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## SRAD Director's Corner: Preserving Taiwan as Strategic Imperative

George Shatzer

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## Preserving Taiwan as Strategic Imperative

George Shatzler

### Review of

#### **The Trouble with Taiwan: History, the United States and a Rising China**

By Kerry Brown and Kalley Wu Tzu-hui

#### **Taiwan Straits Standoff: 70 Years of PRC–Taiwan Cross-Strait Tensions**

By Bruce A. Elleman

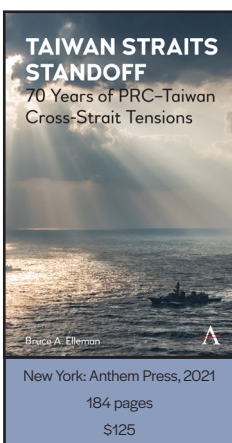
Keywords: China, Taiwan, Cross-Strait tensions, Taiwan Strait, PRC

**D**espite the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin's repeated threats to employ nuclear weapons, the gravest threat to global security remains the potential for war over Taiwan. Were the People's Republic of China (PRC) to attempt to forcibly overthrow the government of Taiwan and seize the island nation, the resulting US-led military operation to defend Taiwan could spark a much wider international war. The world's two largest economic powers with arguably the most powerful nuclear-armed militaries engaging in open war would be a catastrophic first in human history. Both the United States and the PRC would suffer huge military casualties and lose significant portions of combat power, rendering both nations vulnerable to other threats. The homelands for both countries would be subject to nuclear attacks, which would kill and wound many thousands of civilians and lay waste to vast areas. Security commitments and allegiances would likely draw nations in Asia, especially Japan, North and South Korea, the Philippines, Russia, and Singapore, into the conflict. The United States, the PRC, and most of the world would suffer economically as US-PRC trade and the regional maritime shipping that drives much of the global economy slams to a halt. Some would argue US-PRC economic ties alone would prevent war. It is worth remembering wars large and small have jumped the firebreak of economic entanglement many times in history.

Especially worrying today is the threat of conflict over Taiwan seems to be growing and drawing nearer. In what some have called the "Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," the visit to Taiwan earlier this year by the US Speaker of the House of

Representatives sparked an angry response from the PRC. Beijing employed its People's Liberation Army (PLA) aggressively against the main island of Taiwan with unprecedented scale. The deployment of PLA air and maritime forces and the firing of missiles around Taiwan was a significant expansion over what the PRC did during the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, a response to concern that Taiwan's first democratic presidential elections could lead to a referendum on independence for the island. Both in terms of the scale and extent, the PLA demonstrated a much expanded capacity to isolate Taiwan by force.

Additionally, the overt US military response this time was substantially more muted. In December 1995 and March 1996, the United States sent two Naval carrier groups (the USS *Nimitz* and *Independence*, respectively) near Taiwan. This strong US response is widely seen today as a large part of the impetus behind the PRC's rapid acceleration of efforts to build a large, modern military. In 2022, the United States seems content to continue only with what it calls “routine” transits of the Taiwan Strait with smaller US Navy warships. While the lack of a clear military response might be a wise step to de-escalate tensions today, the effect on PRC thinking and actions in the future is potentially unfavorable for the United States and Taiwan should Beijing perceive the United States as unwilling to defend the island. Indeed, as reported by the government of Taiwan, the PRC has increasingly sent its maritime and air forces across the median line of the Taiwan Strait to challenge Taiwan's military and shift the norm for where the PLA can operate in proximity to Taiwan.



Understanding the contentious and violent history of cross-strait relations between the PRC and Taiwan is important to dealing with the problem today and in the future. Bruce A. Elleman's *Taiwan Straits Standoff* is vital reading to this end. This short book was published in 2021 prior to the strait crisis of 2022, and provides the right depth of background to today's issues. Throughout the historical narratives describing the previous three strait crises, the consistency across time in policy perspectives, strategic factors, and military operations is remarkable. Several of these are worth special mention because they are suggestive of potential problems and strategies the United States and Taiwan must understand today.

First, Elleman reminds us of the critical role Taiwan can play to influence PRC behavior elsewhere. He mentions how US military operations in the Taiwan Strait helped bring the PRC to the negotiating table for armistice talks in Korea in 1953. Further, once the armistice was signed, the PRC immediately began pulling forces from Korea to reinforce its posture across from Taiwan (30). The connection

between deep-seated PRC security concerns on or near its borders (especially with India, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) must be accounted for and leveraged as pressure points to shape Beijing's decision making and actions. Similarly, we must be mindful that the PRC could use the same stratagem of generating a military crisis in one location to draw in US forces and reduce its ability to respond elsewhere.

