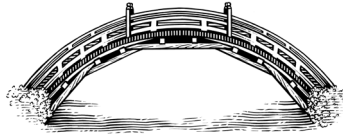


ROUNDTABLE

The Taiwan Flashpoint and Asia's Middle Powers



*Brendan Taylor and Jade Guan*

*Michito Tsuruoka*

*Peter K. Lee*

*Peter Dean*

*Benjamin Ho*

*Hanh Nguyen*

*Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby*

*Alex Bristow and Catherine Jones*

## Introduction

*Brendan Taylor and Jade Guan*

This roundtable considers what role, if any, Asia’s so-called middle powers can play in response to growing tensions across the Taiwan Strait.<sup>1</sup> What strategies and approaches are this category of states adopting as the likelihood of major conflict over this enduring flashpoint intensifies? How do Asia’s middle powers view the costs and risks of conflict over Taiwan, and what key factors inform their assessments? To what extent do their respective approaches exhibit commonalities and potential complementarities, and to what extent are they distinct or even completely divergent? Perhaps most importantly, do this region’s middle powers—either individually or in concert—have the agency to shape the course of the Taiwan flashpoint? Or are they merely pawns in a larger geopolitical game? Even if the latter is true, what strategic choices might they make, especially in the event of conflict, and with what consequences?

Much ink has already been spilled over this flashpoint in recent years as tensions have intensified. The bulk of this work has centered on the three key players in this unfolding drama—China, Taiwan, and the United States—focusing primarily on Beijing’s coercive tactics targeting the island, Taiwan’s shifting identity politics, and an increasingly fractious Sino-U.S. relationship.<sup>2</sup> Some assessments have analyzed Japan-Taiwan security ties and Tokyo’s likely responses in the event of a Taiwan conflict, but these have not considered Japan’s role explicitly through a middle-power lens.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, only a small handful of studies have considered the role that

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bonnie S. Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen, “Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 23, 2023, 88–100.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, William Choong, “Japan’s Intervention in a Taiwan Contingency: It Depends,” *Diplomat*, November 24, 2023 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/japans-intervention-in-a-taiwan-contingency-it-depends>; and Mike Mochizuki, “Tokyo’s Taiwan Conundrum: What Can Japan Do to Prevent War?” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2022): 81–107.

individual Asian middle powers might play—namely Australia or South Korea—either in advance or in the event of conflict over Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> This is notwithstanding the significant stakes involved for these countries and the world. For instance, as modeling published by Bloomberg in January 2024 estimates, a war over Taiwan could cost an estimated \$10 trillion, or 10% of global GDP, making the global financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine each appear pale by comparison.<sup>5</sup>

It is often assumed that middle powers can exert little, if any, influence over the course of this flashpoint and the growing likelihood of catastrophic conflict. A large part of the reason for that pessimism relates to the reduced freedom for maneuver that middle powers are thought to have as a result of structural constraints caused by great-power competition. As the Canadian academic Brian Job has observed:

Certain structural prerequisites are necessary for middle-power diplomacy to flourish. These have been evident in the two waves of middle-power activism since the end of WWII, first in the establishment of the UN and Bretton Woods systems and subsequently in the aftermath of the Cold War. Both have been characterized as relatively benign strategic environments with either mutually accepted boundaries on the direct, strategic competition among major powers, during what [John Lewis] Gaddis termed the “long peace” of the Cold War or during the 1990s with the dominance of the U.S. as a hegemonic power of global and regional security orders. In each, the middle powers shared with the U.S. a prevailing “embedded liberal” consensus on the norms and values underlying the political, economic, and security order. Multilateral and bilateral institutions facilitated the hegemonic provision of global public goods through a “rules-based order.” In these historically contingent periods, there were space and opportunity for middle-power activism.<sup>6</sup>

In contemporary Asia, whatever autonomy or agency middle powers have at their disposal tends to be viewed primarily in terms of their capacity to navigate a course between the great powers—specifically the United States and China—that avoids needing to make “invidious choices” between

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<sup>4</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro and Sungmin Cho, “How South Korea Can Contribute to the Defense of Taiwan,” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2022): 109–29; and Brendan Taylor, “Taiwan Flashpoint: What Australia Can Do to Stop the Coming Taiwan Crisis,” Lowy Institute, Policy Brief, February 26, 2020 ~ <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/taiwan-flashpoint-what-australia-can-do-stop-coming-taiwan-crisis>.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Welch et al., “Xi, Biden and the \$10 Trillion Cost of War over Taiwan,” Bloomberg, January 8, 2024 ~ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-01-09/if-china-invades-taiwan-it-would-cost-world-economy-10-trillion>.

<sup>6</sup> Brian L. Job, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Dilemmas of Middle Powers,” in “The Asia-Pacific Middle Powers’ Strategic Options in the Era of China-U.S. Rivalry,” ed. Chung-chiu Huang and Chien-wen Kou, special issue, *Issues and Studies* 56, no. 2 (2020): 4.

the two.<sup>7</sup> Little consideration has thus far been given to the possibility that Asia's middle powers could potentially influence the Taiwan flashpoint in an active and constructive sense rather than as passive observers to an unfolding Asian tragedy. Instead, scholars of Asian security are even beginning to question the very utility of the middle-power concept, with some calling for its abandonment on the grounds that it is ill-suited to this new era of great-power strategic rivalry.<sup>8</sup>

Curiously, however, such skepticism stands in contrast to the continued insistence on the part of policymakers that middle powers have a valuable and, indeed, indispensable role to play in steering Asia away from catastrophic conflict. As Anthony Albanese, prime minister of Australia, a quintessential middle power, observed during his keynote address to the June 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore:

Australia is engaged not as a spectator or a commentator, not calling for others to act while we stand and watch, not urging nations down a path we are not prepared to walk ourselves. Australia is engaged as a champion for peace and prosperity in the region and the world, and as a contributor to the solutions to the challenges that all of us will face in the years ahead. [We are] investing in our capability and investing in our relationships, working to shape the future, not waiting for the future to shape us.<sup>9</sup>

This roundtable interrogates that apparent disparity between the so-called two worlds of international relations—the scholarly and the policy worlds—through better illuminating what Asia's middle powers might do, and are already doing, in relation to the region's most dangerous flashpoint.

Before proceeding, several definitional and methodological clarifications are necessary. The middle-power concept remains a contested one, and this roundtable does not propose to resolve this long-standing debate. Instead, it embraces what the Australian academic Andrew Carr has characterized as a “position approach” to the dilemmas associated with defining the middle-power concept. As Carr explains, “position

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<sup>7</sup> Lee Hsien Loong, “The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020 ≈ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-06-04/lee-hsien-loong-endangered-asian-century>. See also, for example, Hoo Tiang Boon and Sarah Teo, “Caught in the Middle? Middle Powers amid U.S.-China Competition,” in “Caught in the Middle? Middle Powers amid U.S.-China Competition,” ed. Hoo Tiang Boon and Sarah Teo, special issue, *Asia Policy* 17, no. 4 (2022): 59–76.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey Robertson and Andrew Carr, “Is Anyone a Middle Power? The Case for Historicization,” *International Theory* 15, no. 3 (2023): 379–403.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Albanese, “Keynote Address” (speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, 20th Asia Security Summit, Singapore, June 2, 2023) ≈ <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2023>.

definitions of middle powers focus on quantifiable factors, such as gross domestic product (GDP), population, military size and defence spending, to develop an ‘objective’ ranking of state size.”<sup>10</sup> To operationalize this position approach, the middle powers selected for the roundtable were derived from the Lowy Institute’s reputable Asia Power Index. Six out of the seven countries covered in this roundtable—Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam—are classified as middle powers in the latest Asia Power Index based on eight measures of national power that collectively constitute a country’s “comprehensive power.”<sup>11</sup> While not included in the index, the United Kingdom is added here as a seventh country study—both to reflect its deepening regional engagement and to enhance the generalizability of the roundtable’s findings. While the UK may be regarded as a major or even a great power in certain contexts, for reasons detailed further in that essay, its level of agency is most akin to that of a middle power when considered in an Asian strategic setting.

While comparable in terms of national power, the seven countries exhibit divergences in other areas that add further to the value of this comparative assessment. For instance, the sample includes a reasonable geographic spread, including three Southeast Asian, two Northeast Asian, one Oceanic, and one extraregional middle power. Likewise, the middle powers selected display variation in terms of their alignment status. Three (Australia, Japan, and the UK) are among the United States’ closest allies; two (South Korea and the Philippines) are formal U.S. allies that at times have sought considerable strategic autonomy from the United States but are currently experiencing more intimate ties with Washington; and the remaining two (Singapore and Vietnam) are U.S. strategic partners that resolutely eschew any formal allied status.

### *Essays in This Roundtable*

The roundtable begins with Michito Tsuruoka’s essay on Japan, a country where the implications of a Taiwan contingency are being discussed with increasing frequency and freedom. As Tsuruoka explains, this marks a significant departure from Tokyo’s traditionally more circumspect approach. He outlines the reasons for this shift before focusing on what

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Carr, “Is Australia a Middle Power? A Systemic Impact Approach,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2014): 71–72.

<sup>11</sup> Susannah Patton, Jack Sato, and Hervé Lemahieu, *Lowy Institute Asia Power Index: 2023 Key Findings Report* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2023) ~ <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/report>.

lessons the ongoing conflict in Ukraine might offer for Japan (and other Asian middle powers) in relation to a potential Taiwan contingency. Three such lessons are identified: first, the prime importance of robust deterrence strategies to prevent conflict; second, the uses and limitations of economic sanctions both in advance of and in the event of a conflict; and third, the challenges of countering nuclear-armed adversaries. Tsuruoka concludes that Japan is able to contribute directly toward addressing some of these challenges, particularly the first, through continuing to augment its own military capabilities. However, he also acknowledges that limits remain as to what Tokyo could accomplish, particularly in terms of influencing the growth of China's nuclear arsenal and the future trajectory of Sino-U.S. relations. Indeed, Tsuruoka observes that these limits to influence are a dilemma facing all of Asia's middle powers.

The next essay, by Peter Lee, critiques the long-held assumption that South Korea could abstain militarily from a U.S.-China cross-strait conflict because Seoul would need to focus its energies solely on deterring and, if required, responding to opportunistic North Korean adventurism. Lee argues that the growing likelihood of both horizontal and vertical escalation—particularly in the event of protracted hostilities over Taiwan—is forcing a rethink of this assumption, as reflected in the growing willingness of South Korean leaders to more publicly support preservation of the cross-strait status quo. Yet while South Korea's ability to remain out of the fray looks increasingly untenable, Lee also contends that Seoul's agency in the event of conflict may too have been underestimated. He canvasses five options—total neutrality, partial neutrality, partial involvement, direct intervention, and horizontal counterescalation—that could conceivably be at Seoul's disposal in the event of a Taiwan conflict. Lee concludes that Seoul's choices here could ultimately have significant ramifications for the future of the United States' Asian presence and the region's strategic order.

Continuing the theme of regional order, Peter Dean asserts that Australia's national debate is out of sync with the demands of Asia's new strategic dynamics and is inhibiting Canberra's agency vis-à-vis the Taiwan flashpoint. The long-running debate over whether Australia would support the United States in a Taiwan conflict, Dean argues, has become unduly narrow and outdated. His essay suggests that maintaining the balance of power needed for regional peace and prosperity requires Canberra to think beyond its important alliance with the United States and to contemplate also working more closely with other middle powers on Taiwan, including Japan, South Korea, and the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN). Dean concludes that political leadership will be required both to mend Australia's broken public discourse and to facilitate the difficult regional conversations that working on the Taiwan issue may involve.

The next three essays focus on Southeast Asia's middle powers, many of which are becoming more concerned about the prospects for major-power conflict over Taiwan. As Benjamin Ho observes in the first of these contributions, increased Southeast Asian interest in the flashpoint is occurring at the same time as Taipei is also ostensibly looking to forge closer ties with this subregion as part of its strategy for reducing its dependence on mainland China. Notwithstanding the fact that Taiwan and Southeast Asia are looming increasingly larger on one another's strategic radar, however, Ho contends that the divide between them remains substantial. Rather than seeking to close this gap by attempting to co-opt Southeast Asian governments onto the U.S. side in a new cold war against China, he makes the case that Washington could more productively highlight the importance of the Taiwan issue to the so-called international rules-based order that middle powers, such as Singapore, ultimately rely on for their much-treasured autonomy. Ho argues that the United States, by doing so, stands its best chance of encouraging Southeast Asia's middle powers to exercise any agency they do possess vis-à-vis the Taiwan flashpoint.

Hanh Nguyen analyzes the view from Hanoi. She begins by observing that Vietnam and Taiwan enjoy robust economic and people-to-people relations, notwithstanding their lack of formal diplomatic ties and Hanoi's public adherence to Beijing's "one China" principle. Due to their closeness, however, Nguyen argues that a major-power conflict over Taiwan would generate multiple crises for Vietnam, including the evacuation of its estimated 400,000 citizens currently residing in Taiwan, trade and economic disruption, and horizontal escalation of the conflict into the South China Sea. These developments would, in turn, create a potent mix of domestic and external pressures for Hanoi. While a reluctance to publicly diverge too far from Beijing and the management of all-consuming domestic pressures suggest that Hanoi would be unlikely to adopt a robust stance in the event of a Taiwan conflict, Nguyen maintains that such a response would ultimately damage Vietnam's credentials as an emerging Asian middle power. Even more significantly, she contends, given the stakes involved, such a conflagration would also likely undermine the underpinnings of Hanoi's omnidirectional foreign policy in a manner not dissimilar to that

which occurred following the ending of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby considers the case of the Philippines, which, for reasons of geographic proximity and material weight, has clear potential to play a middle-power role in a Taiwan contingency. Importantly, however, she argues that Manila has yet to articulate a coherent vision for the country's middle-power status and that its propensity to do so remains heavily contingent on whoever is in power. Using the previous Duterte and the incumbent Marcos administrations as comparative case studies, Misalucha-Willoughby demonstrates that each government has responded quite differently to the highly complex and multifaceted menu of security challenges confronting the Philippines. While the Taiwan flashpoint is certainly a priority and, indeed, is arguably ascending the list of challenges, she shows that from Manila's perspective it remains a distant third relative to the conundrums posed by deepening U.S.-China competition and Beijing's coercive moves in the South China Sea. That said, she also highlights that there are lessons from Manila's current responses to the South China Sea disputes, in particular, that are potentially applicable to the Taiwan flashpoint and to the prospective approaches of Asia's other middle powers toward it.

In the roundtable's final essay, Alex Bristow and Catherine Jones observe that the role of the United Kingdom in relation to the Taiwan flashpoint is often underappreciated, particularly at a time when the UK is devoting more attention and resources to the Asia-Pacific. They begin by considering the current trajectory of UK policy toward Taiwan and China, before contemplating the diplomatic, economic, and military choices that would likely confront UK decision-makers in the event of a major crisis or conflict. They contend that the UK, despite being geographically distant, could still exercise a level of agency commensurate with that of an Asian middle power, particularly via its extensive bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral networks that it could draw on in the event of a crisis. Like other middle powers, Bristow and Jones note that the UK could not act alone and would confront considerable economic challenges in the event of a full-blown crisis or conflict. That said, they argue that the UK still retains the capacity to play a meaningful role in deterring, managing, or responding to a Taiwan crisis. Drawing on its diplomatic tools and middle-power status, the UK could do so most effectively by improving regional resilience and scenario planning in anticipation of a Taiwan crisis, while simultaneously fostering cooperation on issues of global concern that extend beyond the Taiwan imbroglio, especially in the areas of climate, trade, and health.



*Common Themes*

Despite the clear differences and areas of divergence between the seven middle powers considered in this roundtable, at least three cross-cutting themes emerge. First, where Asia's middle powers have traditionally tended to absent themselves or, at the very least, sought to preserve the option of remaining neutral in the event of a Taiwan conflict, there is growing recognition that such postures may no longer be viable. For reasons of geographic proximity and economic interconnectedness, Asia's middle powers realize that a major crisis or conflict over Taiwan will affect them directly and possibly even existentially. One often underappreciated consideration here is the relatively large number of foreign nationals living in Taiwan, the fate of whom would present significant dilemmas for a number of Asia's middle powers in the event of conflict—especially Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand, as well as Japan. In a worst-case scenario, Asia's middle powers are also increasingly concerned that a major conflict over Taiwan is unlikely to remain confined to that particular theater. Instead, the potential for hostilities to escalate both horizontally (into other areas such as the South China Sea or the Korean Peninsula) or vertically (possibly even across the nuclear threshold) is such that they can no longer play the role of innocent or largely disinterested bystanders.

Second, the contributions to this roundtable also show that the potential for middle powers to exercise agency beyond simply avoiding “invidious choices” between the United States and China is significantly greater than is often assumed. Some essays highlight the potential for Asia's middle powers to contribute meaningfully to the deterrence of conflict. Others demonstrate the diplomatic contributions that this category of countries can make toward potentially avoiding conflict, whether through utilizing their considerable institutional networks or by playing the “honest broker” role that has traditionally been regarded as such an important middle-power function. Should diplomacy falter and conflict eventuate, the potential for Asia's middle powers to shape the course of hostilities and possibly even determine the shape of the region's resultant strategic order is also highlighted.

Third, the limits to middle-power agency vis-à-vis the Taiwan flashpoint are also well documented and understood in the essays that follow. These limits are understandably a function of the smaller size of Asia's middle powers relative to the region's bigger players—namely the United States and China. They derive in part from the close yet constraining

economic ties that most of these states have with China and the equally inhibiting security bonds that many of them share with the United States. The essays also illuminate the extent to which domestic political pressures will likely limit the freedom of maneuver for Asia's middle powers in the event of a major crisis or conflict over Taiwan. One interesting, and perhaps surprising, omission was the minimal attention given to the possibilities for closer coordination between Asia's middle powers themselves, particularly in terms of trying to avoid a conflict. The reasons for this absence are an area worthy of further exploration.

