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ABSTRACT: This article presents four factors to consider in evaluating Taiwan's strategic importance to the United States and its allies and answers a question often raised at forums concerning the Indo-Pacific: "Why should the United States care" about this small island in the Pacific? The response often given is simply US credibility, and while this is an important factor, this article reviews a wider array of possible factors to consider when answering that question. The study of these factors should assist US military and policy practitioners in accurately evaluating the related strategic environment. Through a survey of official US policy statements and strategy documents across administrations, part two of this article (to be featured in a future issue) will examine the evolving US perception of Taiwan throughout the aggressive strengthening of China and during Taiwan's domestic political development into a full-fledged democracy.

Keywords: Taiwan, geopolitical, credibility, democracy, authoritarian

Audience members at discussions concerning the eastern Pacific's strategic environment often question why the United States should consider a small island to be of any national strategic significance. Many of these audience members and other interested readers are engaged in policy making and related activities critical to furthering US national interests. The People's Republic of China's (PRC's) recent military activities following the then Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to the Republic of China (ROC) and ROC President Tsai Ing-Wen's visit to the United States should underscore Taiwan's strategic importance to them. The ongoing designation of the People's Republic of China as the United States' pacing threat and PRC designs on the Republic of China further stress its strategic importance. This article will unfold in two parts to give readers a stronger understanding of the region's geopolitical, commercial, ideological, domestic political, and policy elements and build a case for Taiwan's strategic importance to the United States. Part one will review four underlying factors to consider when contemplating Taiwan's importance. Part two will review recent changes to the strategic environment and current responses, including an analysis of recent *National Security Strategies* and statements concerning Taiwan.

Taiwan's Strategic Importance to the United States and Allies

Taiwan's strategic relevance is similar to that of Afghanistan, Germany (Berlin), Iraq, and South Vietnam. Few Americans can locate Taiwan on a map, let alone recognize its strategic significance. There were demonstrable reasons, retrospective justifications, and debatable rationales for US involvement in each of these conflicts or potential conflicts. Likewise, Taiwan is of strategic interest to the United States and its allies for four prominent reasons:

- Taiwan's location is geopolitically important to the United States and its allies but even more important to the People's Republic of China.
- Taiwan has commercial significance.
- Taiwan is a beacon of democracy to the people of China.
- The loss of Taiwan's democracy to authoritarianism would undermine our credibility, especially with our allies.

Geopolitical Location – A Realist View

Taiwan's geographic position between China and two major US allies—Japan and the Philippines, with South Korea close by—makes it a pivotal strategic military location.¹ Conversely, physical control of Taiwan would provide the People's Republic of China a geographic wedge between the two US allies and a gateway to the open ocean and would, by default, deny a counterforce from utilizing Taiwan's proximity to China as a military staging ground.

From Japan's perspective, the People's Liberation Army Air Force's recent encirclement of Taiwan often violates Japan's airspace, indicating an impending disregard for Japan's rights and perhaps imminent overt aggression against the same. Taiwan sits at the tail end of Japan's Ryukyu and Senkaku archipelagos, which include the Kadena Air Base on Okinawa.

1. *National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific Region: Hearings before the House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, 117th Cong.* (2022) (statement of Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, Office of the Secretary of Defense), <https://www.congress.gov/117/meeting/house/114487/witnesses/HHRG-117-AS00-Wstate-RatnerE-20220309.pdf>; and Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, "The Consequences of Conquest: Why Indo-Pacific Power Hinges on Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs* (website), June 16, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-06-16/consequences-conquest-taiwan-indo-pacific>.

Taiwan was part of Japan for many decades and has continuing cultural, social, and economic ties with it.

Okinawa is only 400 miles from Taipei, and the closest Japanese island is 70 miles away.² At least one former US government official has commented that any PLA attempt to take Taiwan by force would likely involve engagement with US forces on Okinawa because, from a PLA perspective, it would be folly to leave untouched such a large counterforce so close to the northern sector of a difficult amphibious operation.³ If so, US forces in South Korea would likely be seen in the same way.⁴ Japan itself would consider any large-scale military operations so close to its sovereign territory a vital threat. In fact, Japan protested recent Chinese missile testing that landed in its exclusive economic zone. Thus, the People's Liberation Army is likely to see that any military action against Taiwan could involve Japan or the Philippines—regardless of US troop presence in either country—and could quickly become a global engagement. It is unclear, however, whether the PRC political establishment would view it the same way, or at what point political considerations may overcome the risk of international involvement.

The Philippines, likewise, understands that Taiwan plays an important role in protecting its northern flank.⁵ Many believe America's entry into World War II stemmed solely from the attack on Pearl Harbor but forget that Japan attacked and invaded the US Philippines simultaneously and that the Japanese amphibious assault originated from Taiwan. On December 7, 1941 (HST), Japan launched Zeroes from Taiwan that destroyed B-17 bombers and other key military assets at Clark Field.⁶ About 180 miles away, at the same time, Japanese General Hisaichi Terauchi conducted the amphibious invasion of the Philippines

2. Anthony Kuhn, "On Japan's Yonaguni Island, Fears of Being on the Front Line of a Taiwan Conflict," NPR (website), August 5, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/05/1115384641/japan-taiwan-china-yonaguni-island>.