Second, the PRC harbors a misconception that aggressive action against Taiwan will somehow cause the United States to split from Taiwan. Elleman notes this was the PRC's expectation when it attacked the Taiwan-held offshore island Quemoy in 1954–55 during the first strait crisis (55). The PRC routinely seems to misperceive a US reluctance to fight a war with it as a sign of fundamental weakness in the US-Taiwan relationship or in US resolve to support Taiwan. Yet, in each instance of PRC aggression against Taiwan, the United States has taken concrete measures to reaffirm and even strengthen its relations with the island nation. Recognizing this blind spot in Beijing's thinking is important when working through the potentials for escalation and off-ramps in the next crisis. Perhaps the United States can defuse an emerging crisis and moderate PRC behavior by clearly communicating that escalation is a dead end and will only strengthen US-Taiwan ties.

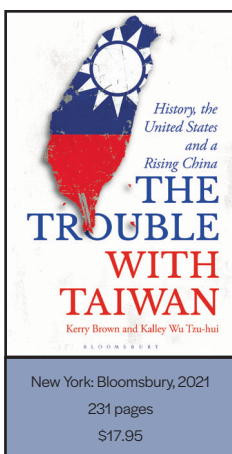
Additionally, history points to other possibilities for PRC military attacks against Taiwan that do not always receive much attention today. In 1958, the PRC ended its shelling of Quemoy after 44 days and the wounding or killing of nearly 3,000 soldiers and 500 civilians. But occasional artillery fire would take place for the next 20 years—the longest sustained artillery campaign in history (105). While it is well known that the PRC has planned firepower strike operations against Taiwan, less appreciated perhaps is the PRC's will to sustain these operations (even if at low volumes) for years and even decades. Given the PRC's present-day rocket and missile capabilities and inventories, we must account for the real possibility of a sustained fires campaign against the main island of Taiwan that would generate far more casualties and destruction today.

Conventional strikes against Taiwan suggest the issue of nuclear weapons. Elleman dedicates an entire chapter to the history of US threats to use nuclear weapons in the context of a Taiwan Strait conflict and briefly tracks the evolution of US nuclear use policy given the advent of PRC nuclear weapons, the dissolution of the PRC-USSR alliance, and Taiwan ending its nuclear weapons program. The specter of nuclear war between two global powers hangs heavily over any Taiwan conflict. Nonetheless, US strategists must thoroughly investigate all the potentials of the nuclear factor. On the surface, it might seem the PRC enjoys a strong first-mover advantage in conducting military operations against Taiwan because the United States would not want to risk a response escalating the situation to a nuclear war. Yet, the PRC faces the same dilemma should the United States

choose either to deter with forward-postured forces or counterattack to defend Taiwan. The US second-strike capability is something Beijing cannot ignore and carries serious deterrent weight.

Another historical Taiwan conflict dynamic Elleman illuminates is the complexity of the PRC-USSR relationship and past US efforts to undermine that relationship. In simple terms, the United States sought to push the USSR and the PRC closer together so they could then be split apart (125). He argues the United States let the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dominate China so the PRC would become dependent on the USSR for support. This closer, dependent relationship exacerbated the animosities and tensions between them and made it easier to fracture the relationship. A key mechanism in fracturing the relationship was the threat of a Taiwan conflict potentially escalating into a broader conflict in which the USSR would be vulnerable to a US attack. As the PRC pressed forward aggressively during the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the USSR fears of a wider conflict helped drive it to withdraw support from the PRC and ultimately collapsed the relationship (131–34). With a much closer PRC-Russian relationship developing today, strategists must consider what tensions exist in PRC relations that might be vulnerable in the context of a Taiwan conflict. These weak points may offer pressure points that deter or constrain military action.

Finally, the book reminds us that for much of cross-strait history the PRC has judged war with the United States over Taiwan “pointless,” since they believed they could ultimately gain control of the island through propaganda and other subversive means (147). If winning without fighting is still a core tenet of Chinese military thinking, then the United States must seek to encourage this idea and leverage its deterrent value. The most troubling trend in the military balance across the strait may not be the growth of PRC military power but rather the growth of nationalism and impatience in the CCP such that they decide it is worth fighting to seize Taiwan.



In *The Trouble with Taiwan*, Kerry Brown and Kalley Wu Tzu-hui delve deeper into PRC perceptions and attitudes toward Taiwan. The book centers on questions of identity and the powerful effects this has on thinking and actions, especially those of the PRC. This welcome find provides fresh perspectives and ideas on the cross-strait problem from British and Taiwan points of view. Distressingly, the authors identify multiple factors that seem to suggest future conflict is becoming more likely.