In the final analysis, in a period where tensions over Taiwan might further intensify, particularly following the January 2024 election of the independence-leaning Lai Ching-te as Taiwan's next president, middle-power interest in and engagement with this flashpoint could well increase. The contributions to this roundtable serve as a guide for both anticipating how this process is likely to unfold and assessing how it can most productively be managed. ◆

## Preparing for a Taiwan Contingency: Lessons for Japan from the War in Ukraine

*Michito Tsuruoka*

Former prime minister of Japan Shinzo Abe stated in December 2021 that “a Taiwan contingency is a contingency for Japan...[I]t is also a contingency for the Japan-U.S. alliance. People in Beijing, particularly President Xi Jinping, should not misjudge that.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, it has become common for Japanese politicians and commentators to speak more freely and frequently about a potential Taiwan contingency and its impact on Japan. Given the geographic proximity between Japan and Taiwan, it is apparent that the Japanese must consider the impact that any crisis over Taiwan, particularly one involving the use of force, would have on Japan. Nevertheless, it had long been taboo—at least in the political realm—to discuss such matters.

First, since Tokyo severed diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan) and officially recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the legitimate government of China in 1972, it has acted as if Taiwan does not exist as either a political or security entity in the region. Tokyo pledged to “fully understand and respect” Beijing’s position that Taiwan is an “inalienable part” of China.<sup>2</sup> In part to avoid invoking Beijing’s ire, most Japanese politicians have remained silent on Taiwan, particularly the political and security dimensions of this long-standing dispute, though Japanese trade and investment relations with Taiwan have developed steadily. Second, Japan’s possible role in any Taiwan contingency, especially in the military domain, has been inherently limited because of the lack of legal basis for its direct involvement. Those in government understandably have not wanted to talk about what they knew their nation could not do.

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<sup>1</sup> “Taiwan Contingency Also One for Japan, Japan-U.S. Alliance: Ex-Japan PM Abe,” Kyodo News, December 1, 2021 ~ <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/12/b38433927c1e-taiwan-contingency-also-one-for-japan-japan-us-alliance-abe.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “Joint Communiqué of the Government of Japan and the Government of the People’s Republic of China,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), September 29, 1972, para. 2 ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/joint72.html>.

However, the context within which Japan's role and approach to Taiwan are contemplated is changing. This essay begins by examining the new strategic landscape that has forced Japan to think more deeply about a Taiwan crisis scenario and public perceptions thereof. It then analyzes Tokyo's evolving approach to a possible contingency over Taiwan, paying particular attention to the lessons Japan could draw from the ongoing war in Ukraine. The assumption here is that, while there is not necessarily a direct link between Russia's actions and those of China, Beijing is closely following events in Ukraine, and there are important lessons to be gleaned by Tokyo and other Asian middle powers in contemplating the growing prospects for a Taiwan conflict.

### *A New Strategic Landscape and Japanese Perceptions*

Japan can no longer avoid discussing and preparing for a potential Taiwan contingency. First and foremost, the cross-strait balance of power has shifted considerably in favor of China over the past decade, leading some American officials and experts to warn that, in terms of capability, Beijing will be able to conduct a major military operation against Taiwan to unify the island by force as early as 2027.<sup>3</sup> The expansion of naval, air force, and missile capabilities of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) have been accelerating at an alarming rate, and it is becoming increasingly harder for Taiwan, even with U.S. support, to keep pace.

President Xi Jinping has repeatedly made clear that "reunifying" Taiwan with the mainland is his ultimate objective, and Beijing has refused to rule out the use of force to achieve that goal. Addressing the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2022, for instance, Xi stated, "We will continue to strive for peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and the utmost effort, but we will never promise to renounce the use of force, and we reserve the option of taking all measures necessary."<sup>4</sup> As a result, a new situation is emerging where both the capability of the PLA and Beijing's willingness to conduct a military operation against Taiwan will soon be in place. Although this does not mean that China will necessarily invade Taiwan, countries in the region

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, "CIA Chief Warns Against Underestimating Xi's Ambitions toward Taiwan," Reuters, February 3, 2023 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-chief-says-chinas-xi-little-sobered-by-ukraine-war-2023-02-02>.

<sup>4</sup> "Transcript: President Xi Jinping's Report to China's 2022 Party Congress," *Nikkei Asia*, October 18, 2022 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-party-congress/Transcript-President-Xi-Jinping-s-report-to-China-s-2022-party-congress>.

and beyond will need to prepare themselves for this potentiality, given its significant ramifications.

A cross-strait invasion by the PRC would present a particularly grave challenge to Japan, owing to its proximity. The distance between Okinawa's main island and Taiwan is approximately 700 kilometers, while Yonaguni, the westernmost island of Japan, is only 111 kilometers away. Japan's role in a Taiwan conflict would, of course, be heavily contingent on the nature and scope of U.S. involvement.<sup>5</sup> Assuming that U.S. forces were deployed in support of the defense of Taiwan in one way or another, it would make sense militarily for Beijing to target U.S. bases in Okinawa and other parts of Japan, including Honshu, the country's main island, to disrupt and deny U.S. military operations. Politically and strategically, however, a case can also be made that a direct PRC attack on Japan would not be prudent because doing so would alienate the Japanese and, once attacked, Tokyo's options for what it could potentially do in direct support of U.S. forces and retaliatory attacks against China would widen considerably. Below the threshold of a direct attack against Japan—an armed attack situation (*buryukougeki jitai*)—the legal scope of Tokyo's actions remains limited.<sup>6</sup>

The Japanese public is displaying growing concern about rising tensions over Taiwan, however. For example, when asked “To what extent do you fear Japan getting drawn into U.S.-China violent conflict over Taiwan?” in a recent *Asahi Shimbun* opinion poll, 28% of respondents indicated “greatly” and 52% answered “to some degree,” while only 16% claimed to be “not concerned much” and 2% responded “not concerned at all.”<sup>7</sup> As for the possibility of Japanese Self-Defense Forces involvement, 11% supported using force with the U.S. military, while 56% supported only providing logistical, rear-area support to the U.S. military.<sup>8</sup>

It is not easy to make sense of this poll. First, the way in which the questions were framed reveals much about Japan's prevailing attitude toward a potential contingency over Taiwan. This prospect is predominantly seen as an issue of so-called entrapment—that Japan might be drawn into a U.S.-China conflict as if Japan is just an innocent bystander. To some extent

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<sup>5</sup> William Choong, “Will Japan Intervene in a Taiwan Contingency? It Depends,” *Diplomat*, November 24, 2023 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/japans-intervention-in-a-taiwan-contingency-it-depends>.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Taiwan and Six Potential New Year's Resolutions for the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” *War on the Rocks*, January 5, 2022 ~ <https://warontherocks.com/2022/01/taiwan-and-six-potential-new-years-resolutions-for-the-u-s-japanese-alliance>.

<sup>7</sup> Taizo Teramoto, “Asahi Poll: 56% Want Only SDF Rear Support to U.S. in Event of Taiwan Crisis,” *Asahi Shimbun*, May 1, 2023 ~ <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14898395>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

this reflects the reality of Japan's status as a middle power, whose actions and calculations would likely not be as decisive in the event of conflict as those of China, the United States, or Taiwan itself. Nonetheless, it is still worth noting that many Japanese perceive a potential Taiwan contingency as a result of the actions of other parties, implying that they also see little role for Japan in preventing it from happening.

Second, the extent to which logistical support to U.S. forces in a Taiwan contingency is recognized as a serious contribution is at best unclear. Such a contribution would certainly be of a completely different order than supporting the U.S. during operations in Afghanistan or Iraq, both of which were faraway places where the adversaries had no credible capability to attack Japan. In the case of a Taiwan contingency, the whole of Japan—not only Okinawa—would be on the front line, and China has the undeniable capacity to target Japan, particularly with missiles.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, regardless of the nature and scale of Japan's support to U.S. forces, the mere fact that the United States uses bases in Japan constitutes a military rationale for China to attack Japan. The Japanese term *kouhou shien* (rear-area support) is therefore misleading in this instance because it suggests that the place from where Japan supports the United States is safe and separate from where the force is deployed. That the notion of “a Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency” ultimately implies that Japan will be on the front line, at risk, does not yet seem to be sufficiently understood by the Japanese public.

### *Deterrence, Deterrence, Deterrence*

One of the most significant lessons from Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine is the prime importance of deterrence. No matter how brave the Ukrainians, their government, and their soldiers have been, it would have been preferable for the country not to have been invaded in the first place. Furthermore, restoring the *status quo ante* is inherently difficult. Even if it is possible, it will incur heavy casualties and destruction. Despite an unprecedented level of military aid by NATO countries, Ukraine has found it hard to take back the occupied territories, with the much-anticipated counteroffensive in the summer of 2023 largely failing to achieve Kyiv's

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<sup>9</sup> Jacob Cohn et al., “Leveling the Playing Field: Reintroducing U.S. Theater-Range Missiles in a Post-INF World,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019 ~ [https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Leveling\\_the\\_Playing\\_Field\\_web\\_Final\\_1.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Leveling_the_Playing_Field_web_Final_1.pdf); and Ankit Panda, “Regional Missile Arsenals: Strategies and Drivers,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 31, 2023 ~ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/10/31/regional-missile-arsenals-strategies-and-drivers-pub-90798>.

stated objectives.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Ukraine is not part of NATO ultimately made it difficult to deter Russia's invasion, highlighting the importance of the transatlantic alliance. Despite escalatory rhetoric against Poland, the Baltic states, and others in NATO, Vladimir Putin has so far refrained from directly provoking NATO countries into armed conflict. There seems to be a clear line between, for example, Ukraine and NATO member Poland.

Japan is in a highly privileged position in this regard, as it has enjoyed an alliance with the United States for more than seven decades. Japan is thus not comparable to Ukraine, despite Tokyo's rhetoric that "Ukraine today could be East Asia tomorrow."<sup>11</sup> More accurately, vis-à-vis potential adversaries Japan would be in the position of Poland in a geographic sense or the United Kingdom in terms of political closeness with the United States.<sup>12</sup>

As noted above, the balance of military power between the Japan-U.S. alliance and China has shifted substantially in favor of China over the past decade. While it is true that Japan's role would be secondary to that of the United States in any military defense of Taiwan, what Japan could do should not be underestimated. Japan's military posture, including both its defensive and offensive capabilities, as well as its preparedness to assist the United States, is undoubtedly a factor in Beijing's strategic calculations, therefore contributing to deterrence. China is closely watching what Japan says and does. The point is that the possibility of Japan's presence in a cross-strait conflict can help maintain the status quo as one of the pillars of regional deterrence posture, particularly in relation to the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea.

In military terms, the most fundamental capabilities for Japan are defensive, particularly air and missile defenses. Japan needs to avoid a situation in which it is deterred by China from assisting the United States—this is the primary function of its air and missile defenses, sometimes referred to as counter-deterrence.<sup>13</sup> In a situation where China attempts to coerce Japan into not supporting the United States, Tokyo can arguably still take the actions it believes are necessary if it feels protected by air and

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<sup>10</sup> "Is Ukraine's Counter-Offensive Over?" *Economist*, November 9, 2023 ~ <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/11/09/is-ukraines-counter-offensive-over>.

<sup>11</sup> Fumio Kishida, "Keynote Address by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue," Prime Minister of Japan, June 10, 2022 ~ [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101\\_kishida/statement/202206/\\_00002.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202206/_00002.html).

<sup>12</sup> See Michito Tsuruoka, "The 'Russia Factor' in NATO-Japan Relations," United States Institute for Peace, June 28, 2023 ~ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/russia-factor-nato-japan-relations>.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Stocker, "The Strategy of Missile Defence: Defence, Deterrence and Diplomacy," *RUSI Journal* 156, no. 3 (2011): 56–62 ~ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2011.591093>.

missile defense capabilities. In reality, however, given the large number of Chinese missiles that are now within striking distance of Japan, it would be unrealistic to intercept them all. Thus, the current Kishida government has committed to developing Japan's own counterstrike capability, which contributes to deterrence by supplementing missile defense.<sup>14</sup>

The war in Ukraine also demonstrates that once a violent conflict starts, it often becomes hard to stop.<sup>15</sup> Even if Ukraine could expel all Russian troops, which at the time of writing appears unlikely, this would not automatically lead to a durable and stable peace, given Moscow's deep-seated designs on its neighbor. Invasion or other means of coercion could recommence at any time, making it essential for Ukraine to seek a reliable security guarantee, most likely via NATO membership.

In the case of a cross-strait conflict, assuming that U.S. forces are directly involved in a timely and effective manner, the defense of Taiwan could be successful, albeit with heavy casualties.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as long as there is no plan or desire on the side of Taiwan and the United States to conduct an invasion of the mainland and capture Beijing—just as in the case of Ukraine vis-à-vis Russia or the United States in the 1990–91 Gulf War—how could this war end? China would still be across the strait intending to invade Taiwan again once it restores its military power. Would the United States be prepared to recognize Taiwan's independence and form a legally binding security treaty similar to the one it has with Japan? This is a serious question for Japan as well. Assisting Taiwan's defense will never be a straightforward proposition. That is also why deterrence is critical because it potentially avoids a situation where the United States, Japan, and other like-minded countries will need to confront this conundrum.

### *Enhancing Economic Resilience*

In the event of a Taiwan contingency, Japanese trade with China will be heavily affected and may even come to a complete halt, depending on the severity of the situation. Japan may also need to impose sanctions on

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<sup>14</sup> Hideshi Tokuchi, "Japan's New National Security Strategy: Background and Challenges," Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Policy Paper, 2023/5, 2023. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/75779/%2810.07.23%29%20RSC%20PP%202023.05.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Modern Warfare: Lessons from Ukraine*, Lowy Institute Paper (Sydney: Penguin Random House, 2023), 166.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2023. [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/230109\\_Cancian\\_FirstBattle\\_NextWar.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/230109_Cancian_FirstBattle_NextWar.pdf).



China, and its sea lines of communication with other countries inevitably will be affected. Such potentialities are of concern not only for those who do business with China but for the Japanese populace more generally, given the high level of economic interdependence between the two countries. Imports of energy and food are especially important for Japan, which heavily depends on secure and stable sea lines of communication.

There have been an increasing number of crisis simulation exercises pertaining to Taiwan in Japan, the United States, and other countries. Thus far, however, these have tended to focus on the military elements of a Taiwan contingency. More needs to be done to address the potential economic dimension of any crisis, including “sanctions contingency planning” in addition to military contingency planning.<sup>17</sup>

Once again, the Russia-Ukraine experience offers some valuable lessons. First and foremost, warnings by the United States and other G-7 partners regarding the imposition of severe economic sanctions—something the Biden administration called “economic deterrence measures”<sup>18</sup>—ultimately failed to deter the Russian invasion. When an aggressor is determined to take military action, economic measures alone are not enough to stop it. Adding to this, the lesson that it is difficult to make an immediate impact on any sanctions target through such measures has been reinforced. Russia continues to bring in huge sums of foreign currency from its energy exports and is thought to be increasing weapons and ammunition production, even under the weight of Western sanctions.<sup>19</sup>

A Taiwan contingency could well be different. Unlike the war in Ukraine, which has not thus far involved the United States or its NATO allies directly, conflict over Taiwan is far more likely to engage the United States and Japan. In the event of such engagement, the need to sever economic ties with China following an invasion of Taiwan may be greater for the United States and Japan than in the Russian case. That said, there is little evidence in either case to refute the prevailing wisdom that points to the overall limitations of economic sanctions as a tool of statecraft.

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<sup>17</sup> Charlie Vest and Agatha Kratz, “Sanctioning China in a Taiwan Crisis: Scenarios and Risks,” Atlantic Council, June 21, 2023 ~ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/sanctioning-china-in-a-taiwan-crisis-scenarios-and-risks>.

<sup>18</sup> “Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on Russia Ukraine Economic Deterrence Measures,” White House, January 25, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/25/background-press-call-by-senior-administration-officials-on-russia-ukraine-economic-deterrence-measures>.

<sup>19</sup> “Russia Ramps Up Output of Some Military Hardware by More than Tenfold—State Company,” Reuters, September 19, 2023 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-ramps-up-output-some-military-hardware-by-more-than-tenfold-state-company-2023-09-19>.

It is important also to not overlook the close strategic relationship between Beijing and Moscow. Although China appears to be refraining from sending heavy weapons systems to Russia, Beijing continues to support Moscow's war efforts against Ukraine by exporting parts and items necessary for weapons production and through energy imports. If the PRC takes military action against Taiwan, Beijing will likely expect a similar level of support from Moscow. To some extent, the degree of Russian support could be determined by the future course of the war in Ukraine. Should the war in Ukraine become protracted, which looks increasingly probable, Russia's ability to help China will likely be limited. At the same time, Beijing is almost certainly deriving its own lessons from the Western imposition of sanctions against Russia and Moscow's responses and adaptations, using these to prepare itself to better counter the effects of any potential sanctions.<sup>20</sup>

### *Countering Nuclear-Armed Adversaries*

Washington has thus far avoided direct involvement in the Ukraine war, arguably with implications for U.S. credibility. At least three plausible explanations for its reticence have been identified.

First, Ukraine is not a NATO member, which President Joe Biden has repeatedly highlighted. To be sure, the United States does not have treaty obligations to come to Ukraine's defense. However, this rationale can also be seen as little more than a convenient excuse for not sending in troops because the United States (or any country for that matter) does not require a security treaty to exercise the right of collective self-defense enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter to help others, including non-allies. For instance, the United States used force to help Kuwait and Kosovo without a treaty commitment to these countries. Whenever Washington thinks it is necessary to send troops, it can take this action. Second, it is possible that Washington simply does not regard Ukraine as important enough, either politically or strategically, compared with Kuwait or Kosovo. Third, Russia's

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<sup>20</sup> Eduardo Baptista, "China Weighs Options to Blunt U.S. Sanctions in a Taiwan Conflict," Reuters, October 20, 2023 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-weighs-options-blunt-us-sanctions-taiwan-conflict-2023-10-20>.

possession of nuclear weapons is also seen to condition U.S. behavior. Indeed, Biden himself has referred to the dangers of nuclear Armageddon.<sup>21</sup>

On the first of these three rationales, one could argue that Taiwan is in a slightly more advantageous position than Ukraine because of the United States' Taiwan Relations Act. Although it is a piece of domestic legislation rather than an international treaty, the act still creates a de facto U.S. commitment to the defense of Taiwan. On the second explanation, an argument can be made that Taiwan is more important than Ukraine to the United States' strategic interests based on its geopolitical location as well as its high-tech industries, especially semiconductors.