3. Carl Ford, "The Ability of the PRC to Take Taiwan by Force" (presentation, Joint Forces Staff College, Norfolk, VA, November 30, 2022); Scott W. Harold and Satoru Mori, "A Taiwan Contingency and Japan's Counterstrike Debate," *RAND Blog*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/07/a-taiwan-contingency-and-japans-counterstrike-debate.html>; and Rachel Oswald, "As China Threatens Taiwan, Okinawa Braces for War," Roll Call (website), October 19, 2022, <https://rollcall.com/2022/10/19/as-china-threatens-taiwan-okinawa-braces-for-war/>.

4. Sungmin Cho, "South Korea's Taiwan Conundrum," War on the Rocks (website), December 31, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/south-koreas-taiwan-conundrum/>.

5. Richard Javad Heydarian, "US-Philippines Drawing Closer on Defense of Taiwan," *Asia Times* (website), October 3, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/10/us-philippines-drawing-closer-on-defense-of-taiwan/>; and Joshua Bernard Espeña, "A 'Taiwan Dilemma' for the Philippines," Atlas Institute for International Affairs (website), September 26, 2020, <https://www.internationalaffairshouse.org/a-taiwan-dilemma-for-the-philippines/>.

6. Sam McGowan, "Japanese Attack on the Philippines: the 'Other' Pearl Harbor," *Warfare History Network* (website), n.d., <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/japanese-attack-on-the-philippines-the-other-pearl-harbor/> (originally published in *WWII Quarterly* 3, no. 2, Winter 2012).

from Taiwan with four corps, starting with Bataan Island. This history bears on why the Philippines and Japan are concerned about Taiwan becoming a base of operations for an aggressive, large, and hostile neighbor.

Conversely, though unwilling to speak openly of offensive operations, many allies understand Taiwan's value for staging resources for and launching attacks on the People's Republic of China should kinetic hostilities ever break out. General Douglas MacArthur once called Taiwan an "unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender," due to Taiwan's proximity to mainland China.⁷

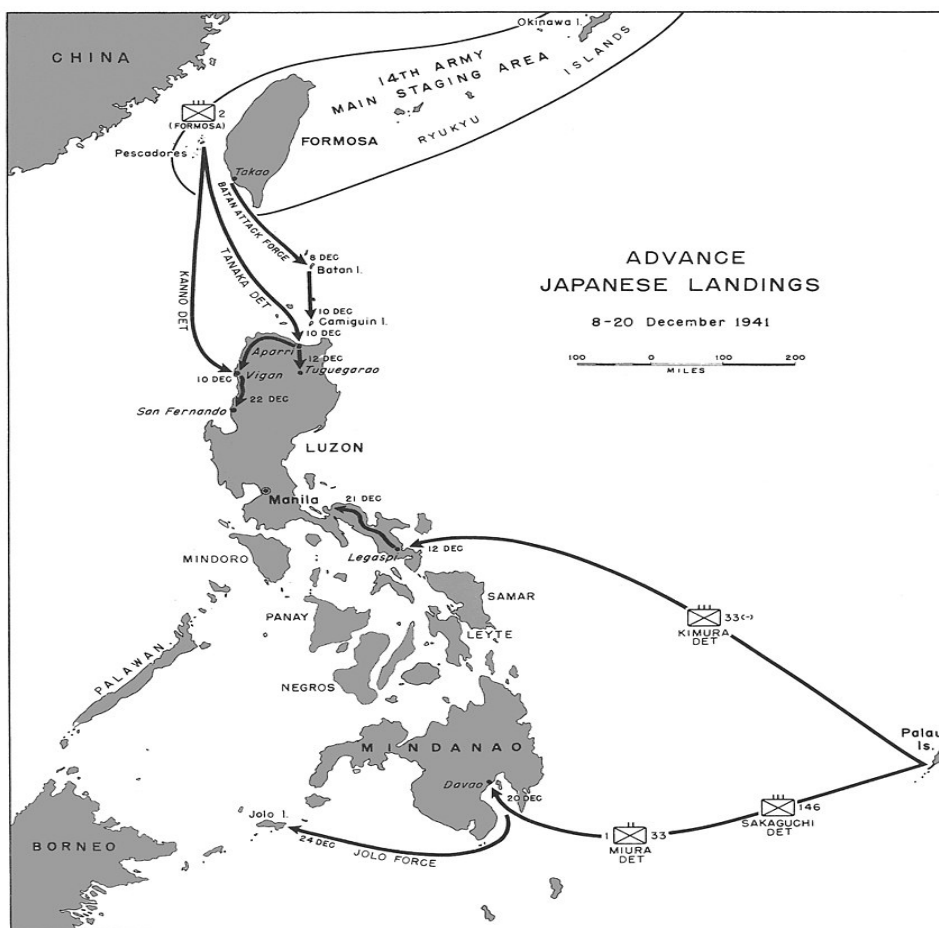


Figure 1. Japanese invasion of Philippines from Taiwan

(Map from Louis Morton, *The War in the Pacific: The Fall of the Philippines*, 1953, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1993, 99, https://history.army.mil/html/books/005/5-2-1/CMH_Pub_5-2-1.pdf)

7. Douglas MacArthur, memorandum, June 14, 1950, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea*, vol. 7, ed. John P. Glennon (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v07/d86>, as quoted in Stanley Kao, "Letter: MacArthur's Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier 70 Years On," *Financial Times* (website), January 5, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/22471013-a931-4e60-a8ee-29efba846ab4>.

