraine in 2014 and annex Crimea? International politics and management of the relations between the states is a tricky act and a tragedy of the great power politics where small, not-so-powerful states become the casualties of the clash between the mighty ones.

At the outset, problematizing the invasion of Taiwan gives us reasons to think about the present state of affairs of Taiwan and a window to look at the future scenarios between the two most powerful nation-states where the dialectical movement between the powerful and the less powerful states portrays a perpetual struggle for power and the constant state of war. Imagination and creativity are one (not all though) of the I.R. scholars' basic formulae to analyze and carve the theoretical constructions helpful in understanding the problems of and within the states.

The first and second sections of the paper will provide a brief historical analysis of Taiwan's modern yet tumultuous formation, setting the context for elaborating and deconstructing the triangular relationship. The third section will summarize the highs and lows of the relationship between the three states: the U.S., China, and Taiwan. The section will analyze Taiwan's geopolitical, geo-strategic, and geo-economic importance for itself and the broader Asia-Pacific Region. This section of the paper looks at the power struggle between China and the U.S. vis-à-vis Taiwan and highlights how Taiwan has gotten caught in the broader tussle for world domination between the two giants of world politics. In this way, the paper gives us an analytical understanding of why and how the island state of Taiwan torn between the two nation-states, matters. Finally, some concluding remarks and suggestions are aimed at the research community as well as the policymakers and the governing elites of the three countries to shun away the chauvinistic war-mongering behavior and give peace a chance. Throughout the paper- Taiwan and the ROC, China, and PRC will be used interchangeably and undifferentiated.

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**Corresponding Author:** Samim Ahmad Khan

1. Post Graduation Student, Jammu and Kashmir, India. Email: [khansamim12n@gmail.com](mailto:khansamim12n@gmail.com)

2. Student from Jammu and Kashmir, India. Email: [musaibmirkmr@gmail.com](mailto:musaibmirkmr@gmail.com)

## **Geopolitical Significance of Taiwan**

The official website of the Republic of China (Taiwan) describes itself geographically in the following lines: "The Republic of China (ROC)/ (Taiwan) is situated in the West Pacific between Japan and the Philippines. Its jurisdiction extends to the archipelagoes of Penghu, Kinmen, Matsu, and numerous other islets. Taiwan proper and its outlying islands total area is around 36,197 square kilometers. At about the size of the Netherlands but with a population of some 23 million, Taiwan is more populous than three-quarters of the world's nations"(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2019). Unlike other states' official websites, the ROC website is a repository of its history, clearly giving out facts and laying bare the claim of the People's Republic of China (PRC) over Taiwan.

The foundations of the modern state of Taiwan started in China when 1912 the ROC came into existence. "At that time, Taiwan was under Japanese colonial rule due to the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, by which the Qing ceded Taiwan to Japan. The ROC government began exercising jurisdiction over Taiwan in 1945 after Japan surrendered at the end of World War II" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2019). While waging a civil war with the Chinese Communist Party led by its powerful leader Mao Tse Tung, the ROC government led by its incumbent ruler Chiang Kai Shek moved to the island of Taiwan in 1949. It has effectively ruled over Taiwan's main island and several of its surrounding islands, allowing Taiwan and China to have their governments; Beijing never established sovereignty over Taiwan or any of the ROC's run islands, although it claims the whole territory as its integral part. An estimated 1.2 million migrated from China to Taiwan during the war years, and the ROC government took its roots in the island nation, giving shape to the modern state of Taiwan. The period is characterized as the most suppressive one in the history of ROC as its leader, Chiang Kai-Shek, suppressed any dissenting voice against him or in support of the Communist Mao rule with force. Shek rules out the ROC Constitution by replacing it with the Temporary provisions for the National Mobilization for the Suppression of the Communist Rebellion. This phase of martial law, notoriously known as the White Terror, lasted until 1987, with the formation of a new independent constitution by the people of Taiwan.