What worries Taipei the most—and Tokyo—is the third explanation. If Russia's nuclear weapons are the fundamental reason for U.S. reluctance to become more directly involved in Ukraine, how can these governments be confident about the U.S. commitment to Taiwan? China also has nuclear weapons and is believed to be rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal.<sup>22</sup> Once the nuclear advantage that the United States has been enjoying in the region vis-à-vis China vanishes, Washington will need to tread even more cautiously.

### *Conclusion*

In sum, Japan must learn important lessons from the war in Ukraine to better consider and prepare itself for a Taiwan contingency. These lessons include recognizing the prime importance of deterrence, the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of economic sanctions, and the challenge of countering nuclear-armed adversaries. On one hand, there are things that Japan can do on its own, such as continuing to strengthen its defense posture. At the same time, however, there are factors that Tokyo does not have the power to influence, including the direction of the U.S.-China relationship or the expansion and modernization of China's nuclear arsenal. These challenges remain a common dilemma for all of Asia's middle powers. ◆

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<sup>21</sup> Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden at Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Reception," White House, October 6, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/10/06/remarks-by-president-biden-at-democratic-senatorial-campaign-committee-reception>.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023* (Washington, D.C., October 2023) ~ <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china.pdf>.

## South Korean Entanglement in a Taiwan Contingency

*Peter K. Lee*

What would the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) do in the event of a war between the United States and China over Taiwan? Until recently, successive South Korean administrations had assiduously insisted that their primary concern during any cross-strait conflict would be the clear and present danger posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea). For policymakers in Seoul, the priority has been ensuring that North Korea does not use a cross-strait conflict as an opportunity to conduct military provocations on the Korean Peninsula or even open a second front in a wider regional war. But increasing fears of a U.S.-China conflict sometime this decade have led South Korean leaders to begin mentioning for the first time the "importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" in joint statements with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Like many of Asia's middle powers, especially those that are U.S. treaty allies, South Korea is beginning to consider the possibility of entrapment in a Taiwan contingency. This essay argues that, rather than deliberate entrapment by the United States to join in a military defense of Taiwan, South Korea faces a far greater risk of entanglement in the conflict during an escalation in fighting. The ROK's status as a U.S. treaty ally hosting 28,500 U.S. troops and major U.S. military installations, as well as geographic proximity to key transit routes for incoming U.S. forces, means that the country is likely to become drawn into most conflict scenarios. Nonetheless, South Korea has the agency to decide the degree of its involvement, which could entail total neutrality, partial neutrality, partial involvement, direct intervention, or horizontal counterescalation.

### *Unfinished Hot Wars from the Cold War*

During the Cold War, South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam were the United States' three front-line Asian allies. All three also happened to be divided states seeking to reunify their countries. South Korea and Taiwan,

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S.-ROK Leader's Joint Statement," White House, May 21, 2021 ≈ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement>.

in particular, were active in trying to build a multilateral security alliance.<sup>2</sup> Taiwan president Chiang Kai-shek's offer to send 33,000 troops to join the Korean War and ROK president Park Chung-hee's deployment of over 300,000 troops to South Vietnam reflected their shared commitment to defeating Communism. But the United States' adoption of a hub-and-spokes alliance system in the 1950s meant that the strategic linkages between its allies, including between South Korea and Taiwan, remained limited and mediated.<sup>3</sup> U.S.-China diplomatic normalization during the 1970s, the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, the end of the Cold War, and South Korea's transfer of diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China in 1992 marked the erosion of ideological solidarity.

For many South Koreans, therefore, limited national interests are at stake in a Taiwan contingency today. Despite South Korea's and Taiwan's enduring national division, mutual dominance of the world's semiconductor industry and advanced manufacturing, and geostrategic proximity of less than a thousand kilometers between each other, their bilateral relationship has faded in importance.<sup>4</sup> Going to war against China to defend Taiwan, even as part of a U.S.-led coalition, is inconceivable for many South Korean experts and officials.<sup>5</sup>

The legacy of the hub-and-spokes alliance system is that South Korea has not had to factor the defense of other U.S. allies into its strategic planning. The *raison d'être* of the ROK-U.S. alliance is to deter North Korea. The ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953 explicitly restricts the scope of mutual assistance to "an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories now under their respective

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<sup>2</sup> Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "Network Connections and the Emergence of the Hub-and-Spokes Alliance System in East Asia," *International Security* 45, no. 2 (2020): 40–41.

<sup>3</sup> Victor D. Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (2010): 158–96.

<sup>4</sup> Jaichul Heo, "The Taiwan Issue and Korea's Economic Security in the Era of U.S.-China Strategic Competition," Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, Opinions, no. 258, February 22, 2023  $\approx$  [https://www.kiep.go.kr/galleryDownload.es?bid=0008&list\\_no=10584&seq=1](https://www.kiep.go.kr/galleryDownload.es?bid=0008&list_no=10584&seq=1).

<sup>5</sup> Moon Heungho et al., "2023 Mijungyeoghag gwangye: Hanbandowa Daemanhaehyeobui wigigwanli banghyang mosaeg" [2023 Joint Conference Papers on the Dynamics between the U.S. and China: Crisis Management of the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan], Institute for Far Eastern Studies, January 16, 2023  $\approx$  <https://ifes.kyungnam.ac.kr/bbs/ifes/910/5297/artclView.do>; and Moon Heungho, "Mijung gyeongjaenggwa Daemanmunje: Hangugui sigag" [The U.S.-China Competition and Taiwan Issue: A Korean Perspective], East Asia Institute, June 22, 2021  $\approx$  [https://www.eai.or.kr/new/ko/pub/view.asp?intSeq=20569&board=kor\\_special](https://www.eai.or.kr/new/ko/pub/view.asp?intSeq=20569&board=kor_special).

administrative control.<sup>6</sup> Based on a textualist reading, this would exclude a Chinese attack on U.S. forces around Taiwan. This differs from the U.S. treaties with Australia and the Philippines that cover “an armed attack...on its armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific.”<sup>7</sup>

As such, many South Korean experts contend that any military operation directed at China would fall outside the scope and mandate of the alliance. The current structure of the U.S. military presence in the ROK reflects this singular focus on the DPRK. As a recent U.S. government report noted, “Unlike in other locations west of the IDL [International Date Line], U.S. basing posture in South Korea is primarily organized around deterring and resisting potential DPRK aggression.”<sup>8</sup> For example, over the past decade, the United States has consolidated its 28,500 personnel stationed in South Korea as part of the United States Forces Korea (USFK) and dozens of bases into two regional hubs around the cities of Pyeongtaek, which is south of Seoul, and Daegu, which is in the country’s southeast.<sup>9</sup> U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys near Pyeongtaek is now the largest overseas U.S. military installation in the world. This consolidation has proceeded at a time when the United States has been adjusting its military footprint throughout the Indo-Pacific to be more dispersed and resilient against a potential Chinese or North Korean missile attack.

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<sup>6</sup> “Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea; October 1, 1953,” U.S. Forces Korea ~ [https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H\\_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty\\_1953.pdf](https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty_1953.pdf). The often-mentioned supplementary “understanding” that accompanied the treaty in 1954 includes the following provision: “nor shall anything in the present Treaty be construed as requiring the United States to give assistance to Korea except in the event of an armed attack against territory which has been recognized by the United States as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the Republic of Korea.” See “Resolution of Ratification, with an Understanding, as Agreed to by the Senate on January 26, 1954,” U.S. Senate, 83rd Cong., January 26, 1954 ~ <https://li.proquest.com/elhpdf/histcontext/SED-83-2-D13.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Article V of the 1951 Security Treaty between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States of America and in the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines both read as follows: “For the purpose of Article IV, an armed attack on any of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack on the metropolitan territory of any of the Parties, or on the island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific or on its armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific.” “Security Treaty between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States of America,” T.I.A.S. 2493, 3 UST 3420–3425, December 9, 1951 ~ <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/treaties/lltreaties-3-3/lltreaties-3-3.pdf>; and “Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines,” T.I.A.S. 2529, 3 UST 3947–3952, August 13, 1951 ~ <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/treaties/lltreaties-3-3/lltreaties-3-3.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Luke A. Nicastro, “U.S. Defense Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, R47589, June 6, 2023 ~ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47589>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 41–42. See also Andrew Yeo and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Geostrategic Competition and Overseas Basing in East Asia and the First Island Chain,” Brookings Institution, Policy Brief, February 2023 ~ [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/FP\\_20230207\\_east\\_asia\\_basing\\_ohanlon\\_yeo.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/FP_20230207_east_asia_basing_ohanlon_yeo.pdf).

South Korea has, however, focused on the possibility of North Korea using a cross-strait military contingency as an opportunity to undertake military provocations on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>10</sup> In this two-front war scenario, South Korea's primary responsibility and contribution to U.S. regional military planning remains to deter North Korea. As Alex Soohoon Lee and Choong-Koo Lee concluded in a recent study, "Overall, the ROK intervening in a Taiwan Strait military crisis would be unlikely."<sup>11</sup>

### *The USFK and Two-Front Contingencies*

As recently as 2021, South Korean and U.S. defense officials were not discussing how to respond to a Taiwan contingency.<sup>12</sup> But this long-established mutual understanding about the role of the alliance is being revisited. The 2021 ROK-U.S. Leaders' Joint Statement between President Moon Jae-in and President Joe Biden was the first to ever mention "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."<sup>13</sup> The 2023 ROK-U.S. Leaders' Joint Statement between President Yoon Suk-yeol and President Biden went further by stating "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the region."<sup>14</sup> In an April 2023 interview with Reuters, President Yoon noted that "the Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, it is a global issue."<sup>15</sup>

Rather than direct intervention, however, ROK-U.S. discussions have focused on whether USFK personnel would be deployed to a Taiwan conflict if the United States were to go to war in defense of Taiwan and how

<sup>10</sup> Byung Hwang Park, "Daeman Munjereul dulleossan gunsajeok ghungdol ganeungseonggwa urui daeeungbanghyang" [Conflict between the U.S. and China over the Taiwan Strait and South Korea's Policy Direction], Institute for National Security Strategy, no. 187, November 2022  $\approx$  <https://www.inss.re.kr/upload/bbs/BBSA05/202211/F20221108132202776.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Soohoon Lee and Choong-Koo Lee, "The Taiwan Strait and the ROK-U.S. Alliance," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 35, no. 1 (2023): 157.

<sup>12</sup> Chulwoo Kim, "Shin Beomcheol gukbangchagwan 'Juhanmigun unyong Hanbando anbo jeohae antorok hal geot'" [Vice Minister of National Defense Shin Beom-cheol, "USFK Operations Will Not Undermine National Security in the Korean Peninsula"], *Sisafocus*, September 22, 2022  $\approx$  <http://www.sisa-news.com/mobile/article.html?no=213333>.

<sup>13</sup> "U.S.-ROK Leader's Joint Statement."

<sup>14</sup> "Leaders' Joint Statement in Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Alliance between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea," White House, Press Release, April 26, 2023  $\approx$  <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/leaders-joint-statement-in-commemoration-of-the-70th-anniversary-of-the-alliance-between-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-republic-of-korea>.

<sup>15</sup> Soyoung Kim, Ju-min Park, and Hyonhee Shin, "Exclusive: South Korea's Yoon Opens Door for Possible Military Aid to Ukraine," Reuters, April 19, 2023  $\approx$  <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-yoon-opens-door-possible-military-aid-ukraine-2023-04-19>.

South Korea might manage this process. South Korea insists that any U.S. decision to relocate USFK troops and military assets off the peninsula to fight in a cross-strait conflict would have to be made in consultation with South Korea. In one study modeling a U.S.-China war over Taiwan, Michael O’Hanlon noted that it “is also not clear if U.S. aircraft based in South Korea and the Philippines could be used in this kind of war; much would depend on how these countries saw the conflict.”<sup>16</sup> By contrast, Oriana Skylar Mastro and Sungmin Cho have suggested that South Korea could free up the USFK to deploy to Taiwan by accepting higher defense burden sharing vis-à-vis North Korea.<sup>17</sup> A report by South Korea’s Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security similarly recommended the provision of nonmilitary support for the USFK, including relocation of USFK air wings to bases in Japan for operations, ROK-U.S. intelligence surveillance, and logistics support for the United States.<sup>18</sup>

There are growing indications that the U.S. military and Congress regard the Korean Peninsula and cross-strait theaters as interlinked.<sup>19</sup> In January 2023, USFK commander General Paul LaCamera remarked that “what begins in one region spreads very quickly within the region and around the world.”<sup>20</sup> On the question of South Korean military involvement, former defense secretary Mark Esper stated that “there would be a support role as well.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Department of Defense has shifted the USFK to a policy of “strategic flexibility” since the Iraq War, which saw deployments of U.S. units in 2006 that subsequently did not return to the South Korea.<sup>22</sup> Most recently, the amended 2024 U.S. National Defense Authorization Act includes a direction to study the organizational structure of the U.S.

<sup>16</sup> Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Can China Take Taiwan? Why No One Really Knows,” Brookings Institution, August 2022 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/can-china-take-taiwan-why-no-one-really-knows>.

<sup>17</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro and Sungmin Cho, “How South Korea Can Contribute to the Defense of Taiwan,” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2022): 109–29.

<sup>18</sup> Choi Woo-seon, “Daeman gunsachungdol sinariowa Hangugui daeeung” [South Korea’s Responses to a Taiwan Military Conflict Scenario], Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, IFANS Brief 2021–51, November 17, 2021 ~ <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/ifans/kor/act/ActivityAreaView.do?csrfPreventionSalt=null&sn=13996&boardSe=pbl&koreanEngSe=KOR&ctgySe=12&menuCl=&searchCondition=searchAll&searchKeyword=&pageIndex=1>.

<sup>19</sup> Russell Hsiao, “Taiwan and South Korea Enhancing Their Engagement as Chinese Aggression Intensifies,” Global Taiwan Institute, Global Taiwan Brief 8, no. 18, September 20, 2023 ~ <https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GTB-8.18-PDF-Final.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Sungmin Cho, “South Korea Would Play Role in a Taiwan Contingency,” *Asia Times*, January 6, 2023 ~ <https://asiatimes.com/2023/01/south-korea-would-play-role-in-a-taiwan-contingency>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Young Ho Kim, “The New U.S. Defense Strategic Guidance and Its Implications for South Korean Security,” East Asia Institute, Issue Briefing, no. MASI 2012-01, February 9, 2012 ~ [https://www.eai.or.kr/main/english/research\\_view.asp?intSeq=17640&code=89&keyword\\_option=&keyword=&gubun=research](https://www.eai.or.kr/main/english/research_view.asp?intSeq=17640&code=89&keyword_option=&keyword=&gubun=research).



Indo-Pacific Command, including any possible modifications “affecting United States Forces in Japan and South Korea, in response to such changing security environment.”<sup>23</sup>

### *Horizontal Escalation and Alliance Entanglement*

This debate over the deployment of the USFK has sidestepped the more fundamental alliance security dilemma of whether South Korea itself would be militarily involved in a U.S.-China war over Taiwan. Alliance politics scholars have primarily focused on the issue of entrapment in terms of how junior allies such as South Korea might drag the United States into undesired conflicts.<sup>24</sup> Tongfi Kim has persuasively argued that entrapment is better understood as a subset of entanglement, which he defines as a situation in which a “state is compelled to aid an ally in a costly and unprofitable enterprise *because of the alliance*. Entrapment is a form of *undesirable* entanglement in which the entangling state adopts a *risky or offensive* policy not specified in the alliance agreement” (italics in original).<sup>25</sup>

For South Korea, entrapment would be if the United States were to deliberately provoke a war with China over Taiwan and then demand ROK military support. Yet the real risk for South Korea is not entrapment but entanglement. In short, the question of ROK intervention and USFK intervention cannot easily be separated precisely because of the alliance. For South Korea, the structure and posture of the ROK Armed Forces and the USFK mean that the threshold for ROK military intervention is much lower than a direct Chinese attack on ROK territory. While a blockade or even bombardment of Taiwan would have lower risk for alliance entanglement, a high-intensity conflict involving large numbers of U.S. forces in direct combat with Chinese forces would create strong linkages between U.S. forces and South Korea.

Sustained military operations in the Taiwan Strait are likely to escalate either vertically in terms of lethality or horizontally in terms of geographic scope.<sup>26</sup> U.S. wargames have concluded that prolonged fighting

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<sup>23</sup> See “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024: Conference Report,” House of Representatives, H.R. 2670, 118th Cong. (2023), section 1319, 919–20 ~ <https://www.congress.gov/118/crpt/hrpt301/CRPT-118hrpt301.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (2015): 7–48.

<sup>25</sup> Tongfi Kim, “Why Alliances Entangle but Seldom Entrap States,” *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (2011): 355.

<sup>26</sup> Josh Smith, “Home to 28,000 U.S. Troops, South Korea Is Unlikely to Avoid a Taiwan Conflict,” Reuters, September 26, 2022 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/home-28000-us-troops-skorea-unlikely-avoid-taiwan-conflict-2022-09-26>.

will eventually lead to a wider theater of U.S. forces also becoming targets, either at U.S. military bases or while transiting seas and airspace to the major areas of fighting.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, while some wargames based on a short conflict scenario account for the possibility that USFK and ROK forces might remain uninvolved, this assumption diminishes the longer a war drags on, raising the likelihood of vertical or horizontal escalation. For example, a wargame by the Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded that “the United States would release two of its four [Air Force] squadrons in South Korea.”<sup>28</sup> Two U.S. 7th Air Force squadrons are based at Osan, near Pyeongtaek, and two are based at Kunsan on the southwest coast. Both airbases are less than 400 kilometers, or 240 miles, from China’s Shandong Peninsula. These bases, as well as any USFK assets identified as being routed to a Taiwan theater of operations, would quickly become targets for Chinese forces. As one former South Korean official explained, “In that scenario, it would be very difficult for South Korea to only provide humanitarian aid to Taiwan, as it did during the Ukrainian war, or to remain on the sidelines.”<sup>29</sup>

South Korea has the agency and options to decide its degree of involvement based on such thresholds. Five possible options are shown in **Table 1**, including South Korea’s expected actions relative to the expected escalation risks and risks to the ROK-U.S. alliance.

