



**Institute
of Global Affairs**

Working Paper Series - 1

Yasmine Neri
20/11/21

Can Taiwan Cause a War Between China and the USA?

Abstract

Political analysts are concerned about the possibility of a war breaking out over Taiwan, which could potentially escalate to a much grander international scale, because of the island's alliance with the United States and in view of its deteriorating relations with China as it pursues independence from the mainland. Analysing the situation from the perspective of great power conflict, as well as examining governmental reports and speeches and secondary data, this paper questions whether Taiwan could cause a war between the two great powers of the 21st century and finds that the elements of security and national interests, as perceived in the context of the pursuit of regional hegemony, are presently at play with the USA and China, and Taiwan represents a vital node, connecting the two, because of its strategic and ideological significance to both. In particular, China views reunification with Taiwan as a major national interest, for historical as well as security reasons, while the US, pursuing the role of regional hegemon, holds Taiwan's location as strategic for trade routes and deems it an ideological mission to protect the island's democracy. All these

elements support the assumptions that great power conflict is caused due to conflicting security and economic issues. Taiwan checks out many of the conditions for great power war and thus finds itself in the precarious position of potentially escalating the tensions of the world's two superpowers into a greater conflict.

Introduction

Taiwan is a small island located off the South-Eastern coast of China and had it not been for its ambiguous legal status and consequent uncertain relationship with China, it might not have had the current international relevance that it holds nowadays. Political analysts are concerned about the possibility of a war breaking out over Taiwan, which could potentially escalate to a much grander international scale. These concerns are backed by Chinese efforts towards reunification with Taiwan, ranging from peaceful enhancement of economic and cultural ties to isolation of Taipei in the international arena. In light of recent events, there have been indications that Beijing may rather opt for an armed reunification, as seen from the numerous displays of military force near Taiwanese territory. The reason behind why a seemingly regional conflict could escalate to a much greater international scale resides in the involvement of the US as an ally, albeit unclearly defined, of the island. The US has been providing Taiwan with defensive weapons and the White House has released comments about Washington's "rock-solid" commitment and support for Taiwan's self-defence (Holland and Renshaw), even though it is unclear whether it has the actual capability or intention of intervening if China should attempt to take Taiwan by force.

The aim of this paper is to answer the question "Can Taiwan cause a war between China and the USA?". The broader question concerns the understanding of the causes behind great power conflict in the 21st century. For the sake of narrowing down the research, this paper will examine the possibility of a war breaking out between two of the most powerful countries in the world, the USA

and China, focusing on the role played by Taiwan as an instigating cause. First, an analysis of the existent literature will be illustrated, followed by a section dedicated to the methodology utilised for the purposes of answering the research question. Next, the paper will present the data analysis, by outlining the conditions of relations among the three countries and offer an overview of the tensions currently emerging because of the 2016 shift in policy. Finally, a critical discussion will ensue, arguing that Taiwan is so significant to China that it would resort to military reunification, which would trigger the US' intervention, therefore making Taiwan capable of causing a war between the two greatest powers of the 21st century. Specifically, the preliminary findings indicate that elements of regional hegemony such as state survival and security, combined with national interests such as trade, are at the forefront of the potential conflict, with Taiwan acting as the connecting node between the two great powers.

Literature Review

International Relations scholars have dedicated entire careers to understanding the causes behind war, providing a plentiful and ongoing reserve of theories. When it comes to great power conflict, Mearsheimer contributed enormously with his theory of offensive realism, as presented in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* which he published in 2001. Through his theory, Mearsheimer challenges the widespread optimistic perspective on great power relations and identifies, among other factors, regional hegemons to be especially threatening to stability in the international system, due to the constant pursuit

of power with the aim of survival in the internationally anarchic system. Along with Mearsheimer's line of thought, Kim (2011) and Wohlforth (2001) also point to multipolarity as a significant instigator of great power conflict, because the equal distribution of power and capabilities gives way to uncertain status hierarchies, therefore increasing the chances of war. On the other hand, Van Evera (2013) argues that realists are dwelling on the "weaker theories of war" and should rather examine "the size of first-move advantages and windows, the degree of resource cumulativity, and the ease of conquest", which in his opinion hold more effect on the risk of war.

A number of scholars agree that the international order's current circumstances resemble those of the world prior to WWI (Coker 2015; Colucci 2015). Almost every work on great power conflict predictably mentions the possibility of a Sino-American conflict, with some calling it improbable (Coker; Graham 2017), and others deeming it inevitable (Mearsheimer 2014; Mastro 2021). A considerable contribution has been offered by Graham Allison in *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (2017), in which he argues that a Sino-American war is not inevitable, despite the risk, depicted by the Greek historian's metaphor, of rising powers rivalling a ruling power.