With the uplifting of the ban on the formation of political parties, a new phase of democratic transition begins. A new party known as the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) emerged in 1986, which plays a key role up to the present in shaping the democratic intuitional buildup of ROC. Subsequently, a new phase of Across the Strait talks began with the PRC representatives and people-to-people exchanges, giving a new ray of hope to the island nation's future. Further consolidation of democracy took root when the first direct elections to the presidency were contested in 1996, with KMT candidates Lee Teng-hui and running mate Lien Chan collectively getting 54 percent of the total vote share. The smooth transfer of power happened when, in the next 2000 elections, the opposition DPP candidates Chen Shui-bian and Annette Hsiu-lien Lu were elected president and vice president of ROC, ending the long rule of the KMT. Since then, the two parties, KMT and DPP, have shared power through the smooth functioning of internal politics. The last elections were held in 2020, and DPP's Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te of the ruling party won again. The next elections will be held in January 2024, giving more importance to understanding the relationship between the three states and the internal politics of the ROC, as China will be closely monitoring the election. In the past, xi has given directions to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) many times to stay vigilant and ready to unify Taiwan. In the next sections, the paper clearly explains why the Taiwan elections are always important and what reasons the PRC has to use such strong rhetoric and can go to any extent to reunify the ROC with the mainland.

## **Relationship within the Triangle: U.S., China, and Taiwan**

It is imperative and a novel trend to understand the interaction of strategic triangles in international relations. Understanding the relations in the triangular forms gives the scholars of I.R. a deep sense of what is happening on the world stage, as their relationship with the third state continuously impacts the relationship between the two states. Various strategic triangles like the USA, China, and India; Pakistan, China, and India; U.S., Taiwan, and China, etc., can only operate with impact and get impacted by the third party. In our case, the role of triangular formation is very well embedded. It has a deep impact on the relationship of the three states with each other, as well as ramifications for the Asia-Pacific Region and the broader global world order.

## **US-China Relationship**

In contemporary times, the US-China relationship has been defined in multiple ways, and different explanations are provided for visualizing it. Henry Kissinger, the realist scholar cum foreign policy expert of the U.S. government, defines it as "cooperative –coexistence"(Kissinger, 2011), while David Shambaugh coins the phrase "cooperation or competitive coexistence"(Shambaugh, 2012) for the relationship. In the past many years, however, the relationship has moved from cooperation to competition or cooperation in some areas, and competition is some with a confrontational attitude in certain areas of vital interest for the two states. This confrontation has been explicit, particularly during the Xi era combined with the Trump years, and continued by the Biden administration, despite high-level meetings between the officials of both states and the heads of the states. "Structural competition between the existing hegemon and the rising power indeed played an important role in shaping the competitive relationship between the United States and China"(He, 2016). Moreover, there are few reasons to believe that the relationship will boil down to the cooperation side of the confrontation-competition-cooperation spectrum.

Aaron L. Friedberg argues -with broad agreement among scholars that "CCP leaders believe that the United States and its liberal-democratic allies are implacably opposed to them on ideological grounds and that the U.S., in particular, seeks not only to encircle and contain China but to undermine its current regime by promoting 'splitism' (that is, separatist movements in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan) and 'peaceful evolution' (that is, the spread of liberal-democratic beliefs among the Chinese population)"(Friedberg, 2018). Therefore, PRC leadership for many decades has sought to challenge and then change the present order of the Western particularly U.S. global order. Xi has been prominent in turning such a dream into a reality. Visualizing a Chinese order, as one scholar points out, "might eventually involve the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Japan and Korea, the end of American regional alliances, the effective removal of the U.S. Navy from the Western Pacific, deference from China's regional neighbors, unification with Taiwan, and the resolution of territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas"(Doshi, 2021).

China and the United States are engaged in a bigger geopolitical fight, searching for alliances and counter-alliances against each other. Although the Cold War is a relic of the past, the relationship between the two countries may still be viewed through this lens. To establish the narrative that China is going to be the new superpower on the world stage, it has started developing new institutions with worldwide recognition, like the New Development Bank and the BRI project, and tirelessly working to promote new norms such as 'internet sovereignty' to encircle those states bonded with the West. China has taken upon itself this ideological tussle for supremacy, banking upon its idea of the market-driven economy with political authoritarianism, "a new option for other countries...who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence"(Buckley & Bradsher, 2017). The USA, for its part, has strictly applied trade tariffs on many Chinese companies affiliated with the PRC Communist party and restrictions on the export of many products. However, it has also hosted the high officials of the Communist party and discussed the many problems confronted by the two states without much result. Leaders of both states have also met on the sidelines of many summits and talked about solidifying the relationship, but all of this has not resulted in some concrete steps to make their relationship meaningful for others to emulate and reap benefits from. Instead, smaller states have suffered from the lack of cooperative partnership between the two giants of the world state system.