The first option would be total neutrality, meaning not only the denial of ROK military forces but also refusal to allow the use of the USFK in support of U.S. military operations over Taiwan. In this scenario, South Korea would only provide “symbolic cooperation,” including information, surveillance, and reconnaissance support; denial of transit to the Chinese military across ROK territorial airspace and waters; cyberdefense operations to protect critical ROK infrastructure; facilities and bases for the maintenance of U.S. civilian aircraft or ships engaged in nonmilitary missions; patrolling of the sea lines of communication east of Taiwan; and logistics cooperation.<sup>30</sup> Although such support would be important, it would not affect the outcome of a war.

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<sup>27</sup> Markus Garlauskas, “The United States and Its Allies Must Be Ready to Deter a Two-Front War and Nuclear Attacks in East Asia,” Atlantic Council, August 16, 2023 ~ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia>.

<sup>28</sup> Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, “The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2023, 60–61.

<sup>29</sup> Cheng-liang Chen and William Hetherington, “South Korea Must Prepare for a Taiwan War,” *Taipei Times*, May 16, 2023 ~ <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/05/16/2003799876>.

<sup>30</sup> Lee and Lee, “The Taiwan Strait and the ROK-U.S. Alliance.”

TABLE 1

*South Korea's Alliance Options in a U.S.-China Conflict over Taiwan*

<b>Involvement option</b>	<b>Expected action(s)</b>	<b>Escalation risk</b>	<b>Alliance risk</b>
<b>Total neutrality</b>	No ROK military involvement; no USFK involvement	Low	High (U.S. charge of abandonment)
<b>Partial neutrality</b>	No ROK military involvement; allow USFK involvement	Medium (Chinese targeting of USFK assets)	High (U.S. charge of free riding)
<b>Partial involvement</b>	Limited ROK military rearguard support; allow USFK involvement	Medium	Medium
<b>Direct intervention</b>	Combined ROK-U.S. military campaign in Taiwan	High	Low
<b>Horizontal counterescalation</b>	Combined ROK-U.S. military campaign in Taiwan and Northeast Asia	High	Low

The second option would be partial neutrality whereby South Korea would abstain from direct military involvement but allow some or all of the USFK to be deployed, either directly from the Korean Peninsula or via Japan. In this case, South Korea would adhere to its position of neutrality to avoid a direct confrontation with China while buck-passing responsibility for U.S. military actions. A third option would be partial involvement in which the ROK military is deployed in a limited capacity, such as for transport, logistics, and munitions. This would signal to China that South Korea is an active participant in hostilities, albeit in a rearguard support role to U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific. The fourth option would be direct intervention and the deployment of both ROK and U.S. forces to the military defense of Taiwan, including air and naval assets. This would mark a significant escalation involving combined ROK-U.S. military operations, potentially as part of a larger coalition of U.S. allies including Japan and Australia, with ROK troops deployed to the combat area. A final option involves horizontal counterescalation by the ROK-U.S. alliance to respond to Chinese military aggression outside the Taiwan Strait, such as in the East China Sea or West/Yellow Sea to tie down Chinese forces from

attacking Taiwan. This would expand the area of military operations as part of a full-scale war with China.

Each option dramatically increases the likelihood of South Korea becoming involved in a direct military conflict with China, an event that has not happened for 70 years. China's preference is for South Korea to stay neutral in any conflict and the USFK to remain uninvolved. The corollary to each of the above options is that they inversely affect the likelihood of U.S. abandonment of South Korea as an ally during or after a Taiwan contingency, with accusations that South Korea had abandoned the United States in its hour of need or been a free rider while U.S. troops were being killed in combat.<sup>31</sup> Total neutrality by South Korea would severely damage U.S. trust in the alliance. More importantly, if South Korea were to abstain from the conflict and the United States were to lose the war, then the likelihood of U.S. retrenchment and withdrawal from Asia would be significant. This scenario, therefore, would bring about the worst-case outcome from Seoul's perspective.

This essay has critiqued the assumption of South Korean military noninvolvement in a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan. A war over Taiwan is not inevitable, nor is South Korean military involvement assured. But the idea that South Korea could abstain from a major U.S.-China war in which tens of thousands of U.S. troops are involved, including those currently based in South Korea, must be seriously scrutinized. There would likely be fierce debate in Seoul between choosing partial neutrality or partial intervention at the onset of a crisis. But the longer a conflict drags on, the more likely escalation to direct intervention or horizontal counterescalation will become serious considerations. The important question, therefore, is not which option Seoul ultimately chooses but at what point in the conflict it makes the choice to best preserve the ROK-U.S. alliance to realize its preferred strategic outcome. South Korean concerns about deliberate entrapment by the United States should be accompanied by close consultations with the United States and other U.S. allies on how to manage the thresholds for escalation and entanglement. ◆

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<sup>31</sup> As Glenn Snyder theorized in the 1980s, "The risks of abandonment and entrapment tend to vary inversely...a strategy of weak or vague commitment, or a record of failing to support the ally in specific conflicts, tends to restrain the ally and to reduce the risk of entrapment; but it also increases the risk of abandonment by casting doubt on one's loyalty, hence devaluing the alliance for the ally." Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 467.

## Australia's "Taiwan Problem": Middle-Power Agency and the Self-Centeredness of the Australian National Debate


*Peter Dean*

Australia has a Taiwan problem. It needs to be acknowledged and discussed—coolly, calmly, and rationally. But it is not the problem that international observers might expect. It does not concern how Australia contributes to regional security, a regional balance of power, or the cross-strait status quo. For most Australian policy elites, foreign policy journalists, commentators (especially on the far left but not exclusively so), and even the broader public, Australia's "Taiwan problem" centers on the question of whether Canberra would support the United States in a war with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over Taiwan. This is a potential strategic dilemma worthy of deep consideration and debate, but it is not "the problem" in relation to Taiwan that Australia should be exclusively focused on. Rather, there is a fundamental problem with the Australian national debate on this subject.

Taiwan as a security dilemma has largely become a reductionist debate in Australian public discourse—rarely, if ever, moving beyond the question of whether to blindly support the United States in the event of conflict and almost always within the context of preserving U.S. primacy in Asia. The debate is almost exclusively focused on this one narrow, hypothetical scenario, which is discussed by journalists, academics, and think-tank commentators such as Hugh White and Sam Roggeveen; former politicians such as Paul Keating and Bob Carr; and far-left commentators and blogs.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach is highly problematic for several reasons. First, it completely disenfranchises the Taiwanese people. Second, it removes any sense that an invasion of Taiwan would most likely be a unilateral act by the PRC to change the status quo through the use of force. Third, it reduces

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Hugh White, "Power Shift: Australia's Future between Washington and Beijing," *Quarterly Essay* 39 (2010); Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Melbourne: Black, 2012); Hugh White, "Without America: Australia in the New Asia," *Quarterly Essay* 68 (2017); Hugh White, "Sleepwalk to War: Australia's Unthinking Alliance with America," *Quarterly Essay* 86 (2022); Sam Roggeveen, *The Echidna Strategy: Australia's Search for Power and Peace* (Melbourne: Black, 2022); and John Menadue, Pearls and Irritations, weblog  <https://johnmenadue.com>.

regional security to a bipolar PRC-U.S. struggle in which Australia and other states are mere adjuncts to U.S. power, removing Australian agency. Fourth, it belittles the role of regional multilateral and minilateral security architecture and ignores the agency of other major regional powers—in some cases U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In other words, this debate reduces one of the most important regional security flashpoints to a binary discussion that focuses on Australia’s support, or lack of support, for the United States. This national conversation is far removed from Australia’s declared strategic approach of a regional balancing strategy enabled through allies and partners, deterrence by denial, and the maintenance of the status quo over Taiwan.<sup>2</sup>

### *The “Debate”*

A few examples from contemporary discussions and historical highlights are illustrative of this narrow focus on whether Canberra would support the United States in a war against China over Taiwan. In Richard Marles’s first appearance as deputy prime minister and defense minister on 7:30, the headline current affairs program of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the first question was on China and the second on whether Australia would support the United States in the event of a Taiwan conflict.<sup>3</sup> During the exchange, journalist Sarah Ferguson interjected no less than three times in search of a “gotcha” moment from Marles regarding President Joe Biden’s statements in 2023 on the defense of Taiwan and U.S. policy. Although she was not successful, it is illustrative that her questions about Taiwan never progressed beyond this point.

Eight months later, Foreign Minister Penny Wong gave arguably the most significant speech on the nation’s Indo-Pacific regional security policy by an Australian government minister in the past decade. Previewing the Defence Strategic Review, released one week later, Minister Wong articulated Australia’s approach to the region. On Taiwan, she stated:

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Government, *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review* (Canberra, 2023) ~ <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>; Penny Wong, “National Press Club Address: Australian Interests in a Regional Balance of Power,” Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon. Penny Wong, April 17, 2023 ~ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/national-press-club-address-australian-interests-regional-balance-power>.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Marles, interview by Sarah Ferguson, “Video: Defence Minister Richard Marles Speaks on Australia’s Relationship with China,” ABC News (Australia), July 4, 2023 ~ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-04/defence-minister-richard-marles-speaks-on/13958708>.

Let me be absolutely clear. A war over Taiwan would be catastrophic for all. We know that there would be no real winners, and we know maintaining the status quo is comprehensively superior to any alternative. It will be challenging, requiring both reassurance and deterrence, but it is the proposition most capable of averting conflict and enabling the region to live in peace and prosperity.<sup>4</sup>

Following her formal address, the third question that the minister received was on Taiwan and on the same theme as the Marles interview with Sarah Fergusson the previous July. Wong's reply is instructive:

I thought it was important to address Taiwan, and it seems... that I wasn't that effective in my argument, Matthew, because I was being very direct and very frank but deliberately so when I said that someone in my position doesn't just refuse to engage in these hypotheses because I want to avoid a question.

I do so because I think this sort of speculation is unhelpful, and...my job and the task of those of us in these positions is to do all that we can to press for the maintenance of the status quo through both deterrence and reassurance.<sup>5</sup>

Unhelpful or not, the "Taiwan hypothetical" question is a long-standing staple of Australian journalism. Perhaps this is because it has notably borne fruit on two previous occasions: once with former foreign minister Alexander Downer and again (although less controversially) with former defense minister David Johnston.

In 2004, while visiting the PRC, Downer was asked by a journalist about Australia's obligations under the ANZUS Treaty with New Zealand and the United States to help the latter defend Taiwan. He responded that the treaty technically only requires the parties to consult. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, in a reductionist approach of making Taiwan a narrow ANZUS alliance issue, ran the headline "ANZUS Loyalties Fall under China's Shadow."<sup>6</sup> As the veteran journalist Graeme Dobell recounts:

The U.S. ambassador in Canberra leapt in to say the U.S. certainly would expect Australia to help defend Taiwan. And the Prime Minister gave an artful demonstration of the side-step denial, delivered with a heavy garnish of praise. No, John Howard said, Downer had certainly not blundered: "He has been an excellent Foreign Affairs Minister. I have no more

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<sup>4</sup> Wong, "National Press Club Address."

<sup>5</sup> "National Press Club Address: Australian Interests in a Regional Balance of Power," Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon. Penny Wong, press conference transcript, April 17, 2023 ~ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/transcript/national-press-club-address>.

<sup>6</sup> "ANZUS Loyalties Fall under China's Shadow," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 18, 2004 ~ <https://www.smh.com.au/world/anzus-loyalties-fall-under-chinas-shadow-20040818-gdjkkw.html>.

dependable, able colleague than Alexander Downer.” As to Taiwan? “Hypothetical!” said the Prime Minister.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Greg Sheridan from the *Australian* called the remarks “grievous, foolish, [and] needless,” defense expert Paul Dibb noted that the comments had “threatened the very fabric of Australia’s alliance with the U.S.,” and then foreign affairs spokesperson for Labor Kevin Rudd called them “one rolled gold diplomatic disaster.”<sup>8</sup>

A decade later, in June 2014, then defense minister David Johnston was asked a similar question on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Lateline* program by journalist Tony Jones and gave the same factually correct answer that under the ANZUS Treaty Australia and the United States are only obliged to consult with each other in the event of an attack on either party. This time the critique was led by a Labor politician, Michael Danby, who wrote in the *Australian* that “even if it was unintentional, Johnston signalled to Beijing a deep reticence within the highest levels of the current Australian government over whether we would come to America’s aid in some future conflict.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the transcript of the interview shows the context, history, and precision of Johnston’s remarks in terms of the text of the ANZUS Treaty:

TONY JONES: Now I understand what you’re saying, but if the United States were to get into a territorial conflict with China, is there any chance at all that Australia could also be drawn into it because of our ANZUS alliance with the United States?

DAVID JOHNSTON, DEFENCE MINISTER: Look, the circumstances that you’re putting forward are very speculative. It is not conducive to our role in the region for me to speculate about whether we would or would not get involved. We would need to know all of the nuances of each of the circumstances and the situation more broadly before a decision was made. The fact is that we have a strong relationship with both China, a strong relationship with South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. And what we’re doing up here this week is to say to Japan, “We are supportive of you assuming a normal Defence posture going forward.”

TONY JONES: But we know that Australia does have a history of joining the United States in most of its wars, particularly regional conflicts. What does the ANZUS alliance say exactly, because I presume you would have looked at it very closely as

<sup>7</sup> Graeme Dobell, “The Downer Legacy: Northeast Asia,” Lowy Institute, September 14, 2009 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/archive/downer-legacy-northeast-asia>.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Tom Switzer, “Is China the Indispensable Nation,” *Australian Financial Review*, August 21, 2014 ~ <https://www.usssc.edu.au/is-china-the-indispensable-nation>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Danby, “Defence Blunder Sends Wrong Signal,” *Australian*, June 16, 2014.



Defence Minister, if the United States gets into any conflict with China?

DEFENCE MINISTER: Well it doesn't say that; it's about threats to the security of both nations. Now, you know, as I've said, Tony, we will look at the circumstances. We're not going to speculate about matters that are a very long way away from Australia, but we want to commend the parties for resolving matters pursuant to international law and that is very, very important.

TONY JONES: So just to complete that answer, does the ANZUS alliance commit Australia or not if the United States is in a conflict in our region?

DEFENCE MINISTER: I don't believe it does.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the minister's response was both nuanced and accurate—especially his clarification regarding the provisions of the ANZUS Treaty—the fact that media analysis portrayed the minister as being “gaff-prone” and that this position somehow, like Downer's, undermined U.S.-Australia security relations serves to reinforce the long-standing and reductionist debate over Taiwan in Australia. Since these episodes, a succession of Australian ministers have, not surprisingly, answered such questions with the staple, “I don't respond to hypotheticals.”

Most recently, the Taiwan debate has been enlivened by former prime minister Paul Keating stating that “Taiwan is not a vital Australian interest”; that Australia should not to be drawn into a military engagement over Taiwan, “U.S.-sponsored or otherwise”; and that Taiwan is “fundamentally a civil matter” for China.<sup>11</sup> Keating even termed Taiwan a “so-called democracy.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, former foreign minister Bob Carr has argued that the AUKUS technology-sharing pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States is “the enmeshment of our

<sup>10</sup> David Johnston, interview by Tony Jones, “Minister for Defence—Transcript—Interview with Tony Jones, Lateline,” Defence Ministers (Australia), June 12, 2014 [~ https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/transcripts/2014-06-12/minister-defence-transcript-interview-tony-jones-lateline](https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/transcripts/2014-06-12/minister-defence-transcript-interview-tony-jones-lateline).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Keating (remarks at the National Press Club, Canberra, November 10, 2021), available from the National Press Club on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/Bg0pMSe4W4U>. See also Helen Davidson and Daniel Hurst, “Taiwan Hits Back after Paul Keating Says Its Status ‘Not a Vital Australian Interest,’” *Guardian*, November 11, 2021 [~ https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/11/taiwan-hits-back-after-paul-keating-says-its-status-not-a-vital-australian-interest](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/11/taiwan-hits-back-after-paul-keating-says-its-status-not-a-vital-australian-interest).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Keating, “AUKUS Statement by PJ Keating, the National Press Club,” the Honorable Paul Keating, March 15, 2023 [~ http://www.paulkeating.net.au/shop/item/aukus-statement-by-pj-keating-the-national-press-club-wednesday-15-march-2023](http://www.paulkeating.net.au/shop/item/aukus-statement-by-pj-keating-the-national-press-club-wednesday-15-march-2023). See also Sam Roggeveen, “The Big AUKUS Question That Albanese Has Yet to Answer,” *Australian Financial Review*, March 17, 2023 [~ https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/the-big-aukus-question-that-albanese-has-yet-to-answer-20230316-p5csl5](https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/the-big-aukus-question-that-albanese-has-yet-to-answer-20230316-p5csl5).

submarine defences with those of the U.S. [and] sent the message we are signing up to a war over Taiwan.”<sup>13</sup>

The result has been a suffocation of the debate in Australia about one of the region’s most important security flashpoints. The most recent government position on this issue occurred in Wong’s aforementioned Press Club address. Likely responding to, although not naming Keating, Carr, and others, Wong noted that her responsibilities as foreign minister mean that “I am...steadfast in refusing to engage in speculation about regional flashpoints, whether the Himalayas, Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula or anywhere else.” She elaborated:

In particular, there is much frenzied discussion in political and media circles over timelines and scenarios when it comes to Taiwan. Anyone in positions like mine who feels an urge to add to that discussion should resist the temptation. It is the most dangerous of parlour games. My approach to this is not simply a politician seeking to avoid hypothetical questions. It is a frank and clear-eyed assessment of interests. We do not want to see any unilateral change to the status quo. We call for the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues through dialogue without the threat or use of force or coercion.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, Taiwan is an acknowledged security issue in Australian public discourse, but it is rarely talked about in any depth. When politicians or senior defense officials engage with the issue, it is almost exclusively in the context of the media searching for a “gotcha” moment. It is rarely discussed within the context of broader regional security dynamics or in terms of solutions to enhance deterrence, the maintenance of the regional balance of power, or the cross-strait status quo. Indeed, Taiwan is treated as an almost exquisite security problem—one that sits outside the discourse on the rest of Australia’s regional security strategy.