In addition to the broader geographic value all parties place on Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines view it as part of the critical first island chain depicted in figure 1. This island chain is a convenient geographic defensive containment line against an ever-aggressive PLA Navy (PLAN). Although not spoken of openly, this island chain provides land-based antiship missile points to deny a PLAN exit from waters close to PRC shores, should a conflict ever arise. With the continuing emergence of a PLAN blue-water fleet, maintaining an unbroken chain to prevent China from breaking out into the open ocean becomes even more geographically important.

From the PLAN perspective, Taiwan implicates long-term naval power projection and contested military control of the Pacific.⁸ A PLAN coordinator has to consider the geography of the region hostile. Unlike the US coastline, there are many obstacles to breaking out for long-range fleet operations.⁹ A scan of a regional map shows a PLAN fleet in a hostile environment is unlikely to move assets through the South Korea-Japan gap (that is, between two US allies) or through a multitude of islands controlled by the Philippines, another US ally. Heading south through numerous murky Indonesian and Malaysian island chains would take China far from any objectives in the central and eastern Pacific, and though Indonesia and Malaysia are not US allies, they are not currently PRC allies either. Movement through any unfriendly areas dotted with land-mass obstacles is treacherous.

At present, going through areas around Taiwan would appear to be the most reasonable alternative to breaking out a blue-water fleet into the open Pacific, regardless of which side controls Taiwan. Yet, in a hostile environment, this alternative would be precarious at best, as allied missiles based on any islands around Taiwan have ranges that could easily close any gap that a hostile fleet might travel. Indeed, Taiwan has the Hsiung Feng III anti-ship missile with a range of 298 kilometers, South Korea has the SSM-700K C-Star with a range of 600 kilometers, and US allies have access to the Tomahawk missile with a range of 185 kilometers and the Harpoon Block II missile with a range of 660 kilometers.

Even if the PLA Navy could penetrate the first island chain, it would have a difficult time returning to any home ports. This is one reason for the PRC's deep interest in gaining dual-use port access in south Pacific Island

8. Andrew Erickson and Joel Wuthnow, "Barrier, Springboards and Benchmarks: China Conceptualizes the Pacific 'Island Chains,'" *China Quarterly* (website), January 21, 2016, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1002513.pdf>.

9. Erickson and Wuthnow, "Barrier, Springboards and Benchmarks"

nations, such as Kiribati and the Solomon Islands, and in Indian Ocean locations, such as Djibouti, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Resupply of PLAN assets in these areas would allow for operations closer to the US mainland without having to return to a homebase. Even in a peaceful environment, the American public will soon see PLAN ships operating near the mainland US coastline, and some will question why the United States allowed their easy passage and sustainment to challenge freedom of navigation. In fact, just before the new year, a PLAN aircraft carrier group led by the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* sailed closer than ever to Guam.¹⁰

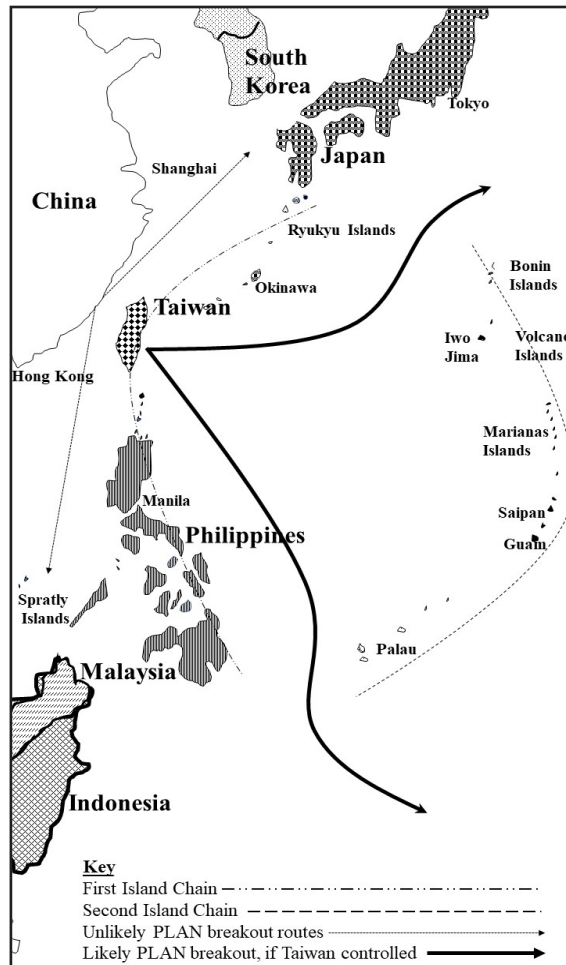


Figure 2. Difficult routes to the open Pacific from China
(Map created by author)

10. Paul D. Shinkman, “China Sails Warships Near Guam in Warning to U.S. over Taiwan,” *U.S. News & World Report* (website), December 29, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2022-12-29/china-sails-warships-near-guam-in-warning-to-u-s-over-taiwan>; and Peter Suci, “China Just Sailed an Aircraft Carrier Near One of America’s Biggest Pacific Bases,” *FortyFive* (website), December 30, 2022, <https://www.fortyfive.com/2022/12/china-just-sailed-an-aircraft-carrier-near-one-of-americas-biggest-pacific-bases/>.