Within the dynamics of a potential Sino-American conflict, a number of scholars have pointed to Taiwan as having a central role, because of its uncertain status in the international system and ambiguous alliance with the US, and Mastro (2021) dedicates an article to why war may be closer than expected due to Beijing's shift to military actions in view of Taiwanese reunification.

Mearsheimer recognises Taiwan as being significant and that the possibility of a conflict between China and the United States is “hardly remote”, while granting that the odds are “not that high”. Allison, in recent online publications and interviews¹, has warned that a military retaliation is very likely to occur if Taiwan continues to pursue independence, and that the US in turn is likely to intervene². Colucci on the other hand, identified Japan as the third-party country likely to cause a showdown between China and the US, because of the country’s large dependence on the US for security matters.

Despite the broad literature there lacks a more recent outlook with the 2016 policy shift timeframe connecting it to the general question of what causes great power wars. Therefore, the present research will be contributing to the existing literature by examining the condition of relations following the 2016 deterioration of relations and providing a more recent and updated perspective on the role of Taiwan in a potential Sino-American conflict.

My assumptions are that, in order for there to be a conflict between great powers 1) there are conflicting national interests, concerning security matters, at stake; 2) there are conflicting economic interests causing tensions in an area of strategic geopolitical importance. Placed in the context of the Taiwan-China-US triangle, these hypotheses can contribute to confirming the research question addressed in paper.

¹ Voice of America interview, May 30th 2020 <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/taiwan-imminent-danger-chinese-invasion>

² The National Interest <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/could-us-lose-war-china-over-taiwan-195686>

Methodology

In order to answer the question "Can Taiwan cause a war between China and the USA?", this paper first analysed the causes leading up to great power conflict generally, then examined the specific relations between Taiwan and China, and Taiwan and the USA, identifying its significance to both superpowers through several governmental reports and speeches combined with secondary data. Taiwan was chosen as a case study because of its distinctive history with China and because of its relations with the US, making it a very likely triggering point for a great power conflict. Between the two countries, Furthermore, the case of Taiwan has sparked academic debate, allowing for a wide range of existing data on the matter.

Analysis

Great Power Conflict

Great powers are states that have global interests, and that have enough military capability to sustain an all-out war as well as the ability to deter nuclear strikes to protect them against their rivals (Mearsheimer 5). The security and interest-based competition between such great powers significantly influences the course of history and other nations. In fact, Mearsheimer argues that it is those elements in the structure of the international system which lead states to ensure their survival through the pursuit of more power. The ultimate goal, for great powers, is to achieve and maintain hegemony, and the distribution of power amongst the leading states is an influencing factor, with unbalanced multipolar systems being the most prone to deadly conflict (335). When states attempt to increase their sense of security and pursue national interests aiming

to become regional hegemons, this causes international tensions and competition to increase and can result in conflicts. Thus, the first hypothesis is confirmed, insofar as conflicting national interests are one of the prime causes of war between great powers.

In the 21st century, great power competition is expected to continue in some form, even though many find the prospect of a conflict “inconceivable” due to the degree of economic integration achieved in our globalised modern society. The United States and China both hold the status of great powers, and the US still has the primacy in exerting influence in the international system even though recently, China’s economic power has overtaken it. The two countries seem to be forming a bipolar geopolitical system, and tensions have arisen over trade, territory, and international governance, therefore filling out this condition for war.

Sino-Taiwanese Relations

Taiwan – officially the Republic of China (ROC) – considers itself independent from China – the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – ever since the 1949 defeat of the Kuomintang Nationalist Government (KMT), that retreated to the island and settled its government there. The victorious Chinese Communist Party (CCP) went on to govern the PRC and, according to its “One China Policy”, it views the island as a “breakaway province” that eventually will be reunified with the mainland (Mainland). However, both entities claim to have legitimate jurisdiction over the entire territory, due to an ambiguous agreement known as the “1992 Consensus”, which resulted in both Taipei and Beijing agreeing to

“one China, different interpretations” formula without actually clarifying which of the two governments represents the one China (Tiezzi).

Relations between the two have been relatively stable, amidst Chinese efforts for reunification ranging from peaceful enhancement of economic and cultural ties to harsher methods of isolation of Taipei in the international arena (Albert). However, since the 2016 shift in Taiwanese leadership with the election of Tsai Ing-Wen, who leads the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) rival to the KMT, the understanding of the 1992 Consensus has been explicitly refused (Tiezzi) and cross-strait relations have deteriorated. After Tsai noted, in the 2016 inaugural speech³, that “the new government will conduct cross-Strait affairs in accordance with the ROC Constitution”, Beijing thereafter employed a sticks and carrots approach. In an effort to convince Tsai to accept the 1992 consensus, Beijing suspended all official communication with Taipei, dramatically halted its tourist flow to the island, and isolated it from international conferences. Additionally, PRC authorities prompted county and city governments to adhere to the 1992 consensus in return for preferential treatment in terms of Chinese agricultural purchases and Chinese tourism (Hickey and Niou 113).