### *Australia’s Regional Agency and Approach*

Australia’s regional security policy has traditionally been based on a sovereign capability for regional defense, an alliance with a great and powerful friend (first the UK, and then the United States), strong support for international institutions, and a multilateral approach to diplomacy and

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<sup>13</sup> Bob Carr, “We’ve Long Said No to the U.S. on Taiwan. Saying Yes Now Would Tempt Nuclear Attack,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 17, 2023 ~ <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/we-ve-long-said-no-to-the-us-on-taiwan-saying-yes-now-would-tempt-nuclear-attack-20230315-p5csh0.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Wong, “National Press Club Address.”

regional security.<sup>15</sup> As the thirteenth-largest economy and military in the world, Australia is a significant regional player. However, it is not a major power, in contrast with the United States and Japan, and requires a more measured approach to issues such as cross-strait relations.

Australia's position has previously been couched in terms of it being a creative "middle power," a G-20 power, or a regional power.<sup>16</sup> Given the changing nature of power in the Indo-Pacific and globally over recent decades, and given the country's geography, identity, economy, size, defense spending, and military capabilities, Australia is best seen as an important regional power in the Indo-Pacific. In recent years, successive governments have focused on developing strategic policy that is cognizant of the changing nature of the international order and, in particular, that of the Indo-Pacific: one that is a reflection of the limits of Australia's power and reach and that maintains international relevance while living within the nation's means and capabilities.<sup>17</sup> As such, for over a decade now, Australian strategy and foreign policy documents have focused on the country's role in the Indo-Pacific, especially Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

Most recently, the 2020 Defence Strategic Update and the 2023 Defence Strategic Review have concentrated specifically on narrowing Australia's focus for its defense operations. The Defence Strategic Review, in particular, focused on maritime Southeast Asia and the Pacific. At the same time, Australia has developed its alliance with the United States, with a heavy focus on U.S. Force Posture Initiatives in Australia that now embrace not only the long-standing U.S. Marine Corps annual rotation in Darwin but also U.S. Air Force rotations of "all aircraft types," increased U.S. Army and Navy presence, and, from 2025, the forward rotation of U.S. nuclear-powered attack submarines in Australia under the AUKUS agreement.<sup>18</sup>

Over the last dozen years, Australia has been steadily revising its strategic policy in response to the rise of China and the broader Indo-Pacific. Along with tightening regional ties to Southeast Asia and the South Pacific,

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<sup>15</sup> See Andrew O'Neill, "Conceptualising Future Threats to Australia's Security," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 1 (2011): 19–34.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Carr, "Is Australia a Middle Power? A Systemic Impact Approach," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2014): 70–84; Peter Jennings, "Being a Top 20 Defence Player," Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Strategist, October 28, 2014 [~ https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/being-a-top-20-defence-player](https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/being-a-top-20-defence-player); and Peter J. Dean, "Australia and the Illusion of Being a G20 Power," ASPI, Strategist, October 28, 2014 [~ https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-and-the-illusion-of-being-a-g20-power](https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-and-the-illusion-of-being-a-g20-power).

<sup>17</sup> Dean, "Australia and the Illusion of Being a G20 Power."

<sup>18</sup> See Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN), especially from 2020 to 2023, available at Department of Foreign Affairs (Australia) [~ https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/australia-and-the-illusion-of-being-a-g20-power](https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/australia-and-the-illusion-of-being-a-g20-power).

Australia has also significantly increased its strategic partnerships with Japan, India, and South Korea. As the Defence Strategic Review states, Australia has also moved away from its previous doctrine that “was aimed at deterring and responding to potential low-level threats from a small or middle power in our [Australia’s] immediate region” to a doctrine of “national defense”—the defense of Australia against major-power threats that is reflective of the reality of living in a region dominated by the rise of China and the end of U.S. hegemony.<sup>19</sup>

Australia’s focus has thus shifted toward the goal of actively shaping, deterring, and responding to regional security risks. The ultimate ends, as Minister Wong articulated, are averting war and maintaining peace by shaping “a region that reflects our national interests and our shared regional interests.”<sup>20</sup> The Albanese government has explicitly rejected the position of “viewing the future of the region simply in terms of great powers competing for primacy.”<sup>21</sup> Such an approach, Wong argues, “diminishes the power of each country to engage other than through the prism of a great power” and “means countries’ own national interests can fall out of focus.” She adds that Australia’s “focus needs to be on how we ensure our fate is not determined by others, how we ensure our decisions are our own.”<sup>22</sup>

In other words, the Australian government believes that it has agency in the region, that it has influence and a role to play, rather than being dictated to by China or the United States. The changing nature of the regional balance of power means a new focus for Australia, as “these circumstances require a response of unprecedented coordination and ambition in our statecraft.”<sup>23</sup> Given the country’s relative power and size, this is not a strategic approach that Australia envisions achieving unilaterally. At the heart of the Defence Strategic Review and the Albanese government’s approach is a strategy of maintaining the regional balance of power in partnership with allies and partners. This includes, specifically, the United States’ ongoing role as the cornerstone balancing power in the Indo-Pacific.

Critical to the ends of this strategy and Australia’s role are institutions, structures, and laws—often referred to in Australia as the rules-based global order. Australia’s interests “lie in a region that operates by rules, standards and norms,” Wong argued, “where a larger country does not determine the

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<sup>19</sup> Australian Government, *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review*, 18, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Wong, “National Press Club Address.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

fate of a smaller country; where each country can pursue its own aspirations, its own prosperity.”<sup>24</sup>

Such an approach is both a response to and reflective of the difficulty of managing risk in the Indo-Pacific in the face of the PRC’s revisionist agenda and ongoing military modernization, which is being undertaken at a pace and scale not seen in the world for nearly a century with little transparency or reassurance about its strategic intent. The PRC’s increasingly aggressive behavior, gray-zone operations, and willingness to use its economic and military power to coerce its neighbors, together with the risk of miscalculation, constitute the most confronting circumstances that the region and Australia have faced in decades.

### *Australia and Taiwan*

Australia’s strategy and agency in a fundamentally changed Indo-Pacific strategic environment mean that its existing public discourse on Taiwan as a security issue is woefully out of date, stuck in a debate from twenty years ago. This reductionist view is also blatantly narcissistic and reflective of a bygone age when Australia wanted security from Asia rather than in Asia.

The region and the world have moved on. In 2004, when Alexander Downer arguably had his “gotcha” moment as foreign minister in 2004, the United States was the hegemon of Asia. By the time of David Johnston’s comments in 2014, the era of uncontested U.S. primacy in the Indo-Pacific was coming to an end. In 2024, it is clear there is a contest for power in a region in which the United States is no longer dominant. Australia’s Defence Strategic Review publicly articulated this shift in the strategic environment with little to no reaction to it.<sup>25</sup>

Australia needs a new public debate on Taiwan. This will require the nation to look more broadly into the region and assess its security more deeply as a part of regional affairs. To maintain a regional balance of power that ensures peace and prosperity, Australia will have to work not only with the United States on Taiwan but also with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN. Of course, this means Australia will need to have hitherto uncomfortable conversations about the role of U.S. allies and regional powers in a Taiwan contingency and how agency and autonomy will be affected. These conversations must explore the balance between posturing for deterrence

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<sup>24</sup> Wong, “National Press Club Address.”

<sup>25</sup> Australian Government, *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review*, 17, 23.

and operational planning contingencies. They should consider how such measures could trade agency and autonomy for enhanced security. This is particularly the case for Australia and Japan but increasingly for the U.S.–South Korea alliance as well.

Australia must mend its broken public debate on this issue. It can no longer afford reductionist arguments. It must move beyond the binary appeal of black-and-white choices that are all about either PRC provocation without considering the difficulties of China’s military being successful and the risks carried by the Chinese Communist Party leadership, or a U.S.-China bipolar conflict over Taiwan that focuses on Australian entrapment and blind support for the United States in a war for primacy. These two conceptions have no nuance, no recognition of Taiwanese agency, and no agency for states beyond the bipolar U.S.-China divide.

What is required is political leadership. The government and its ministers must bear the risk to change the public discourse. They must set the tone and tenor of the debate. The Defence Strategic Review and Minister Wong’s speech in April 2023 have laid the foundation for this national conversation.

At the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese argued that Australia “is not opting out from the big questions of security and stability” in the region.<sup>26</sup> Yet there is no bigger question in Indo-Pacific security at present than the future of Taiwan and the potential for regional war. It is a question—for good reasons—that prime ministers and senior officials have largely evaded for the past two decades. It is time for political leadership to change the question and set the foundations for a new debate on Australia’s engagement with Taiwan as a security issue—a debate that is premised on the maintenance of peace and security and the regional balance of power that engages Australia’s agency and role as a genuine regional power.

Such a move must also be backed by action. It requires greater Australian diplomatic representation in Taipei and enhanced informal mechanisms for bilateral engagement. Action is also needed to significantly enhance sovereign intelligence sources and analysis and to put much greater research into cross-strait relations, Taiwan, alliance dynamics, and crisis management. The government should look for alternative mechanisms to support Taipei that further Australian national interests

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<sup>26</sup> Anthony Albanese, “Keynote Address” (speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, 20th Asia Security Summit, Singapore, June 2, 2023) ≈ <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2023>.

without being overly provocative to Beijing and seek creative diplomacy that goes beyond calls for guardrails. Enhanced regional discussions on the issue and increased defense spending to fund the Defence Strategic Review will be required. And not least of all greater and deeper strategic discussions with the United States, Japan, and South Korea will be needed, especially on how deterrence is understood and operationalized in the region around the Taiwan issue. In the end, this change has to start at home. The political debate in Australia must adjust to the reality of the regional security situation. As the Defence Strategic Review notes, building “national resilience” starts with an “informed public.”<sup>27</sup> ◆

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<sup>27</sup> Australian Government, *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review*, 38.

## Cross-Strait Tensions and Southeast Asia's Middle Powers: A Singaporean Perspective

*Benjamin Ho*

Taiwan appears to be looming larger on the strategic radars of Southeast Asian states, and vice versa. Reflecting growing concerns regarding the rise in cross-strait tensions and the attendant risks of major-power conflict, traditionally reticent Southeast Asian leaders are displaying greater willingness to publicly express their fears. Taiwan, too, appears to be seeking closer ties with Southeast Asia, as seen most prominently through President Tsai Ing-wen's signature "New Southbound Policy," which aims to reduce the island's overwhelming economic dependence on China by diversifying its trade ties, especially with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

This essay argues, however, that there is less to this apparent tightening of relations than it might appear and that the gap between Taiwan and Southeast Asia remains substantial, their geographic proximity notwithstanding. For a variety of reasons on Taipei's part, high-level support for Taiwan's New Southbound Policy has not translated into closer relations in practice, and Southeast Asian governments have been reluctant to get too close to Taiwan for fear of unduly antagonizing Beijing.

The Biden administration's current approach to Southeast Asia attempts to co-opt the subregion's states onto the U.S. side in a new cold war against China. This essay suggests that Washington would be better off encouraging Southeast Asian middle powers, such as Singapore, to view growing cross-strait tensions through the lens of their implications for the international rules-based order on which these states ultimately depend for their much-cherished autonomy. Such an approach stands the best chance of encouraging Southeast Asia's middle powers to play a more active role vis-à-vis the Taiwan flashpoint and exercise what agency they do possess.

### *Southeast Asia's Growing Anxieties*

To illustrate the disquiet that cross-strait tensions have generated in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting, which took place

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just two days after then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan, issued a joint statement expressing concerns with the "international and regional volatility...which could destabilize the region [leading] to miscalculation, serious confrontation, open conflicts and unpredictable consequences among major powers."<sup>1</sup> The statement called for "maximum restraint, refrain[ing] from provocative action and for upholding the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia," and it reiterated ASEAN member states' "support for their respective One-China Policy."<sup>2</sup>

Given the usual reluctance of Southeast Asian leaders to even mention the Taiwan issue in formal meetings and statements, let alone to collectively express their support for the one-China policy, this statement is highly reflective of the anxiety that the subregion is experiencing regarding deteriorating cross-strait relations. Indeed, there is growing recognition that any conflict in the Taiwan Strait would have broader consequences, including the possibility of a regional or even global war, given the numerous actors and stakeholders involved. Singapore's foreign minister highlighted the threat posed by cross-strait relations during his country's annual committee of supply debate:

The Taiwan Strait has become a more dangerous flashpoint... Whilst neither the U.S. nor China seek a military conflict over Taiwan, the fact is that missteps or mishaps can easily trigger a cycle of tit-for-tat actions and reactions that spiral dangerously out of control. A conflict over Taiwan will have global repercussions, and a much more direct impact on Singapore than the ongoing war in Ukraine. Not only is Taiwan much closer to us geographically, but our ties with the United States, China, and Taiwan are much stronger and deeper compared to our ties with Russia and Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, however, it remains far from clear whether Southeast Asian governments are willing to jeopardize their relations with Beijing to either forge deeper relations with Taipei or attempt more actively to ameliorate rising tensions across the Taiwan Strait. Instead, these countries continue to exercise caution by and large because they do not wish to antagonize China by being seen as too close to Taiwan. Thus, ASEAN

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<sup>1</sup> "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Cross Strait Development," ASEAN, August 3, 2022 [~ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/final-ASEAN-FMs-Statement-on-Cross-strait-development.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/final-ASEAN-FMs-Statement-on-Cross-strait-development.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan at MFA's Committee of Supply Debate," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), February 27, 2023 [~ https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2023/02/Min-COS-2023](https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2023/02/Min-COS-2023).

members' unanimous support for the one-China policy reflects the fact that there is very little political appetite to complicate relations with Beijing to work with Taipei. As one Malaysian academic recently noted, Southeast Asian "interactions with Taiwan were more likely to be pragmatic rather than political in nature. There is very little indication that any of the Southeast Asian governments are interested in departing from their existing 'one China' policy."<sup>4</sup>

### *Taiwanese Perspectives on Southeast Asia: Present, but Peripheral*

Taiwanese perspectives and approaches toward Southeast Asia are similarly cautious. At one level, Taipei appears to want closer ties with this subregion. This desire was given its clearest expression in President Tsai Ing-wen's New Southbound Policy, which was formally announced in 2016. Widely viewed as a counterpoint to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the New Southbound Policy was designed primarily to facilitate greater international space for Taiwan and ensure that its economic fortunes were not unduly wedded to Beijing's. From this perspective, Southeast Asia represents an increasingly important theater for Taiwanese policymakers. Supporting this view, scholars at the Brookings Institution have shown that seven of the top ten New Southbound Policy countries that receive Taiwanese exports are ASEAN member countries.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, scholar Mariah Thornton has documented how Tsai's New Southbound Policy has also focused on strengthening cultural and institutional links with Southeast Asian countries, thus contributing to the meaningful expansion of Taiwan's international space.<sup>6</sup>

That said, it remains unclear whether these gains reflect a deeper, more intentional commitment to Southeast Asia as a priority region or whether Taipei has bigger prizes in mind in terms of its long-term objectives and strategic calculations. For instance, a recent study of Taiwan-Vietnam relations, authored by University of Nottingham scholar Chun-yi Lee, concludes that while the New Southbound Policy has achieved successes in

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<sup>4</sup> Ngeow Chow Bing, "The 'One-China' Policy of Southeast Asian Countries," ThinkChina, August 12, 2022 ~ <https://www.thinkchina.sg/one-china-policy-southeast-asian-countries>.

<sup>5</sup> Hunter Marston and Richard C. Bush, "Taiwan's Engagement with Southeast Asia Is Making Progress under the New Southbound Policy," Brookings Institution, July 30, 2018 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/taiwans-engagement-with-southeast-asia-is-making-progress-under-the-new-southbound-policy>.

<sup>6</sup> Mariah Thornton, "Walking towards China or towards the World? Taiwan's International Space under Ma Ying-jeou and Tsai Ing-wen," in *Taiwan's Economic and Diplomatic Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Mariah Thornton, Robert Ash, and Dafydd Fell (London: Routledge, 2021), 172–93.

terms of the boost it has given to tourism and foreign student enrollment in Taiwan, business investment remains limited.<sup>7</sup> According to Lee, Taiwanese businesses continue to have more “institutionalized interactions with Chinese local governments than with governments in Southeast Asia.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, given that the Chinese central and local governments generally regard Taiwanese firms as strategic assets that could be mobilized to create a more pro-Beijing mood within Taiwanese domestic society for “reunification” purposes, it stands to reason that Taiwanese businesses, all things being equal, would more naturally gravitate toward the mainland instead of Southeast Asia due to the more attractive economic and business opportunities on offer.

Against this backdrop, and notwithstanding the high-level support that appears to have been afforded to the New Southbound Policy since its inception, a compelling case can be made that Southeast Asia does not feature as prominently in Taiwan’s political calculations as Taipei’s political rhetoric and the conventional wisdom would suggest. The findings of fieldwork undertaken by this author in Taiwan from September to December 2022 support this assessment. One Taiwanese scholar studying Southeast Asia observed in an interview that “economic cooperation in the New Southbound Policy generally works at the lower level, which is better than nothing...[but] it is unlikely to achieve its political objectives. To do so, Taiwan would want to go for bigger players rather than Southeast Asian countries.”<sup>9</sup>

Part of the challenge relates to historical Taiwanese perspectives regarding Southeast Asia. The subregion has traditionally been viewed primarily by Taiwanese as a source of cheap migrant labor. As one Taiwan-based sociologist observed, Taiwanese people often have a “condescending view toward Southeast Asian countries, with the exception of Singapore. Instead, they have traditionally preferred to look toward Western countries, South Korea, and Japan as models for admiration, rather than Southeast Asia.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Chun-yi Lee, “Review and Look Ahead: Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy in the Case of Vietnam,” in Thornton, Ash, and Fell, *Taiwan’s Economic and Diplomatic Challenges and Opportunities*, 97–113.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>9</sup> Author’s interview in Taipei, September 28, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Author’s interview in Taipei, October 12, 2022. For further reading on this subject, see Michael Leifer, “Taiwan and South-East Asia: The Limits to Pragmatic Diplomacy,” *China Quarterly* 165 (2001): 173–85; and Lee Lai To, “Taiwan and Southeast Asia: Realpolitik Par Excellence?” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 7, no. 3 (1985): 209–20.

Taken together, the above analysis suggests that Taiwan, insofar as it is now attempting to court Southeast Asia in response to intensifying cross-strait tensions, is largely acting instrumentally, as opposed to having a deeper, more ideological affinity for the region. In this regard, there is arguably much less difference than is often assumed between Taipei's present posture and the deep-seated pragmatism that has long been seen (often negatively) as a defining characteristic of Southeast Asian approaches toward the Taiwan issue.