Given this geographic layout, clearly control of Taiwan as a base of operations—by whatever means—is crucial to the PLA Navy’s long-term geostrategic plan. By extension, in a militarily competitive scenario, the denial of Taiwan as a base for the PLA Navy is just as critical to the United States and its allies. Control of Taiwan would provide the PLA Navy a base of operations unhindered by ally-controlled areas on the first island chain—even if it would have to build artificial harbors and bases on the island’s eastern side. Furthermore, by controlling Taiwan, the PLA Navy would create a buffer between the two main US allies—Japan and the Philippines—and obstruct coordinated operations between them and the United States. Falling back on the second island chain where US-controlled Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands lie might be a backup plan, but this porous line has large gaps and is easily penetrated. These geographic features are important from a military standpoint and impact what the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs described as “the most strategic strait in the world, in particular for our trade,” and the world’s commercial shipping lanes.¹¹

Commercial Importance

Taiwan’s economic importance to the United States has been discussed widely in various forums, and this section provides a brief review.¹² In short, Taiwan is important to US, allied, and world economies due to its location, production size, and important role in the high-tech supply chain.

Geography

Taiwan’s militarily important geographic location lies along main commercial shipping routes and is near several tiger economies. Over the past year, 88 percent of the world’s largest container ships by tonnage traveled through the Taiwan Straits—and half the world’s container ships

11. CNA Brussels Staff Writer, “Taiwan Strait ‘Strategic’ for EU Trade, Borrell Says,” *Taipei Times* (website), April 20, 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2023/04/20/2003798271>.

12. For further reading, see “Transcript: Event: ‘Why Taiwan Matters – From an Economic Perspective,’” Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), October 12, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-taiwan-matters-economic-perspective>; Joshua Meltzer, *Taiwan’s Economic Opportunities and Challenges and the Importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership*, East Asia Policy Paper 2 (Washington, DC: Brookings, January 2014), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/taiwans-economic-opportunities-and-challenges-and-the-importance-of-the-trans-pacific-partnership/>; and Yun-feng Pai, “Taiwan’s Economic Success,” *Journal of Third World Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 31–35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45197199>.

had done so by the time of Pelosi's 2022 trip to Taiwan.¹³ The island is home to several of the 10-largest shipping fleets, including the highly recognizable Evergreen lines.¹⁴ According to Maersk (another large shipping company), diverting around the island if China blockaded the strait would "add to the length of voyages and that would absorb a significant capacity," thereby disrupting commercial supply lines.¹⁵ A recent Mercatus Center study found that insurance premiums for shipping in the Black Sea since the start of the Russia-Ukraine War have become cost-prohibitive, and any conflict over Taiwan would likely have a similar outcome. The study also found that each day of shipping delay equates to adding 1 to 2 percent to the cargo transshipment cost so that one week's diversion would equate to a 7 to 14 percent tariff.¹⁶

The weather also poses a significant risk. The region east of Taiwan has some of the most cyclonic activity worldwide, averaging 20 cyclones annually.¹⁷ In a sense, the island provides a harbor-like shield to ships passing along the strait, and its separate status from the People's Republic of China keeps the passage open to traffic or at least provides a basis to contest any challenges to that freedom. A Chinese takeover of the island would squarely place this critical shipping lane in the hands of an authoritarian regime.

Economy

Although Taiwan is often compared to Belgium in terms of geographic size, Taiwan has a larger population and economy, and at US\$669 billion gross domestic product, Taiwan's economy is four times larger than Ukraine's pre-war economy, the seventh-largest economy in Asia, and

13. Kevin Varley, "Taiwan Tensions Raise Risks in One of the Busiest Shipping Lanes," Bloomberg (website), August 2, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-02/taiwan-tensions-raise-risks-in-one-of-busiest-shipping-lanes>; and David Uren, "A Blockade of Taiwan Would Cripple China's Economy," *Strategist* (blog), August 8, 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/a-blockade-of-taiwan-would-cripple-chinas-economy/>.

14. Alcott Global consultancy, as cited in Marcus Lu, "Ranked: The World's Largest Container Shipping Companies," Visual Capitalist (website), July 26, 2022, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/worlds-largest-container-shipping-companies-2022/>.

15. Huileng Tan, "China Is Conducting Military Exercises in and around One of the World's Busiest Shipping Lanes after Pelosi's Controversial Taiwan Visit," Business Insider: Africa (website), August 4, 2022, <https://africa.businessinsider.com/transportation/china-is-conducting-military-exercises-in-and-around-one-of-the-worlds-busiest/yycynfv>.

16. Christine McDaniel and Weifeng Zhong, "Policy Brief: Submarine Cables and Container Shipments: Two Immediate Risks to the U.S. Economy if China Invades Taiwan" (brief, Mercatus Center, George Mason University, August 29, 2022), <https://www.mercatus.org/research/policy-briefs/submarine-cables-and-container-shipments-two-immediate-risks-us-economy-if>; Harry Valentine, "Comparing Maritime versus Railway Transportation Costs," Maritime Executive (website), December 25, 2017, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/comparing-maritime-versus-railway-transportation-costs>.