Tensions across the Strait are continuing to escalate, and in recent displays of military strength, the PRC has been stepping up its pressure on Taiwan. In October 2021, in the span of four days, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) flew more than 120 aircrafts into Taiwan’s air defence identification zone

³ Inaugural address of ROC 14th-term President Tsai Ing-wen <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/4893>

(ADIZ) (Ebbighausen). The self-governing island's defence minister, Chiu Kuo-Cheng described the current situation as the "toughest [...] in 40 years" of his military life and warned that by 2025 China would be capable of a full-scale invasion (Lee).

US-Taiwan Relations

After the separation of the "two Chinas", the US initially maintained relations with Taipei rather than Beijing, but under Carter's administration the country abruptly turned its recognition towards the CCP in 1979 (Erskine). In the same year, the "Taiwan Relations Act" was stipulated, agreeing on the provision of weapons to Taiwan to ensure its self-defence capability (US Congress, 1979). Additionally, traditional US policy towards Taiwan includes Six Assurances conveyed to the island in 1982, including the promise that the US would not set a date for the termination of arms sales to Taiwan (Xiyang 4). Furthermore, there are three Communiqués, albeit vague in language, that shape Sino-US consensus on Taiwan issues. Overall, it can be said that the US approach to relations with Taiwan is one of strategic ambiguity, with the aim of preserving peace and stability in the region. In this way, by adhering to the One-China policy, and providing Taiwan with arms sales, a balance can be found across the Strait.

In view of the 2016 deterioration of relations between Taiwan and China, and the latter's consequently more assertive and aggressive efforts at isolating Taiwan, the US has also adjusted its policy towards Taiwan accordingly (7). China is attempting to achieve its goals through coercion and increasing pressure on Taiwan, while the United States has increased its commitment to Taiwan and

applied more pressure towards China (3). In fact, following China's shift in policy towards Taiwan, the US has actually deepened ties with Taiwan, especially after President Obama's foreign policy pivot to the Asian continent. Moreover, during Trump's presidency, relations between China and the US deteriorated, and the United States sold more than \$18 billion of weapons to Taiwan. Following Trump's approach, current US president Joe Biden, even invited Taiwanese representatives to his inauguration (Erskine), which is a strong diplomatic message considering Taiwan's ambiguous international status. The present data indicates that the uncertain US-Taiwan alliance could potentially cause China to react aggressively, if threatened, especially considering that a major part of their entente is the provision of military arms to the small island.

Taiwan's Significance

So, why is Taiwan so important to both China and the USA? In the case of China, it's a matter of nationalism, as Beijing is deeply committed to reunifying it with the mainland, and it provides President Xi Jinping with the possibility of realising his "Chinese Dream" of leading China to the position of regional hegemon and a "reputable and vital global great power", making the matter of reunification also a personal one to the President, in his political aspirations of power and status. The PRC President has declared numerous times the importance of Taiwan's reunification, such as the 2021 speech in occasion of the centennial celebration of the CPC, where he stated that:

"We must take resolute action to utterly defeat any attempt toward "Taiwan independence," and work together to create a bright future for national rejuvenation [...]. No one should underestimate the

resolve, the will, and the ability of the Chinese people to defend their national sovereignty and territorial integrity.”⁴

Most significantly, he reassured and confirmed that the policy towards peaceful reunification remains unchanged (Sacks). However, his statement still points to the high relevance of Taiwan’s reunification.

On the other hand, the US is eager to prevent the reunification from happening because of Taiwan’s strategic position for the control of sea-lanes in East Asia (Mearsheimer 380), as well as for a question of credibility of commitments. In fact, while the island’s geopolitical position and economy are strategic to the US, they are not as critical as the safeguarding of an autonomous democracy, as the loss of Taiwan through blatant PRC military coerciveness and actions would negatively impact American credibility and global values-based policies (Bolton and Zitelman).

Discussion and Conclusion

In light of emerging trends of great power conflict, particular attention has been directed towards Taiwan, a tiny island which finds itself in the crossfire of a much larger great power competition. In fact, it holds a crucial role that could lead to the escalation of tensions into a conflict between the two 21st century great powers. The island has a history of ambiguous relations with China due to inaccurate and unclear understandings of legitimate governance over the

⁴ Full Text: Speech by Xi Jinping at a ceremony marking the centenary of the CPC
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm

Chinese territory, and the PRC aims to reunify it, preferably peacefully, but it will not stop until the goal is achieved. On the other hand, the USA, in an attempt to maintain regional peace and stability, acting as a regional hegemon, has maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity with Taiwan, while adhering to the "One-China policy", which recognises Beijing as the legitimate government, and simultaneously maintaining unofficial relations with Taiwan and providing it with the means of self-defence.