### *Taiwan and the Rules-Based Order: Implications for Middle Powers*

Marked differences in their political regime types further complicate the relationships between Taiwan and ASEAN states. Taiwan's idealization of liberal democracy, which it frequently—and proudly—cites, is not universally shared or embraced in Southeast Asia. This reality is particularly relevant given the ideological emphasis ascribed by the Biden administration to the deepening U.S. geopolitical rivalry with China. This ideological contest remains a course that Southeast Asian countries do not necessarily agree with or endorse. The prominent retired Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan, for instance, has cautioned against framing this competition as one between democracies and autocracies. In his words:

Washington should avoid assuming that the United States' decentralized democracy, in which distrust of the state is ingrained, is well understood in Southeast Asia, where centralized government is the norm and a strong state is the aspiration—even if not always achieved in practice. Ideological efforts in the vein of Biden's Summit for Democracy, convened last December, risk alienating partners in Southeast Asia. An event framed in terms of a supposedly universal contest between democracy and authoritarianism—both protean terms—would limit rather than expand support for Washington in the region. In general, Southeast Asians neither find all American values attractive nor all aspects of the Chinese system abhorrent. An approach that invokes a clash between democracy and autocracy will only risk alienating governments that do not look at the world in such absolutist and simplistic binary categories and have no wish to be forced into them. The Biden administration would be ill advised to pursue such ideological projects much further in Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup>

By extension, any attempt by Washington or Taipei to frame cross-strait tensions in a similar ideological context is likely to be met with nonchalance

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<sup>11</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, "Threading the Needle in Southeast Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, May 11, 2022. ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeast-asia/2022-05-11/threading-needle-southeast-asia>.

or even resistance from Southeast Asian states. Instead, a far more productive angle could be to appeal to this subregion's middle (and even some of its smaller) powers by highlighting the importance of Taiwan to the future of the so-called rules-based international order. Because of their power asymmetries relative to the world's larger states, smaller actors' ability to act autonomously and sometimes even to exist as independent states—as the case of Ukraine dramatically highlights—is reliant on the existence of a robust set of international rules, norms, and conventions supported by and implemented via a workable multilateral system. As Singaporean prime minister Lee Hsien Loong observed in a September 2022 address to the UN General Assembly High Level Forum of Small States, “Small states depend on the multilateral system for our security and survival. This international order is imperfect, but it is by far our best bet. If we regress to a world where ‘might is right,’ small states would find it impossible to survive and even big countries will not be better off.”<sup>12</sup>

There are at least two ways Taiwan could impact the rules-based order and, by association, the autonomy currently enjoyed by Southeast Asia's middle powers within it. First, as the Singaporean foreign minister's statement on cross-strait tensions suggested, a conflict in the strait is unlikely to be limited and would almost certainly take on regional, if not global, proportions much larger than those currently being experienced as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A worst-case scenario would see the conflict escalate beyond the nuclear threshold, a potentiality that has thus far not eventuated in the case of Ukraine but that cannot be ruled out given that Asia is home to the majority of the world's nuclear states. An all-out nuclear war—or even limited use of nuclear weapons—could, of course, change life as we know it, and thus the prevailing status quo would also inevitably change.

Second, short of this catastrophic scenario, the course of a conflict over Taiwan could have significant ramifications for the future of the rules-based international order to the extent that it impacts the United States' presence in Asia. Should Taiwan come under the control of China, U.S. primacy in the Indo-Pacific would likely be highly conditioned, especially as far as its Southeast Asian allies and partners are concerned. Indeed, since at least the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, most Southeast Asian states have actively sought to facilitate a continued U.S. presence in their neighborhood,

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<sup>12</sup> “PM Lee Hsien Loong at the 30th Anniversary of the Forum of Small States (FOSS),” Prime Minister's Office (Singapore), September 22, 2022. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-30th-Anniversary-of-the-Forum-of-Small-States>.

as this is key to the implementation of their long-standing strategic approaches such as “omni-enmeshment” and “complex balancing.”<sup>13</sup> This prerogative remains unchanged.

In the short to medium term, however, the greatest fear of most Southeast Asian governments is that conflict over Taiwan will erupt by accident rather than by design. Their assiduous adherence to a one-China policy ought to be seen in this light, and it arguably has an important role to play in preserving the cross-strait status quo. As three American experts on China and Taiwan have recently observed, the avoidance of major conflict through an effective deterrence strategy requires the provision of credible reassurances to Beijing that it will not be punished if it ultimately opts to forgo the use of military force.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond this, Southeast Asia’s middle powers could still play a more active role in avoiding conflict and preserving the status quo by providing a “neutral” platform for cross-strait discussion. Singapore, for example, has previously demonstrated its capacity to do this, including in November 2015 when it hosted a historic meeting between Xi Jinping and then Taiwanese president Ma Ying-jeou (albeit in their private capacities) and again in June 2018 when it hosted another historic summit between U.S. president Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

None of this is to underestimate the difficulties in finding a peaceful resolution to this flashpoint. The future of relations between Beijing and Taipei will depend as much, if not more, on domestic factors on both sides of the strait as it will on more structural factors such as power balances or military capabilities. Moreover, such domestic dynamics may ultimately generate path-dependent outcomes that would exacerbate the likelihood of conflict. That said, the Taiwan flashpoint is one whose significance extends beyond Northeast Asia and potentially poses an existential challenge to the rules-based international order. To the extent that Southeast Asia’s middle powers—whose cherished freedom of diplomatic maneuver depends on the existence of this incumbent order—can be convinced to view growing tensions across the Taiwan Strait in such a light, their willingness to exercise what agency they do possess is likely to increase. ◆

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<sup>13</sup> For further reading, see Evelyn Goh, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007/08): 113–57.

<sup>14</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen, “Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2024, 88–100.

## Vietnam in a Taiwan Contingency: Facing Multiple Crises

*Hanh Nguyen*

**I**n a Taiwan strait contingency, Vietnam's robust engagement with Taiwan would pose multiple simultaneous challenges for Hanoi, notably economic contraction, humanitarian crises, and military contingencies in the South China Sea. Furthermore, a great-power conflict arising from this crisis would upend the central assumption behind Vietnam's omnidirectional foreign policy—a benign regional security environment without great-power warfare. Demanding crisis-management tasks and uncertainty over the new geopolitical era that could follow a major Taiwan contingency might prevent Hanoi from taking a strong stance during a crisis, with implications for its emerging middle-power status.

### *Robust Engagement despite Diplomatic Constraints*

Vietnam and Taiwan do not maintain official diplomatic relations. Hanoi adheres to Beijing's "one China" principle, which claims Taiwan as an inalienable part of China. During the Vietnam War, Taiwan maintained official ties with the Republic of Vietnam as both sides shared an anti-Communist agenda.<sup>1</sup> After the war, there was no contact between the two sides until 1992, when Taiwan established a Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Hanoi and later another office in Ho Chi Minh City, both of which function as de facto embassies. Vietnam opened its own economic and cultural office in Taiwan in 1993.

These constraints on diplomacy, however, did not prevent both sides from establishing economic and people-to-people exchanges. Vietnam and Taiwan signed their first bilateral investment agreement in 1993. Since then, Taiwan has consistently been one of Vietnam's leading investors, with over 2,900 projects worth \$36 billion in total registered capital as of December 2022 (for projects still in effect).<sup>2</sup> Because Vietnam's economic

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel C.Y. Ku, "The Political Economy of Taiwan's Relations with Vietnam," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 21, no. 3 (1999): 407–8.

<sup>2</sup> General Statistics Office (Vietnam), *Nien giam thong ke 2022* [Statistical Yearbook 2022] (Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House, 2023), 349.

growth is reliant on manufacturing exports led by FDI, Taiwan has become a significant contributor to Vietnam's development because its investments are concentrated in this sector. Taiwan is also among Vietnam's top-five import markets (see **Table 1**), surpassing much bigger economies such as the European Union and the United States. Two-way trade between Vietnam and Taiwan comprises many of the same products, including computers, electronic products and components, and machinery.<sup>3</sup>

Taiwanese business representatives often travel to Vietnamese provinces to explore investment opportunities, and they are warmly welcomed by provincial leaders who extol Taiwan's contributions to local development.<sup>4</sup> Local leaders also actively encourage further investment, especially in the electronics and chipmaking sectors, promising preferential policies on land allocation, and rent as well as efficient administrative procedures.

TABLE 1

*Vietnam's Import Values from Major Trade Partners (\$ Billion)*

	<b>China</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>South Korea</b>	<b>Taiwan</b>	<b>ASEAN</b>
<b>2019</b>	75.5	19.5	46.9	15.2	31.1
<b>2020</b>	84.2	20.3	46.9	16.7	30.5
<b>2021</b>	109.9	22.6	56.2	20.8	41.1
<b>2022</b>	117.9	23.4	62.1	22.6	47.3

*Source:* Author's compilation based on Vietnam's Export and Import Reports data, 2023.

*Note:* Values for China do not include the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Industry and Trade (Vietnam), *Bao cao xuất nhập khẩu Viet Nam 2022* [Vietnam's Export and Import Report 2022] (Hanoi: Hong Duc Publishing House, 2023), 87–88.

<sup>4</sup> See Thanh Thuy, "Uy ban công tác Đại Loan và đoàn danh nghiệp Đại Loan tìm hiểu cơ hội đầu tư tại Nam Định" [Working Committee on Taiwan and Taiwanese Business Delegate Explore Investment Opportunities in Nam Định], *Nam Định Newspaper*, November 26, 2021 ~ <https://baonamdinh.vn/channel/5083/202111/uy-ban-cong-tac-dai-loan-va-doan-doanh-nghiep-dai-loan-tim-hieu-co-hoi-dau-tu-tai-nam-dinh-2547832>; Quang Xuan and Hoang Vu, "Binh Phuoc xúc tiến đầu tư với doanh nghiệp Đại Loan" [Binh Phuoc Promotes Investment Opportunities with Taiwanese Companies], *VnExpress*, October 4, 2022 ~ <https://vnexpress.net/binh-phuoc-xuc-tien-dau-tu-voi-doanh-nghiep-dai-loan-4518937.html>; and Thai Duong and Truong Ca, "Doanh nghiệp Đại Loan tìm hiểu mọi trường đầu tư tại Nghe An" [Taiwanese Businesses Explore Investment Opportunities in Nghe An], Nghe An Radio and Television Station, September 27, 2022 ~ <https://truyenhinhnghean.vn/thoi-su-chinh-tri/202209/doanh-nghiep-dai-loan-tim-hieu-moi-truong-dau-tu-tai-nghe-an-0906fd9>.



There are no official estimates of the number of Vietnamese living in Taiwan. However, a recent estimate by the Vietnam Economic and Cultural Office in Taipei puts this figure at approximately 400,000. Migrant workers account for more than 250,000 of this group, generally working in manufacturing, healthcare, and family housekeeping. This figure is expected to grow further due to Taiwan's labor demands, favorable salaries, cultural similarities, and geographic proximity to Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Taiwan also seeks to boost people-to-people exchanges with Vietnam, particularly in the education and tourism sectors, under the New Southbound Policy unveiled in 2016. This policy aims to cultivate economic collaboration, talent exchange, resource sharing, and regional links with nations in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania.<sup>6</sup> Historically, Taiwan has tried to develop and enhance connections with surrounding regions to reduce its economic reliance on China, as evidenced by successive versions of "Go South" policies under Presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian. Such an approach has brought increasing numbers of Vietnamese students and visitors to Taiwan.<sup>7</sup>

Not everything is smooth sailing for Taiwan-Vietnam relations, however. Thorny issues include the South China Sea disputes and problems related to migrant workers. Taipei and Beijing appear to share similar claims in the South China Sea—a dashed line that encloses much of the sea—and Taiwan controls the Pratas and Itu Aba Islands.<sup>8</sup> These claims put Taiwan in direct dispute with Vietnam (except for Pratas Island, which Vietnam does not claim). Hanoi regularly objects to Taiwan's actions to demonstrate its South China Sea claims, including live-fire military exercises in waters

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<sup>5</sup> Huynh Tam Sang and Tran Hoang Nhung, "Embracing Taiwan in Vietnamese Media," *Taiwan Insight*, November 15, 2021 [~ https://taiwaninsight.org/2021/11/15/embracing-taiwan-in-vietnamese-media](https://taiwaninsight.org/2021/11/15/embracing-taiwan-in-vietnamese-media).

<sup>6</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser et al., "The New Southbound Policy: Deepening Taiwan's Regional Integration," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2018 [~ https://www.csis.org/programs/china-power-project/taiwan/new-southbound-policy](https://www.csis.org/programs/china-power-project/taiwan/new-southbound-policy).

<sup>7</sup> See Huynh Tam Sang, "Boosting Taiwan's Vietnam Policy," *Taipei Times*, July 28, 2021 [~ https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2021/07/28/2003761579](https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2021/07/28/2003761579); and Nguyen Quy, "Numbers Hit Record High as Foreign Tourists Flock to Vietnam," *VnExpress*, December 28, 2019 [~ https://e.vnexpress.net/news/travel/places/numbers-hit-record-high-as-foreign-tourists-flock-to-vietnam-4034336.html](https://e.vnexpress.net/news/travel/places/numbers-hit-record-high-as-foreign-tourists-flock-to-vietnam-4034336.html).

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Kuok, "Tides of Change: Taiwan's Evolving Position in the South China Sea," Brookings Institution, East Asia Policy Paper, no. 5, May 2015 [~ https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tides-of-change-taiwans-evolving-position-in-the-south-china-sea](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tides-of-change-taiwans-evolving-position-in-the-south-china-sea).

adjacent to Itu Aba.<sup>9</sup> The high number of Vietnamese migrant workers in Taiwan also creates issues between the two sides, including visa overstayers, the substandard treatment of migrant workers by Taiwanese employers and authorities, and dangerous attempts by Vietnamese people to illegally migrate to Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, these issues have not yet become serious obstacles to bilateral relations.

The scope and depth of Vietnam's engagement with Taiwan not only illuminates the contrast between rhetoric and practice but also reflects the pragmatic nature of Vietnam's foreign policy. Since undertaking economic reforms in 1986, Hanoi has been pursuing an approach of diversification and multilateralization in its foreign affairs.<sup>11</sup> This strategy consists of reaching out to former foes such as China and the United States, normalizing relations with its Southeast Asian neighbors, and establishing cooperation with other regional states under the motto of "willing to be a friend and a reliable partner of all countries in the world community."<sup>12</sup> This omnidirectional foreign policy has helped Vietnam end its diplomatic isolation and has created a stable security environment in which to concentrate on development. This pragmatism also explains Vietnam's motivations for resuming relations and cultivating economic engagement with Taiwan. Furthermore, Vietnamese leaders were likely attracted by Taiwan's economic success as one of the "four Asian tigers." Starting from a low development base, and with a population initially resentful of the Kuomintang's rule, Taiwan transformed itself into an industrializing economy through export promotion and the development of its high-tech sector, despite operating in an environment of constant security threats

<sup>9</sup> Trang Tran, "Yeu cau Dai Loan (Trung Quoc) huy tap tran ban dan that o dao Ba Binh" [Vietnam Demands Taiwan (China) Cancel Live-Fire Exercise on Itu Aba], *Economy and Forecast Review Online*, December 2, 2022 ~ <https://kinhtevadubao.vn/yeu-cau-dai-loan-trung-quoc-huy-tap-tran-ban-dan-that-o-ba-binh-24742.html>; and Binh Giang, "Viet Nam phan doi Dai Loan tap tran o Truong Sa" [Vietnam Resolutely Opposes Taiwan's Exercises in the Spratly Islands], *Tien Phong*, August 28, 2023 ~ <https://tienphong.vn/viet-nam-phan-doi-dai-loan-tap-tran-o-truong-sa-post1564354.tpo>.

<sup>10</sup> Huynh Tam Sang, "Addressing Challenges Faced by Taiwan's Migrant Workers," *Diplomat*, December 30, 2021 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/addressing-challenges-faced-by-taiwans-migrant-workers>.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Vuving, "The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy in the Doi Moi Era," in *Vietnam: Navigating a Rapidly Changing Economy, Society and Political Order*, ed. Börje Ljunggren and Dwight H. Perkins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023), 347–69; and Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Foreign Policy: Structure, Evolution, and Contemporary Challenges," in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Jonathan London (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 120–22.

<sup>12</sup> Nguyen Phu Trong, "Speech of Party General Secretary at National Foreign Relations Conference," VietnamPlus, December 31, 2021 ~ <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/speech-of-party-general-secretary-at-national-foreign-relations-conference/220070.vnp>.

from the mainland.<sup>13</sup> Taiwan's rapid modernization has thus offered abundant investment opportunities and critical lessons in industrialization for Vietnam.

Vietnam's approach to Taiwan is not unusual. Southeast Asian states' postures toward Taiwan are generally closer to Beijing's one-China principle than to Washington's more ambiguous one-China policy.<sup>14</sup> Yet countries from this subregion have few qualms about advancing economic engagement with Taiwan. However, this traditionally pragmatic approach has come under increasing strain as the cross-strait situation has worsened significantly over the last few years.

### *Multiple Crises*

A major conflict over Taiwan would entail multiple challenges for Vietnam. This section will examine the three most urgent of these: the repatriation of Vietnamese citizens, economic spillover, and military contingencies in the South China Sea. To be sure, some caveats are required: the challenges and their impacts would vary depending on the form, scope, duration, and intensity of the crisis. Furthermore, the reaction of relevant actors would also condition Vietnam's response.

The first challenge would be the fate of the approximately 400,000 Vietnamese living in Taiwan. Repatriating even one-tenth of this number would pose a substantial capacity and coordination challenge for Vietnam. Whether Hanoi has sufficient resources, including ships, planes, and other means of transportation, as well as infrastructure, facilities, and personnel to support the evacuation effort, is unclear. A comparison with Vietnam's evacuation efforts following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine illustrates this point. On this occasion, Hanoi safely evacuated more than 2,600 nationals during the initial phase of the war.<sup>15</sup> However, evacuees had to make an arduous journey to Poland and Romania to reach their flights as intense fighting prevented Vietnam from landing planes in Ukraine. This evacuation strategy would be virtually impossible to replicate in Taiwan given

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<sup>13</sup> Joe Studwell, *How Asia Works: Success and Failure in the World's Most Dynamic Region* (New York: Grove Press, 2014); and Cal Clark, Alexander C. Tan, and Karl Ho, "Confronting the Costs of Its Past Success: Revisiting Taiwan's Post-Authoritarian Political and Economic Development," *Asian Politics and Policy* 10, no. 3 (2018): 462–65.