17. Jonathan Belles, "Which Countries Get Hit the Most by Tropical Cyclones?" Weather Channel (website), July 7, 2016, <https://weather.com/storms/hurricane/news/tropical-cyclone-hits-by-country-typhoon-hurricane>; and Varley, "Taiwan Tension Raise Risks."

the 16th-largest trading economy, exceeding US\$90.6 billion in trade with the United States annually.¹⁸ Its foreign reserves amount to about US\$500 billion, and its foreign investment totals US\$6 billion. Needless to say, a PRC takeover of Taiwan would significantly boost China's economy in terms of productivity and wealth. Taiwan's economy is not the only one at stake. All global economies are at risk. The second-largest (People's Republic of China), third-largest (Japan), and 10th-largest (South Korea) global economies are nearby and might be drawn into any military conflict in the region.¹⁹ Further, the United States should be concerned about the PRC's ability to envelop any other regional economies into its growing economic orbit—which would amount to these economies being tied to PRC economic resource bases.

Supply Chain

As noted, Taiwan lies along a critical commercial shipping lane and is crucial to supply chains relying on that passage; however, Taiwan also has domestic-based industries vital to high-tech industries. One of the most notable segments of the Taiwanese economy is its semiconductor industry. While other countries, including the United States and the People's Republic of China, engage in semiconductor manufacturing, 60 percent of the total and 90 percent of the most sophisticated and best semiconductors are built in Taiwan.²⁰ These semiconductors are key components for cars, cell phones, and advanced computers, among other technologies.²⁰ During the COVID-19 crisis, chip shortages in 2021 resulted in US\$60.6 billion in lost auto industry revenue alone.²¹

18. Statista.com (Taiwan's economy was US\$669B while Ukraine was US\$156B in 2020); and "Country Comparisons - Real GDP (Purchasing Power Parity," in *The World Factbook* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2021), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/real-gdp-purchasing-power-parity/country-comparison>; "Taiwan: US-Taiwan Trade Facts," Office of the United States Trade Representative, Executive Office of the President (website), n.d., <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china/taiwan>; and Staff Writer, "Taiwan Ranks as World's 16th-Largest Trading Economy," *Taipei Times* (website), April 16, 2022, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/biz/archives/2022/04/16/2003776667>.

19. Insider Monkey Team, "22 Biggest Economies in the World in 2022," yahoo!finance (website), November 2, 2022, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/22-biggest-economies-world-2022-144215864.html>.

20. Ralph Jennings, "EU Seeks to Strengthen Taiwan's 'Silicon Shield' as Military Tensions with China Threaten Chip Supply," South China Morning Post (website), September 16, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3192759/eu-seeks-strengthen-taiwans-silicon-shield-military-tensions>; and "Special Report: Taiwan's Dominance of the Chip Industry Makes It More Important," March 6, 2023, *Economist* (website), <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/03/06/taiwans-dominance-of-the-chip-industry-makes-it-more-important>.

21. Michael Wayland, "How Covid Led to a \$60 Billion Global Chip Shortage for the Auto Industry," CNBC (website), February 21, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/11/how-covid-led-to-a-60-billion-global-chip-shortage-for-automakers.html>; and Reuters, "Top US Spy Says Chinese Invasion Halting Taiwan Chip Production Would be 'Enormous' Global Economic Blow," Reuters (website), May 4, 2023, U.S. News & World Report (website), <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2023-05-04/top-us-spy-says-chinese-invasion-halting-taiwan-chip-production-would-be-enormous-global-economic-blow>.

Should a Taiwan conflict occur, chip shortages cannot be easily made up by capacity elsewhere due to the volume of chips and level of chip sophistication Taiwan provides.

There have been Taiwanese and other initiatives to offshore some of this production, but moving a semiconductor factory is difficult. Most of its value lies in workers' sophistication and know-how relevant to operating in a complex global supply chain. These workers are part of a free and dynamic market economy and demonstrate to the Chinese people what life and work look like in a free society.

Beacon of Democracy – A Liberalist View

Taiwan exemplifies a functioning democratic Chinese society. It is an embarrassment and a threat to the authoritarian PRC regime. Specifically, some argue that Taiwan demonstrates that a Chinese-based society can also be a liberal democratic society and that its existence directly affronts the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) arguments that China must be ruled through socialism with Chinese characteristics.²² In recent congressional testimony, a labor camp survivor testified,

[l]ook at what Taiwan has showcased for us, that the traditional Chinese values, they keep that very well, but they also live in a very vibrant democracy . . . so Taiwan's example is actually the sore [point] for the CCP, that's the main reason why they would like to take Taiwan over, to say that the Chinese people only deserve dictatorship.²³

Democracies generally demonstrate to people living under authoritarian regimes that they have the freedom to criticize and hold their elected officials accountable and to choose their own leaders when the people are not well-served. Unlike the situation in other democracies, however, Mandarin is the most common language used by the media in Taiwan and on the mainland. People in China often view Taiwanese news and see Taiwan's example. Taiwanese soap operas, pop stars, and the like have fan bases in mainland China and remind viewers of the freedoms, choice, and dynamism free societies possess. A pipeline of social and political examples to the people of China operates as a counter gray zone activity

22. Rana Mitter, "New Characteristics for Chinese Socialism? How a CCP Resolution Connects Xi to China's Marxist Past," *Foreign Affairs* (website), December 20, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-12-20/new-characteristics-chinese-socialism>.