It is possible to see that the characteristics identified by Mearsheimer in his offensive realism theory are present in the analysed situation, namely the fact that it is state's pursuit of survival and security with the ultimate goal of being regional hegemons that is behind the current potential conflict. The tensions between China and the US have arisen over trade, territory and international governance and Taiwan combines all of these, as it has access to important trade sea channels, it represents territory that China would like to incorporate with the aim of gaining more security in its near proximity, and it has become a matter of international governance due to its ambiguous legal status as well as because of its alliance with the US. Essentially, according to Mearsheimer's theory, the elements of security and national interests, as perceived in the context of the pursuit of regional hegemony, are presently at play with the USA and China, and Taiwan represents a vital node, connecting the two, because of its significance to both.

While it is impossible to predict the future, it is possible to state that, considering all the elements of the international system, another great power conflict could occur, and that Taiwan could play a central role in the escalation

of the tensions. Even if the two states avoid a confrontation, their lack of cooperation could have other disastrous implications, ranging from the managing of epidemics to climate change.

Works Cited

Albert, Eleanor. "China-Taiwan Relations." *Council on Foreign Relations* 7 (2016).

Allison, Graham. *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides' Trap?*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

Bolton, John, and Derik R. Zitelman. "Why Taiwan Matters to the United States". *The Diplomat*. 23 Aug 2021, Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/why-taiwan-matters-to-the-united-states/>.

Coker, Christopher. *The improbable war: China, the United States and the continuing logic of great power conflict*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Colucci, Lamont. "Great Power Conflict: Will It Return?" *World Affairs*, vol. 177, no. 5, Sage Publications, Inc., 2015, pp. 44–53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43555423>.

Ebbighausen, Rodion. "China's Taiwan military incursions test the limits of airspace". *Deutsche Welle*, 4 Oct 2021, Retrieved from <https://p.dw.com/p/41E8t>.

Erskine, Andrew. "Strategic Ambiguity, China, and Taiwan: The US-Taiwan Quagmire" *The New Global Order*, 10 August 2021. Retrieved from <https://thenewglobalorder.com/world-news/strategic-ambiguity-china-and-taiwan-the-us-taiwan-quagmire/>.

Hickey, Dennis V., and Emerson MS Niou. "Taiwan in 2016: A new era?." *Asian Survey* 57.1 (2017): 111-118.

Holland, Steve, and Jarrett Renshaw. "White House says U.S. commitment to Taiwan is 'rock solid'". *Reuters*. 14 Oct 2021, Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/white-house-says-us-commitment-taiwan-is-rock-solid-2021-10-14/>.

Kim, Woosang. "Power Transitions and Great Power War from Westphalia to Waterloo." *World Politics*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1992, pp. 153–172., doi:10.2307/2010522.

Lee, Tsung-Hsien. "Why are tensions increasing between China and Taiwan?" *Deutsche Welle*, 7 Oct 2021, Retrieved from <https://p.dw.com/p/41Nhs>.

Maizland, Lindsay. "Why China-Taiwan relations are so tense." *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated May 10 (2021).

Mearsheimer, John J. *The tragedy of great power politics*. WW Norton & Company, 2001.

Sacks, David. "What Xi Jinping's Major Speech Means For Taiwan". *Council on Foreign Relations*. 6 July 2021, Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-xi-jinpings-major-speech-means-taiwan>.

Tiezzi, Shannon. "China and Taiwan Leaders Emphasize Kinship, 1992 Consensus in Historic Talks". *The Diplomat*. 7 Nov 2015, Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/china-and-taiwan-leaders-emphasize-kinship-1992-consensus-in-historic-talks/>.

U.S. Congressional Research Service. Taiwan: Political and Security Issues (IF10275; Updated November 29, 2021), by Susan V. Lawrence, Available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10275.pdf>

United States. Congress. Conference Committees 1979. *Taiwan Relations Act: Conference Report to Accompany H.R. 2479*. [Washington] :[U.S. Govt. Print. Off.], 1979.

Van Evera, Stephen. *Causes of war: Power and the roots of conflict*. Cornell University Press, 2013.

Wohlforth, William C. "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War." *World Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2009, pp. 28–57., doi:10.1017/S0043887109000021.

Xiying, Zuo. "Unbalanced deterrence: Coercive threat, reassurance and the US-China rivalry in Taiwan strait." *The Pacific Review* 34.4 (2021): 547-576.