<sup>14</sup> Ngeow Chow Bing, "The 'One China' Policy of Southeast Asian Countries," ThinkChina, August 12, 2022 ~ <https://www.thinkchina.sg/one-china-policy-southeast-asian-countries>.

<sup>15</sup> "Hon 2.500 người Việt được sơ tán khỏi vùng chiến sự tại Ukraine" [More than 2,500 Vietnamese Evacuated from War Zones in Ukraine], VietnamPlus, March 6, 2022 ~ <https://www.vietnamplus.vn/hon-2500-nguoi-viet-duoc-so-tan-khoi-vung-chien-su-tai-ukraine/776684.vnp>.

its distinct maritime geography. Yet the Vietnamese government would likely face intense public pressure, particularly on social media, to undertake rapid action. This pressure might spill over into outright discontent, especially if the government were perceived as acting too slowly or as unresponsive to demands from nationals trapped in Taiwan or their relatives.

Second, trade and investment flows between Vietnam and Taiwan would experience major disruptions in a Taiwan contingency. If a cross-strait crisis were to escalate into a major war, it would likely cause shortages of critical goods, negatively affecting production and exports. One sector that would be particularly exposed in a crisis is Vietnam's fledgling semiconductor industry. Taiwan is a major player in chip manufacturing, producing at least 92% of the world's most advanced logic chips and one-third to half of its less sophisticated chips.<sup>16</sup> A cross-strait shock might halt flows of parts, components, technologies, and human resources, dealing a significant blow to Vietnam's ambition of becoming a major chip manufacturer.

Vietnam's trade with China would likely also suffer extensive losses. Anticipating Western sanctions during a Taiwan crisis, international investors, banks, and other financial institutions might withdraw from China to seek safer investments, which could trigger a collapse of global trade in a worst-case scenario.<sup>17</sup> This development would devastate trade linkages with China—Vietnam's most important trade partner—particularly in production output, exports, and imports, leading to mass unemployment and an overall contraction of economic activity. Vietnam's currency might come under downward pressure, as the dollar tends to rise during crises, prompting concerns over inflation and capital outflows.

Again, some caveats should be considered. Given the strength, diversity, and extensive linkages of China's economy, if the contingency were a short, low-intensity crisis with limited reach, Beijing might weather the storm without suffering an economic catastrophe. A low-intensity crisis might further encourage investors and businesses to move production chains of critical goods, such as chips and semiconductors, out of China and Taiwan. Vietnam could benefit from this development, as it has become a new investment destination for these industries.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Charlie Vest, Agatha Kratz, and Reva Goujon, "The Global Economic Disruptions from a Taiwan Conflict," Rhodium Group, December 14, 2022 ~ <https://rhg.com/research/taiwan-economic-disruptions>.

<sup>17</sup> Vest, Kratz, and Goujon, "The Global Economic Disruptions from a Taiwan Conflict."

<sup>18</sup> Phan Le and Hai Thanh Nguyen, "Vietnam Climbs the Chip Value Chain," East Asia Forum, November 15, 2022 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/11/15/vietnam-climbs-the-chip-value-chain>.

A third aspect of the crisis—military contingencies in the South China Sea—also poses challenges for Vietnam. The escalation of cross-strait tensions to a conflict, especially one involving Chinese and U.S. forces moving troops and military assets, would inevitably raise tensions in the South China Sea and compel Vietnam to put its forces on high alert. Furthermore, Hanoi also must consider a hypothetical scenario where China stages an attack on Itu Aba. Were China to successfully seize and control the island, it would create a significant dilemma for Vietnamese leaders. Itu Aba is the largest naturally occurring feature in the Spratly Islands, and Taiwan has fortified it with power generators, an airstrip, a hospital, radar equipment, and a lighthouse. The island is close to three features under Vietnam's control: Namyit Island, Sand Cay, and Petley Reef. Control of Itu Aba would provide strategic benefits for China in the sea and heighten Vietnam's sense of vulnerability.

### *Understanding the Challenges*

Anticipating Vietnam's response requires an understanding of how the Communist Party of Vietnam perceives these multiple challenges. Domestically, trade and investment disruptions, declining output, and possible economic contraction could generate popular discontent. If the party cannot successfully manage the economic pressure, it would undermine one of its pillars of legitimacy: ensuring continued economic growth and raising living standards for the masses. Public opinion on the party's evacuation efforts and the management of military movements in the South China Sea would also affect its standing among the broader populace.

Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states will also face growing pressures from China and the United States to choose sides in the event of a Taiwan conflict. Both great powers will employ all means at their disposal to convince the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its members to endorse their interpretations of and responses to the conflagration, threatening punishments and promising rewards in exchange for support. The pressure level will correspond with the intensity of the contingency and will require ASEAN, in particular, to exhibit a high level of unity and strategic adroitness.

Added to this, a direct conflict between China and the United States over Taiwan could well be the death knell for the U.S.-led international order, which has already been weakened in recent decades by multiple

economic crises as well as by challenges from both Moscow and Beijing.<sup>19</sup> A breakdown in this order would upend the assumptions underpinning Vietnam's omnidirectional foreign policy: a benign security environment under U.S. hegemony and a global preference for economic development and interdependence.<sup>20</sup> The Communist Party of Vietnam would have to determine a new strategic direction during a period of high uncertainty and vulnerability that would be compounded by domestic pressures and regional ramifications of the conflict.

Given the enormous impact of a Taiwan contingency, Vietnam would be unlikely to offer a robust response. Crisis management at home would consume most of Hanoi's time, attention, and resources. Vietnam would officially urge all parties to exercise restraint and refrain from further escalation. This muted reaction would be entirely consistent with Hanoi's record of keeping silent on issues that Beijing deems "core interests." For instance, during the tension following then U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan, Vietnam reiterated its commitment to the one-China principle and urged all relevant parties to exercise restraint.<sup>21</sup> Hanoi might privately express its concerns to Beijing through party-to-party channels—a unique feature in China-Vietnam relations—but there is nevertheless a limit to what Vietnam will do to influence Chinese policies given Hanoi's strong aversion to unnecessarily provoking Beijing. ASEAN would serve as another platform for Vietnam to express concerns in concert with other Southeast Asian states. However, ASEAN's low level of institutionalization, internal divisions, and subjection to great-power pressure might prevent the organization from taking a strong and outspoken stance.

### *Implications for Vietnam's Middle-Power Status*

As noted in the introduction to this roundtable, the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index ranks Vietnam as a middle power based on an aggregate index of criteria that range from economic relationships to defense

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<sup>19</sup> Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018); and Adam Tooze, *Shutdown: How Covid Shook the World's Economy* (New York: Viking Press, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> David W.P. Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25–125; and Kosal Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 167–202.

<sup>21</sup> Duy Linh, "Viet Nam len tieng ve tinh hinh eo bien Dai Loan" [Vietnam Issued a Statement on Taiwan Situation], *Tuoi Tre*, August 3, 2022. ≈ <https://tuoitre.vn/viet-nam-len-tieng-ve-tinh-hinh-eo-bien-dai-loan-20220803094620294.htm>.

networks to diplomatic and cultural influences.<sup>22</sup> Vietnamese academics and experts also argue that the country exhibits certain features of middle-power status based on aspects of its capacity, behavior, and identity. In particular, these scholars attribute Vietnam's middle-power status to its growing economic and military capacities, commitments, and achievements in promoting multilateralism.<sup>23</sup>

However, Vietnam's muted response to growing cross-strait tensions, as well as to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, demonstrates the limits to this argument. Not only does Vietnam rarely comment on the Taiwan issue, but it also abstained from UN General Assembly votes to condemn Russia's illegal invasion and annexation of Ukraine, did not participate in Western sanctions against Moscow, and continues to embrace economic and political ties with Russia.<sup>24</sup> These responses contrast sharply with the conventional understanding that middle powers are "internationalist, multilateralist and good citizens."<sup>25</sup> They also reinforce Vietnam's preference for pragmatic consideration of national interests, particularly its extensive ties with Russia, over the more traditional normative responsibilities of a middle power. However, Hanoi is not alone in this regard. Traditional middle powers such as Australia, Canada, South Korea, and Indonesia have also at times pursued foreign policy directions that are inconsistent with the expectations of middle powers.<sup>26</sup>

Nearly 40 years ago, an external crisis triggered Vietnam's postwar transformation—the combination of globalization and the action of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who pulled the rug from under the feet of the Communist Party of Vietnam by offering entente to China and disrupting Soviet Communism with his policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*.<sup>27</sup> The Soviet Union's subsequent collapse shook party elites out of their Marxist-style

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<sup>22</sup> Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index, Vietnam  <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/countries/vietnam>.

<sup>23</sup> Thuy T. Do, "Vietnam's Emergence as a Middle Power in Asia: Unfolding the Power-Knowledge Nexus," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2022): 279–302; Le Dinh Tinh and Vu Thi Thu Ngan, "The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Emergence of Vietnam as a Middle Power," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2022): 303–25; and Phan Xuan Dung, "No One Can Force Vietnam to Choose Sides: Vietnam as a Self-Reliant Middle Power," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 4 (2022): 151–79.

<sup>24</sup> Vietnam has welcomed visits from Russian senior officials, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in July 2022, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitri Medvedev in May 2023, and State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin in October 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Robertson and Andrew Carr, "Is Anyone a Middle Power? The Case for Historicization," *International Theory* 15, no. 3 (2023): 379–403.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott, *Changing Worlds*, 25–86.

class-struggle worldview and forced them to reimagine Vietnam's position in a globalized, interdependent world. A Taiwan contingency in its worst form—a great-power conflict—might be another crisis that forces the party to re-examine its current strategy and, by extension, its omnidirectional foreign policy. Vietnam is now in a much stronger position than it was in the 1980s, and there is a chance that it might be better able to cope with such a transformational crisis. Demanding crisis-management tasks, economic and geopolitical uncertainty, and confusion over how to deftly operate in the new geopolitical era that would result from a cross-strait conflict, however, are likely to constrain Hanoi's options and responses to a crisis over Taiwan. ◆



## The Philippine Presidency and Middle-Power Agency

*Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby*

**B**ased on its geographic proximity, coupled with its economic, demographic, military, and diplomatic weight, the Philippines is a middle power that—in theory—ought to have the agency to influence tensions in the Taiwan Strait. The Lowy Institute’s Asia Power Index, for instance, ranked the Philippines 16th out of 26 Asian countries for comprehensive power in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Other regional countries in this middle range included Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Vietnam. However, the Philippines has not yet articulated a vision emphasizing its middle-power status, and prudence is required regarding any role it could play in a cross-strait conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the last two administrations of President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–22) and President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (incumbent since 2022) as case studies, this essay argues that while the Philippines potentially has agency vis-à-vis a Taiwan contingency, whether this agency is exercised remains highly context specific. The essay begins by first canvassing the geopolitical risks the Philippines must consider, followed by an analysis of how the Duterte and Marcos administrations have exercised agency in relation to these risks. Understanding the dynamics of these varying contexts, in turn, has policy implications for the Philippines’ role in preventing a military conflict over Taiwan.

### *The Philippines’ Risk Assessment*

At least four factors presently loom large on Manila’s geopolitical radar. The first is the U.S.-China strategic competition. The hardening of U.S. political and strategic attitudes across the board—compounded by the fact that 2024 is a U.S. presidential election year—makes it increasingly difficult

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<sup>1</sup> Susannah Patton, Jack Sato, and Hervé Lemahieu, *Lowy Institute Asia Power Index: 2023 Key Findings Report* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2023) ~ <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/downloads/lowy-institute-2023-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Aileen S.P. Baviera, “Is the Philippines Moving to Active Middle Power Diplomacy?” East Asia Forum, March 27, 2020 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/03/27/is-the-philippines-moving-to-active-middle-power-diplomacy>.

for Washington to shift the deepening Sino-U.S. rivalry back toward even a modicum of cooperation. Meanwhile, China is confronting challenging domestic dynamics. The most urgent task for President Xi Jinping, who is now in an unprecedented third term, is to stabilize and rebuild the Chinese economy. Two years of strict zero-Covid policies severely disrupted China's economy, as evidenced by a sharp drop in consumer spending, business investment, and exports, while also halting growth in the real estate sector. These dynamics place the Philippines—as well as most other Asian middle powers—in an increasingly precarious position between China, its leading trading partner, and the United States, its long-standing security ally.

A second factor on Manila's list of strategic priorities is China's continued presence in the South China Sea. This is not a new challenge for the Philippines, which has been grappling with China's so-called gray-zone tactics since the mid-1990s when Beijing erected structures on Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands. Yet China's use of such tactics has intensified since the mid-2010s, especially following the July 2016 decision in favor of the Philippines by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. The case was initiated by the Philippines and found China's South China Sea policies and behaviors to be illegal. Chinese coercive measures within Philippine waters during this period can be categorized as either militarized or nonmilitarized. Militarized activities involve the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and its maritime militia using methods that range from shadowing and swarming to outright dangerous vessel maneuvers. Nonmilitarized tactics utilize official diplomatic measures and information manipulation.

In the past year, Beijing has further intensified its coercive measures in the West Philippine Sea (the Philippines' official name for the parts of the South China Sea within its exclusive economic zone, or EEZ). The CCG and maritime militia continue to use dangerous maneuvers to block and harass Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and Philippine military vessels from conducting resupply missions to the BRP *Sierra Madre* in Ayungin Shoal. A small team of Philippine marines is stationed on the BRP *Sierra Madre*, a grounded ship from World War II that serves as a Philippine outpost in the West Philippine Sea.

China continues to bolster its militarized coercive maneuvers with political and diplomatic measures as well. In the past, the Chinese Communist Party used a historically based “nine-dash line” to illustrate the country's claim to South China Sea. The nine dashes delineated approximately 90% of the sea and were judged illegitimate in the Permanent

Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling. However, in 2023, China released a new map showing ten dashes (with the additional dash located east of Taiwan), effectively extending its territorial claims to about 95% of the entire South China Sea.<sup>3</sup> Philippine defense secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. has observed that the updated map is "the best evidence of [China's] expansionist agenda."<sup>4</sup> Speaking at the September 2023 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Jakarta, President Marcos stated that precisely because of this agenda, the region's vision for a peaceful and stable South China Sea "remains a distant reality."<sup>5</sup>

Adding to its militarized and political measures in the South China Sea, China's coercive activities are further reinforced by information campaigns that permeate domestic discourse. For example, there is ongoing propaganda in the Philippines that the CCG is a civilian service, even though since 2018 it has been under the command of the People's Armed Police, which is under the authority of China's Central Military Commission. According to this line of argument, combating the CCG-led maneuvers in the West Philippine Sea does not necessitate invoking the Philippines' Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States. This narrative implies that the country must therefore rely on its own limited capabilities instead of seeking help from like-minded states, allies, or partners. To do otherwise would provoke China even further.

Given the highly complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges presently confronting the Philippines in the South China Sea, and in its near waters specifically, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Taiwan issue is a distant third among Manila's geopolitical concerns. That said, a case can be made that the importance of this issue is steadily increasing, not least because of its potential to intersect with and reinforce the two aforementioned strategic challenges of U.S.-China competition and the South China Sea flashpoint. China's growing presence in the South China Sea is a reminder that this strategically significant body of water could be a staging ground for potential military scenarios in the Taiwan Strait. Although there are strong indications that China will continue to use gray-zone tactics, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Bamba Galang, "PH Rejects, Protests China's Expanded 10-Dash Line in South China Sea," CNN Philippines, August 31, 2023 ~ <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/8/31/ph-rejects-china-10-dash-line.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Cecille Suerte Felipe, "Gibo: 10-Dash Line Shows China's Expansionist Policy," *Philippine Star*, September 11, 2023 ~ <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/09/11/2295413/gibo-10-dash-line-shows-chinas-expansionist-policy>.

<sup>5</sup> Bea Cupin, "Marcos: South China Sea Dispute Isn't about U.S.-China Competition," Rappler, September 6, 2023 ~ <https://www.rappler.com/nation/marcos-jr-says-south-china-sea-not-about-united-states-competition-asean-summit-2023>.

engaging the CCG and its maritime militia to conduct activities below the threshold of war, a forceful change of the cross-strait status quo cannot be ruled out.

A fourth and final challenge for the Philippines relates to taking a more active role in ASEAN. While the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling heavily favored the Philippines in 2016, it should be noted that there are other claimant (and non-claimant) states in the South China Sea with which Manila's claims are not in direct competition. This represents an opportunity for middle-power collaboration, wherein the Philippines could reach out and work with its ASEAN neighbors to counter Chinese aggression in these waters. The 2023 ASEAN Summit in Indonesia announced that the 2026 chair of the organization would be assumed by the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> This presents an opportunity for the country to take a leadership role and shape, among other things, discussions on new guidelines for a binding code of conduct in the South China Sea.

In sum, there are four key interconnected factors determining the Philippines' geopolitical environment. The great-power competition between the United States and China will most likely continue to intensify, depending on the outcome of the 2024 presidential election in the United States and Xi's ability to retain power in China. The competition will, in turn, likely be expressed and articulated in the South China Sea and possible contingencies in the Taiwan Strait. Against this backdrop, it is critical for the Philippines to continue using the platform that ASEAN provides to garner support from the other Southeast Asian states.

### *Manila's Strategic Responses*

The following discussion examines the responses of the Duterte and Marcos administrations to the Philippines' current geopolitical environment. This analysis reveals that while both administrations exercised agency, they differed in the strategies they adopted and in the means by which they implemented them. Highlighting these differences is essential to anticipate and calibrate the Philippines' course vis-à-vis a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

*The Duterte administration.* Duterte was inaugurated as president in June 2016. A month later, the landmark arbitral award regarding the

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<sup>6</sup> ASEAN, "ASEAN Leaders' Review and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus," September 5, 2023 ≈ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/01.final-asean-leaders-review-and-decision-on-the-implementation-of-the-5pc-1.pdf>.