### **U.S. - Taiwan Relationship**

The U.S. has been a constant support to ROC against the bullying and encroachment tactics from the PRC. It has provided economic, military, and moral support to the ROC, which has been under pressure for unification with mainland China from the times of Mao up to Xi. "The current version of the United States One China policy, which holds that there is only one legitimate government of China, dates to 1979 when the United States recognized the communist government in Beijing while breaking off formal diplomatic ties with the nationalist government in Taipei"(Babones, 2016b). However, in 1995, the USA gave the then-leader of Taiwan, Lee Teng-hui, permission to visit the U.S., hence starting a fresh wave of pro-independent sentiment among the people. This step was a radical departure from the previous foreign policy choices of the U.S., going against the Chinese foreign policy and creating a fracture in the mutual understanding between the two states. This, for China, was a direct provocative step aimed at encouraging Taiwan's independence. Also, various anti-China steps taken by the new President of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian, since 2000, like amending the constitution, etc. enraged the Chinese, who vowed to use force in case of a declaration of independence or something close to that, "prompting the Bush administration to step in and discourage Taipei from such moves. President George W. Bush publicly criticized Chen and affirmed his opposition to Taiwanese independence in a joint press conference with China's president, Hu Jintao, in November 2004" (Ross, 2006). The U.S. administration has taken calculated steps and risks to come to terms with the PRC over the sovereignty issue of Taiwan, except Trump going to the level of risking a war with China over Taiwan. A Foreign Affairs analyst put it this way: "Although a Taiwanese declaration of independence would arouse much sympathy in the United States, it would not likely result in American diplomatic recognition. Taiwan may be a fellow democracy with free and vibrant political institutions. However, the United States is a global hegemon with global responsibilities and a massive stake in the stability of the Asia-Pacific region. The United States may sell weapons to Taiwan in a tit-for-tat response to Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea, but it is not about to start World War III over Taiwanese sovereignty"(Babones, 2016a). Any formal or informal meetings or exchanges between the ROC and the U.S. are condemned with harsh military threats, economic blockages, and other grey zone tactics by the Chinese state, giving a clear warning that any U.S. political interference with the present status quo would be met with powerful force.

On the other hand, as Taiwan maintains a very cordial relationship with the U.S. despite the pressures exerted by the Chinese strong arm-twisting tactics, "among the 40 countries included in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, Taiwan is the only one that does not maintain formal diplomatic relations with the United States"(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2019). Even though it sounds ironic, the reason is noticeably clear for not having a formal diplomatic link with Taiwan: the constant Chinese threat to overrun the island nation by force. Even without official diplomatic connections, the U.S. Congress's 1979 passage of the Taiwan Relations Act has continued to offer a solid basis for Taiwan-U.S. collaboration. Under the TRA and the Six Assurances terms, the United States has often reaffirmed its security obligations to Taiwan. The Taiwan Travel Act was overwhelmingly approved by the U.S. Congress in 2018 and subsequently signed into law by U.S. President Donald J. Trump. This act highlights the strong support that the U.S. legislative and executive branches have for Taiwan by encouraging visits by officials at all levels from both sides. The U.S. Congress also approved and signed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act (TAIPEI Act), demonstrating support for Taiwan's diplomatic relationships globally and its membership in international

organizations. Reiterating the nation's commitment to Taiwan, the Trump administration released new rules during his tenure to facilitate more cooperation between the U.S. government and its colleagues in Taiwan. Incorporating policies and initiatives to support Taiwan in strengthening its self-defense capabilities, these rules and acts are crucial in upholding regional security. Taiwan's bilateral relationship with the United States has developed into a global partnership as they keep extending their cooperation scope.

### **Taiwan-China Relationship**

The foundations of ROC were laid in 1912 in mainland China when the Chinese overthrew the Qing dynasty, overruling the territory. There is no denying that the modern so-called ROC is an offshoot of the PRC, but it should be made clear that this does not give the PRC exclusive sovereign rights over the land that it is today. Nor does the same narrative give the ROC any claim over the mainland territory and its people. Both states should respect each other's claims over their respective territories without encroachments upon the others and coexist peacefully as they share the same culture, ethnicity, and objective parameters of statehood.