23. *The Chinese Communist Party's Threat to America, Before the House of Representatives, Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the US and the Chinese Communist Party*, 118th Cong. (2023) (statement of Ms. Tong Yi), 51:56, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/republican-led-house-committee-on-china-holds-first-hearing-transcript>.

that authoritarian regimes desperately seek to suppress. A critical aspect of any attempt to curb authoritarian aggression is to lay the foundation for democratic change in a regime, and the United States and its democratic allies should support such an effort. Taiwan serves an important role in the future dynamics of how the people of China will develop their political future—perhaps as a democracy with Chinese characteristics.

Taiwan is also strategically important to the collective and self-defense of the United States and its democratic allies. At the beginning of her recent speech to the George W. Bush Presidential Center, Tsai quoted Chairman Oleksandr Merezhko of the Ukrainian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, who stated, "The grand strategy of authoritarian regimes is to divide and destroy democracies one by one." Building on the statement, Tsai argues her case plainly:

. . . [D]emocracies and the rules based international order are being challenged on a daily basis. . . . The dangerous potential of authoritarian regimes to corrode democratic institutions and tarnish human rights cannot be ignored. Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine serves as a prime example. . . . [D]ictatorships will do whatever it takes to achieve their goal of expansionism. . . . [T]he Taiwanese people are very familiar with such aggression. . . . [Taiwan] has been confronted by increasingly aggressive threats from our authoritarian neighbor, . . . [f]rom daily military intimidations, gray zone activities, and influence operations, to cyber attacks and periodic attempts at economic coercion. . . . The menacing behavior of authoritarian regimes should be a wake-up call to all democracies. We must work together to strengthen our resilience and safeguard our values.²⁴

The fall of Taiwan to China would be a net loss to democratic forces everywhere; a gain of some other territory could not easily replace a self-actualized democracy lost to authoritarianism. Afghanistan should

24. Tsai Ing-wen, "The Struggle for Freedom: Remarks from Taiwan President, Tsai Ing-wen" (transcript), George W. Bush Presidential Center, November 16, 2022, <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/the-struggle-for-freedom-remarks-from-taiwan-president-tsai-ing-wen>.

remind us that democracy is not fostered under the influence of a gun but must grow from the will of the people.

The Biden-Harris administration has begun to solidify mutual support among democracies by organizing and a “Summit for Democracy” in 2021 and 2023, to which Taiwan was invited.²⁵ The organization of these summits tacitly acknowledges that other international organizations may no longer be appropriate forums for promoting democratic ideals. The UN, though certainly a useful forum to promote peace and advance diplomatic solutions to world problems, was organized in a completely different environment, with fewer countries and a post-war anachronistic understanding of global power relationships. Although the UN has elements designed to promote democratic ideals, such as the UN Human Rights Council, the membership does not always exemplify or promote its ideals.²⁶ The rise of China and recent Russian aggression has essentially divided the world into two camps—authoritarian and democratic—though in a world not so easily defined as in the Cold War. The Biden summits attempt to rally democratic forces to resist PRC aggression on the political level. It may serve future administrations to shape these summits into a recognizable international organization to marshal democratic forces in the new global dynamic, especially if the UN can no longer accomplish that task. Inviting Taiwan signals the recognition of a new international order and that the United States stands by its democratic allies and partners.

Credibility to US Allies

Credibility among our allies is often touted as a reason for the United States to engage in global affairs. Credibility was the justification for US engagements in Kosovo and in Vietnam, and credibility is often invoked with regard to NATO’s involvement in the current Ukraine crisis. In general, especially for our democratic allies, US assistance to like-minded states

25. State Department, “Summit for Democracy 2021: Invited Participants,” U.S. Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/participant-list-the-summit-for-democracy/>; and “Briefing Room: Joint Statement between Costa Rica, the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, the Republic of Zambia, and the United States on the Announcement of the Second Summit for Democracy” (press release, Washington, DC: White House, November 29, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/29/joint-statement-between-costa-rica-the-netherlands-the-republic-of-korea-the-republic-of-zambia-and-the-united-states-on-the-announcement-of-the-second-summit-for-democracy/>.

26. “Membership of the Human Rights Council for the 17th cycle, 1 January–31 December 2023,” United Nations Human Rights Council (website), n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/current-members>; and Patrick Wintour, “UN Vote to Ignore Human Rights Abuses in China Leaves West in Dead End,” *Guardian* (website), October 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/06/un-vote-ignore-human-rights-abuses-china-leaves-west-dead-end>.

clearly signals whether democracies have a reliable security partner. So what does it mean for Taiwan?