They first provide a very clear explanation of the importance of Taiwan to the PRC. Taiwan’s symbolic value

is bound up with the PRC's notions of its historical legitimacy and the very idea of the Chinese nation they claim ownership of. For Beijing, compromising on the status of Taiwan would mean forfeiting its claimed historical and cultural right to controlling it and would thus call into question its right to every other territorial and maritime claim, such as the South China Sea, Tibet, and Xinjiang (55–56). The CCP has based its legitimacy in the restoration of the Chinese nation. Ceding any of these claims would mean the literal breaking up of this Chinese nation—an action irreconcilable with the CCP's stated purpose. As US President Abraham Lincoln asserted in his first inaugural address in 1861, no government proper ever permits its own termination.

Additionally, the authors argue nationalism is on the march in the PRC and, for President Xi Jinping and the CCP, it is now a “core source of legitimacy” (111). Along with this shift is a burgeoning sense of urgency in resolving the Taiwan problem. While the PRC has for decades been clear it views Taiwan as one of its provinces, the authors convincingly illustrate how the PRC under Xi has been much more assertive in enforcing this claim internationally as well as at home (112). Further, Brown and Tzu-hui argue the pervasive nationalist messaging and quashing of dissenting views have created an insular and dangerous orthodoxy on Taiwan such that the CCP decisionmakers have outdated views. The authors suggest Xi's inner circle of advisers—much like with Putin and his misguided war on Ukraine—is out of touch and dares not challenge convention or present new ideas anyway (117).

Finally, the authors contend the real reason today the PRC wants control of Taiwan owes to status and face. As the PRC has grown wealthier and more powerful, its view of its status has increased. With its growth in power the PRC now has more means at its disposal today to compel “reunification” with Taiwan than at any other time in its history. These trends elevate the desire and urgency of taking control of Taiwan (220). Also, harkening back to historical notions of China as a “civilizational force” and “mother culture,” today the PRC has the strong Confucian sense of being an elder sibling to Taiwan and deserving of its respect (221). This dynamic means Taiwan cannot be sovereign in the eyes of the PRC and hence there is no room to consider any sort of relationship that would afford Taiwan equality. The PRC expects to have senior status (222). As the authors summarize: “That Taiwan has become so tied up with the PRC's own identity and definition of its self [sic], and feelings about itself, creates an almost intractable problem. To be fully China, to have the status it wants, to rank as a great global power, the PRC needs Taiwan to be part of it” (223).

Despite this bleak assessment, the authors offer some hopeful ideas. They suggest Taiwan's democracy is its best defense against PRC aggression (68). Like many other observers of Taiwan society, the authors note that increasingly

the people of Taiwan, especially younger generations, view themselves as being uniquely Taiwanese and not Chinese. While this dynamic would seem to make the possibility of a peaceful reconciliation with the mainland more remote, it does have two potentially useful effects. First, democracy holds with it the possibility that the people could choose to reunify with the PRC. This permits Taiwan to say it is not ruling out that possibility (98). Second, the unique Taiwanese identity suggests to the PRC that Taiwan has a strong will to resist. This identity raises the stakes and potential threat to the CCP's legitimacy should it fail to subdue Taiwan. No matter how confident the PRC becomes in its military power, it will have to account for the real possibility that Taiwan will resist with all means, even without US intervention.

Returning to the worst-case scenario of a US-PRC war described earlier, this presumes the United States would defend Taiwan. A great many questions have been raised concerning the likelihood of the United States risking war with the PRC over an island the size of Maryland. While the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 does not require the United States to defend Taiwan, it is nonetheless a strong statement of US commitment to supporting Taiwan militarily and in other ways. Additionally, the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 greatly expands US security assistance over the next four years. Most compelling have been seemingly resolute statements by President Joe Biden, twice last year and twice again this year, that the United States would defend Taiwan in the event of a PRC attack to seize the island.

These recent assurances of US commitment seem to be shifting the long-standing US policy of “strategic ambiguity” on the question of US military intervention in a Taiwan conflict. In decades past, when the United States enjoyed clear military superiority over the PLA, maintaining strategic ambiguity was a sensible approach to checking the PRC's aggressive ambitions towards Taiwan while also not encouraging Taiwan to declare independence. As the military balance across the strait no longer seems to favor the United States (or Taiwan), the utility of strategic ambiguity has arguably worn thin. Critics charge that dropping strategic ambiguity is dangerous because it hardens US and PRC positions and ripens the potential for war. This is a valid but manageable concern so long as the United States can maintain a credible capability to deny the PRC achieving its objective by force. This deterrence mission very much remains viable so long as the United States makes the necessary investments in posture, will, relationships, and capabilities in the region and beyond.