Taiwan is a thriving democracy with a more robust and flourishing economy than states of its size. However, China has laid flimsy claim to the whole territory and its surrounding water bodies, as has ROC. "Like Beijing, Taipei maintains a flimsy claim to sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, based on the premise that it is the rightful claimant of China's maritime territory. Taiwan's South China Sea claims are based on the infamous nine-dash line, a rough sea boundary first drawn on Chinese maps in 1947. The line illustrated the expansive claims over the waters, islands, and seabed of the South China Sea made by the ROC, which was in control of the mainland at the time. When the communists won the Chinese civil war, they adopted the nine-dash line as the basis of their claims, and today, both China and Taiwan maintain that the entire South China Sea belongs to them—that is, to the real China"(Babones, 2016b). This is one crucial point of contention among the many others pulling the two neighbors apart.

The only instance in the past, when the Chinese mainland state and the ROC fought, was when they fired 40 days of artillery in 1958. Since then, short of using force, both states have seen phases of cooperation and contention in their relationship. The breakaway point in the relationship was the U.N. Resolution 2758 of 1971, after which the ROC withdrew from the U.N. as it recognized the PRC as the only legitimate representative of the people of China. However, a major thaw in the relationship started in 1992 when, for the first time after initial talks and correspondence, government-appointed delegates from both sides of the Taiwan Strait reached several shared understandings and agreements in Hong Kong.

In March 2005, The National People's Congress, the legislature of China, approved the Anti-Secession Law, igniting popular sentiment in Taiwan against the mainland by formalizing Beijing's threat of war if Taiwan proclaimed independence. "Nonetheless, KMT Chair Lien Chan (Lee's former vice president) traveled to Beijing in April, the first visit to the mainland by a leader of one of Taiwan's major political parties since 1949. Lien and Hu declared their opposition to Taiwan's independence and support for the 1992 consensus, in which Taiwan and the mainland agreed that there is one China" (Ross, 2006). In 2010, both states signed the Cross-Straits Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) to establish commercial and trading ties across the Taiwan Strait formally. The leaders of the two governments' official agencies in charge of cross-strait relations, the Mainland Affairs Council Minister Wang Yuchi and the Director of China's Taiwan Affairs Office, Zhang Zhijun, met in Nanjing in February 2014. This was the first time the two agencies had official contact, leading to the inking of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement. However, the DPP opposed the agreement, leading to the Sunflower Movement, a large, mostly student protest movement against having stronger relations with the PRC. To boil down the escalation and bring the relationship back on track, for the first time in 66 years, the leaders of the two states, President Ma, and Chinese Leader Xi Jinping, met in Singapore in November 2015. However, nothing concrete came out of the meeting, and relations remained tense.

However, the post-2016 phase saw a remarkable downgrading in the relationship when Tsai Ing-wen, the leader of the DPP, won the Presidential election and took charge of ROC. The government of Tsai has been seen as anti-China throughout its brief history and has gone against the '1992 Consensus' of the One Country, Two Systems Model. Xi has blocked all the formal communication channels with Taipei since. President Tsai issued directives on March 11, 2019, in response to China's ever-more assertive political program. These directives were designed to fortify national security protocols, protect national sovereignty, and guarantee that present and future generations possess the authority to choose Taiwan's destiny. The Legislature of ROC enacted the Anti-Infiltration Act. Since then, xi has been very stringent in his address to the Annual Congress of the CCP, and the PLA forces have conducted many military exercises around Taiwan. In his 2019 New Year address to the nation, he was very clear and harsh in his use of rhetoric, reiterating his commitment to reunifying Taiwan with the PRC to rejuvenate and complete the process of national consolidation. Such irresponsible claims by one of the world's most powerful leaders, if left unchecked and unnoticed, without proper ears and understanding, can cause a major fracture in the international system and a catastrophe for world peace. It appears that xi thinks the only way he can achieve Mao Zedong-like stature in the Chinese Communist Party canon is if he conquers Taiwan. There is a serious possibility of conflict because of Xi's goals and sense of personal destiny. In Taiwan, there is a significant risk that xi may make the same grave miscalculations as Putin made in Ukraine.

Any mis adventurous step by the DPP can escalate the tensions and give Xi a chance to embark on his long-awaited project of fulfilling his dream of unifying the so-called renegade province ROC with its motherland. That is why the January 2024 elections assume significance for the entire Asia-Pacific region and not only for the three states, as the stakes are extremely high for all. The pre-poll surveys favor the incumbent DPP, with its President Tsai considered an anathema by the PRC, especially Xi, who stands as a major force against completing the Chinese project of national unification. Similarly, this election is important from the Western perspective as it will decide the four-year foreign policy of the ROC towards China as well as the U.S. and vice versa. If the incumbency persists against the KMT, then the U.S. has all the say in running the state's foreign policy, as the party has favored the U.S. against the PRC.