To answer that question, one should analyze allies' views of the regional and perhaps global strategic environment, should Taiwan fall into the hands of the People's Republic of China.²⁷ It is not just a question of whether the United States would renege on a commitment should the People's Republic of China attack Taiwan, but also of the security situation in which our allies and partners would find themselves in such an event. The United States no longer has a mutual defense treaty with the government of Taiwan, but continuous arms sales and policy statements from at least two US presidents appear to have committed the United States to its defense. If these gestures prove bluffs, it is hard to imagine that many countries that would continue relying on the United States for their security. Some may go their own way, and some may default to what they see as the inevitable—being sucked into the PRC's economic and security orbit.

Since the start of the Ukraine conflict and its impact on the Taiwan situation, Japan has doubled its defense budget in a clear sign that it views its security is in peril.²⁸ Such spending will nearly surpass Russia's military budget.²⁹ Moreover, Japanese leadership has openly pushed for a change to the pacifist portion of Japan's constitution.³⁰ These moves are reactions to what the Japanese government has already labeled an *existential* threat to Japan itself—an attack on Taiwan.³¹ Recently assassinated Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe institutionalized the use of “important

27. David Santoro and Ralph Cossa, eds., *The World After Taiwan's Fall, Issues & Insights* 53, SR 2 (Honolulu: Pacific Forum International, 2023), <https://pacforum.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-23-sr2-the-world-after-taiwans-fall>.

28. Ben Dooley and Hisako Ueno, “Japan Moves to Double Military Spending, With a Wary Eye on China,” *New York Times* (website), December 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/16/world/asia/japan-national-security-strategy.html>.

29. Fumio Kishida, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo: National Security Council, 2022), as quoted in Lucy Craft, “Japan to Double Defense Spending, Gain Missile amid Regional Threats,” *CBS News* (website), December 16, 2022, www.cbsnews.com/news/japan-defense-force-spending-budget-doubling-china-taiwan-north-korea/; and Isabel Reynolds, “Japan's Rising Defense Budget Is Now Nearly on Par with Russia,” *Bloomberg* (website), December 5, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-06/japan-s-kishida-hikes-5-year-defense-spend-to-about-315-billion#xj4y7vzkg>.

30. William Gallo, “Japan's Abe Brought Lasting Change to Country's Defense Approach,” *VOA News* (website), July 8, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/japan-s-abe-brought-lasting-change-to-country-s-defense-approach-/6650690.html>; Donald Kirk, “Japan May Be Ready to Break Away from Decades of Pacifism,” *Hill* (website), December 19, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3779084-japan-may-be-ready-to-break-away-from-decades-of-pacifism/>; and Hideki Kitami, “Survey: Record 56% of Voters Back Changes to Constitution,” *Asahi Shimbun* (website), May 3, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14612968>.

31. Sanbeer Singh Ranhotra, “If China Attacks Taiwan, Japan Will Attack China,” *TFI Global* (website), July 7, 2021, <https://tfglobalnews.com/2021/07/07/if-china-attacks-taiwan-japan-will-attack-china/>.

partner” and “precious friend” with reference to Taiwan: “A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency, and therefore an emergency for the Japan-US alliance.”³² He continued: “It is time to abandon this ambiguity strategy. The people of Taiwan share our universal values, so I think the US should firmly abandon its ambiguity.”³³ It was reported that Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida recently stated that “the front line of the clash between authoritarianism and democracy is Asia, and particularly Taiwan.”³⁴ Japan, which has the world’s third-largest economy, could and would defend itself if a theoretical loss of Taiwan tests US credibility. As a reemergent major military force, Japan would certainly change world power dynamics.

In contrast, South Korea has attempted to act as a pivot state since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, despite its long-standing mutual defense treaty with the United States and calls for greater ties.³⁵ South Korea initially resisted independent sanctions on Russia, citing that growing trade links were in line with South Korea’s “more traditional stance of balancing between Beijing and Washington.”³⁶ This stance has developed simply because of South Korea’s geopolitical position and enormous trade ties with its giant neighbor, the People’s Republic of China.³⁷ Although South Korea has recently gestured for greater ties with the United States, its long-term interests may gravitate toward China, and recent history might indicate a wait-and-see position should international support

32. David Sacks, “Shinzo Abe Transformed Japan’s Relationship with Taiwan to Counter Threats from China,” *Asia Unbound* (blog), Asia Program, Council on Foreign Relations, July 13, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/shinzo-abe-transformed-japans-relationship-taiwan-counter-threats-china>; and Ben Blanchard, “Former PM Abe Says Japan, U.S. Could Not Stand by If China Attacked Taiwan,” Reuters (website), November 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/former-pm-abe-says-japan-us-could-not-stand-by-if-china-attacked-taiwan-2021-12-01/>.

33. Ken Moriyasu, “U.S. Should Abandon Ambiguity on Taiwan Defense: Japan’s Abe,” *Nikkei Asia* (website), February 27, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/U.S.-should-abandon-ambiguity-on-Taiwan-defense-Japan-s-Abe>.

34. Richard Haass and David Sacks, “The Growing Danger of U.S. Ambiguity on Taiwan Biden Must Make America’s Commitment Clear to China—and the World,” *Foreign Affairs* (website), December 13, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-12-13/growing-danger-us-ambiguity-taiwan>.

35. Scott A. Snyder, “In Brief: How South Korea’s Foreign Policy Could Change under the New President,” Council on Foreign Relations (website), March 10, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/south-korea-election-new-president-yoon-foreign-policy>.