Yet, the valid question remains: are such massive investments worth it? Or, put another way, is Taiwan worth it? The clear answer is yes. Economically, Taiwan and the United States enjoy robust trade relations, particularly in goods, services, and agriculture. In the past few years, US foreign direct investment in Taiwan has

doubled to over \$31 billion, especially due to the vital semiconductor industry as Taiwan is the world's top producer of computer chips. Further, Taiwan sits astride some of the world's busiest maritime shipping lanes. Nearly 90 percent of the largest container ships transit through the Taiwan Strait every year as they connect East Asia with the Middle East and Europe.

Taiwan's geographic location also matters deeply from a military perspective. It is noted frequently that Taiwan is the central link in the island chain that sits just offshore of mainland China and effectively bounds Beijing's ability to project the PLA eastward. This island chain runs from the Russian-controlled Kuril Islands (claimed in part by Japan) in the north through the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan, and the northwestern Philippine islands and ends with Borneo in the South China Sea. Less often elaborated is the military maritime advantage the PRC would gain if it controlled Taiwan. The PRC would be able to expand significantly the reach of its maritime surveillance and submarine warfare capabilities. This would leave US naval forces far more vulnerable even at great distances east of Taiwan as the PRC could significantly upgrade its long-range fires capabilities. This, in turn, would greatly complicate US naval operations and war planning generally and leave the United States with fewer practical contingency response options in the region. Also, PLA Navy and Air Force operations out of Taiwan would present a much greater direct, flanking threat to Japan and the Philippines, especially, and would open a direct attack route to Guam.

The most serious interest the United States has in preserving Taiwan is political. The United States had a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan for nearly 25 years (from 1955–79). Although the United States switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in 1979, it replaced that treaty with a set of laws mandating the sale of defensive arms to Taiwan and enshrining a range of other business and cultural ties with the island. Were the United States to choose not to defend Taiwan with military force, the clear signal to allies and partners in the region would be that the United States is unwilling to defend anyone from the PRC military threat. Additionally, the United States would be standing by as the PRC snuffed out a democratic government and locked its nearly 24 million people in an industrial-sized police state. The democratic experiment in Taiwan and US leadership in the region would end (to say nothing of the damage done to US leadership worldwide). In essence, the United States would be permitting the PRC to control the region. This would immeasurably hurt the region and the United States—immediately and in the long run. It is hard to imagine the expense and suffering that would have to be borne to reverse this situation and recover US position and influence.

Preventing this outcome requires careful study of the PRC and the development of a firm understanding of its thinking. What does the PRC fear more: loss of



legitimacy from not “liberating” and “reunifying” Taiwan with mainland China or loss of legitimacy from losing a war with the United States over Taiwan? This is the critical question framing PRC decision making. If the CCP increasingly perceives that its so-called China Dream of national rejuvenation is threatened by failing to absorb Taiwan and that the United States is unwilling or unable to defend Taiwan, then Beijing might choose to use force to seize the island. This is the question and problem the United States must commit to solving.

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George Shatzer

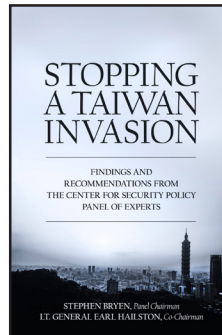
Colonel George Shatzer is the director of the Strategic Research and Analysis Department in the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College.

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February 2021  
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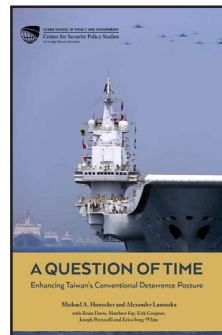
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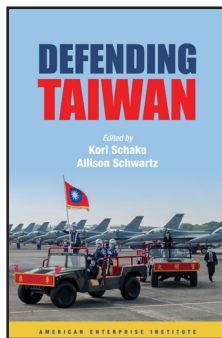


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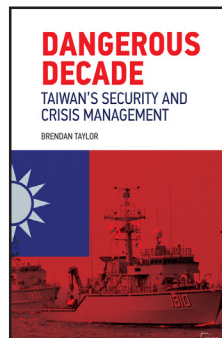
Michael A. Henthorn and Howard J. Eisenko,  
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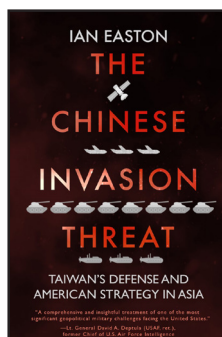
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