The above discussion makes a strong case for analyzing the relationship of states and their foreign policies in contemporary international relations while keeping track of their relationship with powerful states with direct national interest in the small, less powerful, yet resourceful states. The discussions and the interwoven intricate complexities in the relationship of the three states give a solid foundation to our argument of understanding the relationship in a triangular structure. Hence, the nature of (overarching) strategic triangles assumes significance. Taiwan's geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-strategic importance gives semblance and justification for simultaneously understanding Taiwan and its relationship with the U.S. and China. That is why Robert S. Ross claims that "the peaceful transformation of relations between China and Taiwan will help stabilize eastern Asia, reduce the likelihood of conflict between China and the United States, and present an opportunity for Beijing, Taipei, and Washington to adjust their defense postures-all without hurting Taiwan's security or threatening U.S. interests"(Ross, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

At this particular time of writing this paper, when there are no formal links of communication between the PRC and ROC with the upcoming Presidential elections of ROC, tensions are brewing between the three states as the two strongest superpowers of the time are directly involved in the internal politics of ROC and in shaping the regional dynamics in their favor. Beijing has already given directions to the PLA to keep closer watch over the Taiwan Strait and will be closely monitoring the elections and their results. The USA has always taken a firm stand to respect the impartial elections of Taipei, as it should have. However, it should not escalate the tensions, giving Beijing unnecessary pressure to take some undesired steps like invading Taiwan or directly or indirectly interfering in the state's internal politics and shaping the election results in its favor. All the states involved should track the real events in their respective state and that of the other two, as any unwanted propaganda or post-truth information can be destructive. Long-term policies aimed at mutual coexistence will not create undue pressure on the other side, and the economic imperative of benefiting from the burgeoning relationship should be the only way out of the escalation. Phrases such as 'the most dangerous place of the earth', once used for states such as Afghanistan and the region of South Asia where India-Pakistan has been at each other's collars, have been replaced by the ROC, and many scholars have rightly called it a nuclear flashpoint which could start a new world war.

The U.S. should continue with its policy of Dual Deterrence as the PRC has grown into a monster that the U.S. (even in alliance with other states) cannot handle and lacks the means and the will to do so. The policy of Dual Deterrence gives the USA the leverage of keeping Beijing in check while also hoping to secure the independent future of Taipei as the U.S. has failed to convince Beijing that there can exist a separate state of Taiwan outside the Chinese boundaries, nor can it shove down the idea to the PRC. To deter China from invading Taiwan and Taipei from taking any steps that would encourage such an assault, the U.S. has adhered to a policy of strategic ambiguity. Both China's invasion of Taiwan and Taiwan's independence declaration are to be discouraged by this. This policy keeps the Chinese strength in Strategic Depth of land in check as Taiwan is only 100 miles (160 km) off China's Coast while the nearest U.S. base to Taipei is more than 8000 km from Honolulu and 11000 km from San Diego. Also, the U.S. should sensitize the governments in Taipei (or any other state) about renouncing the flimsy claims of declaring the South China Sea as their territorial part; as Robert Kaplan rightly argues, "the SCS is to China, what the Greater Caribbean- the region stretching from Florida to Venezuela along with the Gulf of Mexico- is to the U.S."(Rej, 2018). It will help ease the pressures exerted by the Xi government over Taipei, and there is no strategic wisdom in calling something one's own when it cannot be controlled realistically.

Taiwan has grown into a successful democratic country with an economic base for highly competitive economic semiconductor industries and products in high demand worldwide. At the same time, its democratic grounding and bipartisan support for democratic institutionalization act as the symbol of democratic resilience against the authoritarianism of Xi and the model that China propagates. Taiwan has been recognized as a full member of as many as 45 intergovernmental organizations, such as WTO. Taiwan has participated as an independent agent in many other IGOs and is actively engaged as an observer in many subsidiary bodies of the UNO. Taiwan has a population of 23 million people with a huge political success story, even if the USA has been active in shaping its political matters and has carved a niche for itself. Any step towards declaring independence at this particular moment in history, although being an unwise step to tread on, as its recognition would be immediately and successfully blocked by the PRC and further aggravate the already hostile situation on the election time, should not be considered as an unviable option in the future as the world politics is a dynamic field where changes in the international power structure can work in favor of such a radical step (in the right direction).

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