36. Andrew Ye, “How Will South Korea’s New President Approach Russia’s Ukraine Invasion?,” *Diplomat* (website), May 7, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/how-will-south-koreas-new-president-approach-russias-ukraine-invasion/>; Seong-Hyon Lee, “South Korean Angle on the Taiwan Strait: Familiar Issue, Unfamiliar Option,” Stimson (website), February 23, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/south-korean-angle-on-the-taiwan/>; and Zaini Majeed, “South Korea President Yoon Accused of Avoiding Pelosi after Her Taiwan Visit Angers China,” REPUBLICWORLD.COM (website), August 4, 2022, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/south-korea-president-yoon-accused-of-avoiding-pelosi-after-her-taiwan-visit-angers-china-articleshow.html>.

37. Konstantin Asmolov, “Details of the Economic Relations between PRC and South Korea in 2021,” New Eastern Outlook (website), November 23, 2021, <https://journal-neo.org/2021/11/23/details-of-the-economic-relations-between-prc-and-south-korea-in-2021/>.

for Taiwan deteriorate. With about 28,000 US troops stationed in South Korea, the country would likely find itself embroiled in any conflict in the Taiwan Strait, if not a direct target of China's ire.

Conversely, a PRC-controlled Taiwan would strain US-Korean relations and lead the South Korean government to question the US alliance as China further further occupies the waters surrounding their country. Another formal US ally, the Philippines, has now seen a second president who has demurred in challenges with Beijing. Newly elected Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos has sought to ignore the International Court of Arbitration ruling concerning PRC territorial claims around Philippine waters. Other domestic dynamics, however, make the regional geopolitical situation difficult to navigate. The United States continues to supply the Philippines with armaments, and national security forces remain wary of any closer ties to an ever-encroaching People's Republic of China. In the past, the many ethnic Chinese who controlled a large portion of the economy had closer ties to Taiwan, but there are growing economic ties to the People's Republic of China. These loyal citizens of the Philippines may naturally grow enough PRC ties that the country's interests will change.³⁸ Like South Korea, a PRC-controlled Taiwan could cause the Philippines to become ever more ambivalent toward the United States.³⁹

Although further away from Taiwan, Australia has vocally pushed back in the Taiwan Straits scenario. In a November 13 interview, Australian Minister for Defence Peter C. Dutton averred it would be "inconceivable that we wouldn't support the US in an action if the US chose to take that action" with regard to Taiwan.⁴⁰ In other words, even powers outside the immediate region find strategic value in Taiwan and are willing to go to war over it.

The bottom line is that the loss of Taiwan to PRC control will be seen as a signal by allies and partners that the United States can no longer run the show in the Pacific—at least not solely—and is unable to maintain a rules-based order in the Pacific. That momentum would be on the side of China, and countries in the region should go along to get along with the new sheriff in town. Even in peace time, however, this new balance of power would see a more expansive range for PLAN

38. "Philippines – China Relations," Global Security (website), n.d., <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/philippines/forrel-prc.htm>.

39. Duyeon Kim, "If Taiwan Falls to China: Implications for the Korean Peninsula," in *World After Taiwan's Fall*, ed. David Santoro and Ralph Cossa (Honolulu: Pacific Forum International, 2023), 11, 47, 72, <https://pacforum.org/publication/issues-insights-vol-23-sr2-the-world-after-taiwans-fall>.

40. Colin Clark, "Aussies Would Join US to Defend Taiwan: Defense Minister Says 'Inconceivable' They Wouldn't," Breaking Defense (website), November 15, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/11/aussies-would-join-us-to-defend-taiwan-defense-minister-says-inconceivable-they-wouldnt/>.

operations along their (and US) coastlines.⁴¹ The PLA Navy is already projecting its growing blue-water fleet around American coastal territories, such as Guam.⁴²

Conclusion and Recommendations for Action

This article provided a forthright analysis of basic factors to consider when evaluating the strategic environment concerning Taiwan and related US interests, including the geopolitical, commercial, and ideological interests of the United States and its democratic allies and partners in managing a new great-power dichotomy between authoritarian and democratic states. The forthcoming part two will further analyze changes in this dynamic, to include a review of domestic politics in Taiwan, the One China Policy basis for the triangular relationship between China, Taiwan, and the United States, an analysis of statements of US presidents and in past and present *National Security Strategies*, and policy reactions to provocative Chinese military drills around Taiwan in response to Pelosi's Taiwan visit. Part one is contextual, presenting factors to consider regarding the island's importance to US and allied policy objectives. Read part two of this article in a future issue. It will provide concrete recommendations on how to progress the US relationship between China-Taiwan in favor of democratic ideals.

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41. Kristin Huang, "Chinese Navy Drills Reveal Greater Ability to Project Power Deeper into the Pacific, Analysts Say," *South China Morning Post* (website), January 7, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3205906/chinese-navy-drills-reveal-greater-ability-project-power-deeper-pacific-analysts-say>.

42. Peter Suci, "China Just Sailed an Aircraft Carrier Near One of America's Biggest Pacific Bases," *19FortyFive* (website), December 30, 2022, <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/12/china-just-sailed-an-aircraft-carrier-near-one-of-americas-biggest-pacific-bases/>.

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