South China Sea was handed down in favor of the Philippines. Almost immediately, Duterte announced he would pursue an “independent foreign policy” in response to the geopolitical environment.<sup>7</sup> To many observers, this announcement was indicative of a so-called middle-power moment for the country. In practice, however, Duterte’s foreign policy set aside the arbitration award and forged closer ties with China. In this instance, pursuing an “independent” foreign policy meant becoming independent of the country’s longtime ally the United States and pivoting toward China in the hopes that doing so would lower tensions in the South China Sea. While the strategy arguably worked to a limited extent, the closer bilateral relationship between Duterte and Xi ultimately drove a wedge into the U.S.-Philippines alliance.<sup>8</sup>

There were, of course, domestic drivers of Duterte’s pursuit of an independent foreign policy. One of these was the president’s desire to project himself as a strongman who would lead the country out of the debilitating depths of criminality and corruption.<sup>9</sup> To do that, he launched a “war on drugs,” which became notorious for its extrajudicial killings. However, the longer the drug war progressed, the more support Duterte needed from international partners as critics of his human rights violations became more vocal. It was in this context that China stepped in to give its full support to the drug war. China was also willing to support Duterte’s flagship infrastructure projects, including the addition of the Philippines to its Belt and Road Initiative.

However, the cost of closer ties with Beijing ended up being significant. In practice, the metaphorical wedge in Philippine-U.S. relations took the form of a threat by Duterte to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), a cornerstone of the alliance. Although Duterte ultimately suspended the cancellation three times and eventually scrapped his plan to abrogate the agreement, the damage to U.S.-Philippine ties was severe. Taking the VFA out of commission would have meant that the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Philippines did not reflect current dynamics and realities. In particular, the 2014 Enhanced

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<sup>7</sup> For further reading, see Renato Cruz De Castro, “The Duterte Administration’s Foreign Policy: Unravelling the Aquino Administration’s Balancing Agenda on an Emergent China,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 139–59.

<sup>8</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, “Caught Between Appeasement and Limited Hard Balancing: The Philippines’ Changing Relations with the Eagle and the Dragon,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2022): 258–78.

<sup>9</sup> Vicente L. Rafael, *The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the United States and the Philippines—which allows the U.S. military to rotate troops through the Philippines for extended periods and operate facilities on Philippine bases—could not remain in effect if the VFA were abrogated. Another ramification of the closer bilateral relationship with Beijing was that the 2016 arbitration award was essentially set aside, enabling China’s coercive activities in the South China Sea. Despite these evident costs, the Duterte administration trivialized the effects of China’s aggressive moves.

Unsurprisingly, Duterte’s attention to the potential for a military confrontation over Taiwan was low. Based on how he crafted Philippine foreign policy, Duterte believed that Taiwan was an issue between China and the United States, not the Philippines. Moreover, given the close ties that he had developed with Xi, Duterte could argue that China would not attack its friend, the Philippines. In this context, the Duterte administration’s Taiwan strategy was one of neutrality.

*The Marcos administration.* The son of a former dictator, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. came to power in 2022. He identified as a continuity candidate on the campaign trail, and as such, he officially maintained Duterte’s pursuit of an independent foreign policy. But whereas Duterte’s foreign policy was characterized by a pivot to China, Marcos has distinguished his administration by standing up to Beijing. In his inaugural state of the nation address, he made it clear that the Philippines would “not give up an inch of Philippine territory.”<sup>10</sup> Since then, Marcos has actively diversified the country’s international relations by reaching out to partners that were previously alienated by Duterte’s harsh policies. Of course, a leading domestic driver for this stance is Marcos’s desire to restore the name and image of his own family in Philippine society.

One of the core pillars of Marcos’s foreign policy has been the reinvigoration of the U.S.-Philippines alliance, which, as noted, was on the brink of collapse under his predecessor. In April 2023, Manila identified four additional military sites to which U.S. forces will have access under the EDCA, all of which face Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> Later in the year, Manila and Washington signed a landmark deal to develop small modular nuclear reactors for civilian nuclear energy infrastructure.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Argyll Cyrus Geducos, “Marcos: I Won’t Surrender an Inch of PH Territory,” *Manila Bulletin*, July 26, 2022 ~ <https://mb.com.ph/2022/07/25/marcos-i-wont-surrender-an-inch-of-ph-territory>.

<sup>11</sup> David Vergun, “New EDCA Sites Named in the Philippines,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 3, 2023 ~ <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3350297/new-edca-sites-named-in-the-philippines>.

<sup>12</sup> “U.S., Philippines Sign Landmark Nuclear Deal,” Reuters, November 18, 2023 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-philippines-ink-landmark-deal-nuclear-cooperation-2023-11-17>.

Almost certainly in response to the reinvigoration of the U.S.-Philippines alliance, China increased its aggression in the South China Sea near the Philippines. In December 2023, for instance, the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea reported that CCG ships used water cannons against civilian vessels of the Philippines' Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) near Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal), a high-tide feature within the country's EEZ.<sup>13</sup> The Philippine boats were on a humanitarian support mission to provide resources to more than 30 fishing vessels near the shoal. The CCG used its water cannons at least eight times, significantly damaging the communication and navigation equipment of one of the BFAR vessels. Additionally, the CCG deployed boats to block the Philippine vessels awaiting the BFAR ships. A day later, another incident at Ayungin Shoal (Second Thomas Shoal) involved CCG and PCG vessels on a resupply mission to the BRP *Sierra Madre*.<sup>14</sup> Besides firing water cannons, the CCG also rammed a PCG vessel, causing severe engine damage.

Following the two incidents, and in stark contrast to the approach taken during the Duterte administration, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs filed protests with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and via a maritime communication mechanism that the two countries had previously established. The Department of Foreign Affairs also formally summoned Huang Xilian, the Chinese ambassador to the Philippines.<sup>15</sup> Whether these measures have any significant long-term impact on China's behavior remains to be seen, especially in light of developments in 2024 such as the Taiwan election in January and the U.S. election in November, both of which will influence the trajectory of geopolitics.

### *Policy Implications*

The current Marcos administration's foreign policy course opens up the opportunity for the Philippines to deepen its partnerships with other Asian middle powers in ways that are potentially significant for the Taiwan flashpoint. For instance, in November 2023, Japan provided the Philippines

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<sup>13</sup> Jairo Bolledo, "China Fires Water Cannon at Filipino Ships in West PH Sea," Rappler, December 9, 2023 ~ <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/china-fires-water-cannon-filipino-ships-west-philippine-sea-december-2023>.

<sup>14</sup> Bonz Magsambol, "Philippines Says China Rammed, Water Canned Resupply Vessels," Rappler, December 10, 2023 ~ <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/philippines-china-statements-ayungin-shoal-incident-december-10-2023>.

<sup>15</sup> Bea Cupin, "Manila Summons Chinese Ambassador after Back-to-Back Water Canning in West PH Sea," Rappler, December 11, 2023 ~ <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/manila-summons-chinese-ambassador-after-water-canning-west-philippine-sea>.

with \$4.2 million in official security assistance.<sup>16</sup> This security cooperation supports building the Philippines' maritime domain awareness capabilities, which can be used to detect and track CCG vessels in the West Philippine Sea. Additionally, maritime domain awareness can strengthen maritime law enforcement to address piracy and armed robbery at sea and identify and regulate illegal fishing. These activities will entail increased coordination by the PCG and the Philippine Navy with their counterparts in ASEAN through joint maritime training exercises.

Another measure the Philippines can take in standing up to China's aggressive moves is to impose economic sanctions that cancel or limit the extent of existing Chinese business operations in the country, including joint oil and gas exploration in the West Philippine Sea and the notorious offshore gaming operators. In December 2023 the Philippines deported 180 Chinese nationals involved in such gaming operations in Manila.<sup>17</sup> The government must also work to counter Chinese information campaigns about potential economic backlash if the Philippines does impose targeted sanctions. One way to fight this misinformation is by doubling down on the numbers: trade between China and the Philippines has remained constant as a percentage of GDP despite tensions between the two countries.<sup>18</sup> These measures can lead the Philippines to build a collective of like-minded states to hold China accountable for its actions.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, middle powers do have agency and strategies to deal with geopolitical realities. What the Philippines case reveals, however, is that the exercise of middle-power agency can change depending on the context. Whereas the Duterte administration downplayed strategic discussions about a potential conflict in Taiwan, the Marcos administration has thus far displayed a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and a less risk-averse approach. Manila's approach to dealing with the Taiwan flashpoint will depend heavily on the president and administration in power. ◆

<sup>16</sup> "Signing and Exchange of Notes for Official Security Assistance (OSA) to the Republic of the Philippines," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), Press Release, November 3, 2023 ~ [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_003330.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003330.html).

<sup>17</sup> "PH Deports 180 Chinese Held in Anti-Trafficking Raid," *Inquirer*, December 15, 2023 ~ <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/224360/ph-deports-180-chinese-held-in-antitrafficking-raid>.

<sup>18</sup> Philippine Statistics Authority, "Highlights of the Philippine Export and Import Statistics August 2023 (Preliminary)," October 2023 ~ <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/export-import/monthly/node/1684061292>.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Joseph P. Medillo, "It's Not about Fear: What Drives the Philippines' Response in the South China Sea," *ThinkChina*, December 11, 2023 ~ <https://www.thinkchina.sg/its-not-about-fear-what-drives-philippines-response-south-china-sea>.



## UK Agency on the Issue of Taiwan

*Alex Bristow and Catherine Jones*

The United Kingdom's role in the stability of the Taiwan flashpoint merits closer attention than it is typically afforded. The UK has global commitments to uphold the international rules-based order, including as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which raises expectations that it would act to oppose China's use of force or coercion to change the status quo across the Taiwan Strait.

The UK is also focusing more attention and resources on the Indo-Pacific, as outlined in recent government reviews of its foreign and defense policies, which expand options for UK policymakers to contribute to regional stability. While the UK is sometimes regarded as a great power, it would not act unilaterally over Taiwan's status or security as China or the United States could. Therefore, the UK's level of agency is closer to the regional "middle" powers considered in this roundtable.

This essay first assesses the trajectory of UK policy toward Taiwan and China. It then considers the diplomatic, economic, and military choices available to British policymakers now and in the event of a crisis or war across the Taiwan Strait.

### *The UK's Approach to Taiwan*

The UK's policy toward Taiwan continues to be framed by its "one China" policy, adopted in 1972. This policy, resembling the approach of several other countries, acknowledges, without accepting, Beijing's claim that Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, the UK has developed trade and cultural relations with Taiwan and supported Taipei's meaningful participation in international organizations while capping government interactions below the cabinet level and avoiding open

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cooperation on defense.<sup>1</sup> Alongside partners such as the G-7 and Australia, the UK has become more vocal about Taiwan as Beijing's pressure on Taipei has increased in recent years. The UK has reiterated its opposition to any forceful change to the status quo while deepening engagement with Taiwan.

Two government policy white papers, the Integrated Review Refresh and the updated Defence Command Paper, both published in 2023, sharpened the UK's response to worsening global geopolitics, including the "threat" posed by Russia and the "epoch-defining challenge" posed by the growing assertiveness of "systemic competitor" China.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the 2021 versions of the same policy papers, the Integrated Review Refresh and the new Defence Command Paper mention Taiwan and the risk that China will use force across the strait. The Integrated Review Refresh states that the UK will widen alignment with core allies and a broader group of partners, including through collective security, to cope with the Chinese Communist Party, and that the UK will work with all parties to ensure that heightened tensions across the Taiwan Strait, as well as in the East and South China Seas, do not escalate.<sup>3</sup> The Defence Command Paper outlines how the UK's growing military presence in the Indo-Pacific will support a "campaigning approach" to systemic competition that reinforces deterrence and international order and upholds British interests and values.<sup>4</sup> These undertakings could provide a rationale and capability for UK involvement in a Taiwan crisis or cross-strait conflict but do not commit the government to any specific course of action.

Beyond this, many parliamentarians and parliamentary committees have called for firmer UK policies toward China, and some also favor greater support to Taiwan. Some of the strongest opinions on Taiwan have been put forward by the cross-party House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC), which published its 2023 report on the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt to coincide with then foreign secretary James Cleverly's

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<sup>1</sup> Gray Sargent, Yao-Yuan Yeh, and I-Ching Lai, "Supporting Taiwan: A Calling for Global Britain," Henry Jackson Society, July 2021 ~ <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/taiwan-global-britain>; and John Curtis and Matthew Ward, "Taiwan, History, Politics and UK Relations," House of Commons Library, Research Briefing, August 17, 2023 ~ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9254>.

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Office (UK), *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World* (London, March 2023), 7, 6, 12, 30 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>; and Ministry of Defence (UK), *Defence Command Paper 2023: Defence's Response to a More Contested and Volatile World* (London, July 2023), 2 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-command-paper-2023-defences-response-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>.

<sup>3</sup> Cabinet Office (UK), *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 31, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Defence (UK), *Defence Command Paper 2023*, 84–86.

visit to Beijing. The FAC, directly quoting evidence submitted to it, stated that “Taiwan is already an independent country, under the name Republic of China (ROC)...it is only lacking greater international recognition.”<sup>5</sup> Drawing on wider insights garnered from a visit to Taiwan that included a tabletop exercise, the FAC made several recommendations for UK policy toward Taiwan, including campaigning for Taiwanese membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and working with like-minded countries to build the resilience of Taiwan’s critical supply resources such as semiconductors. The FAC also recommended that the UK “identify meaningful activities, and red lines, that enable it to shape and pursue an effective policy of deterrence diplomacy to contribute to the protection of the right of self-determination of the people of Taiwan.”<sup>6</sup> The FAC has reviewed a range of options, including coordinated economic sanctions and nonrecognition of any Chinese gains taken by force, but has stopped short of specifically advocating UK military involvement in a conflict.

In a subsequent report, the House of Commons Defence Committee cautioned that conflict over Taiwan was “potentially only years away” and recommended “closer cooperation with partners, including the United States and France, and regional allies, to prepare for a range of actions by China against Taiwan.”<sup>7</sup> In its response to the committee’s report, the government reiterated that the Taiwan issue should “be settled peacefully by the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait through constructive dialogue, without the threat or use of force or coercion.” The government acknowledged: “We are increasingly concerned by the consequences should peace and stability fail in the Taiwan Strait, including global supply chains and the regional economy. We have restated the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait alongside our G7 partners.”<sup>8</sup>

Differences of opinion on China policy do not simply follow party lines. Conservative and Labour politicians were among the co-founders of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, which is staunchly critical

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<sup>5</sup> UK Parliament, House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, “Tilting Horizons: The Integrated Review and the Indo-Pacific,” July 18, 2023 ~ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41144/documents/204045/default>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> UK Parliament, House of Commons, Defence Committee, “UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific,” October 17, 2023 ~ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41808/documents/207298/default>.

<sup>8</sup> UK Parliament, House of Commons, Defence Committee, “UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific: Government Response to the Committee’s Eleventh Report of Session 2022–23,” January 17, 2024, 4 ~ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/6499/uk-defence-and-the-indopacific/publications>.

of Beijing. Factions of the Conservative Party, including former prime minister Liz Truss, have urged Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to label China a threat. There are also debates about China policy within the Labour Party. For example, former trade secretary Peter Mandelson has recommended a softer, more business-friendly approach to China, while former shadow foreign secretary Lisa Nandy has advocated for greater use of human rights sanctions. However, the shadow cabinet's approach seems broadly in line with government policy, even if shadow foreign secretary David Lammy enjoys sniping at Conservative infighting over China.<sup>9</sup> Although the Labour Party is favored to win the next general election (expected in 2024), there is little indication that a Labour government would take a different approach to Taiwan. That said, Labour could potentially rebalance some of the UK's burgeoning involvement in the Indo-Pacific back toward Europe,<sup>10</sup> which could affect the country's diplomatic, economic, and military options in the event of a Taiwan crisis or conflict.

Beyond political and government circles, surveys reveal that public sentiment toward China has soured, while Taiwan is generally well regarded, following a trend in other Western democracies.<sup>11</sup> One survey conducted shortly after Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan, for instance, revealed that about the same-sized narrow majority in the UK and United States favor "other countries" providing help to Taiwan if China tried to annex it.<sup>12</sup> That said, while the UK government and politicians presently possess a degree of social license in taking a firmer line on China, it is important to note that this does not necessarily translate into public consent for UK involvement in a conflict over Taiwan. The UK government needs to remain mindful of how it would explain its choices and decisions to a public that would be confused and frightened amid a barrage of disinformation,

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<sup>9</sup> Sophie Wingate, "Labour's Position on China Would Not Boil Down to the Word 'Threat'—Lammy," *Independent*, October 8, 2023 ~ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/david-lammy-labour-china-rishi-sunak-beijing-b2426206.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine West, "Britain's Role in the Indo-Pacific" (remarks at panel three of the Indo-Pacific Roundtable, Centre for Geopolitics, Cambridge, May 26, 2023), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ove8kCAMonk>.

<sup>11</sup> Evie Aspinall and Eliza Keogh, "2023 Annual Survey of UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Britain," British Foreign Policy Group, July 19, 2023 ~ <https://bfpg.co.uk/2023/07/2023-annual-survey>; and Christine Huang and Laura Clancy, "Taiwan Seen More Favourably than Not across 24 Countries," Pew Research Center, August 11, 2023 ~ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/11/taiwan-seen-more-favorably-than-not-across-24-countries>.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Henley, "Sharp Fall in China's Global Standing as Poll Shows Backing for Taiwan Defence," *Guardian*, October 23, 2023 ~ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/23/sharp-fall-in-chinas-global-standing-as-poll-shows-backing-for-taiwan-defence>.

likely goods shortages, and other forms of political warfare and gray-zone coercion were there to be a major crisis over Taiwan.<sup>13</sup>


### *UK Options over Taiwan*


*Diplomatic agency.* The UK benefits from an extensive diplomatic network and would aim to work through multilateral and bilateral channels in response to a Taiwan crisis or conflict. Since voting to leave the European Union in 2016, the UK has expanded its diplomatic and defense attaché staff in the Indo-Pacific, while also joining and deepening its engagement with several multilateral groupings. This additional capacity, complemented by new senior Indo-Pacific roles in London, should translate into greater diplomatic capacity and expanded options for decision-makers.<sup>14</sup>

The UK would probably seek to maintain dialogue with China in any potential crisis, but it is unlikely to be regarded as a credible interlocutor, especially as London has lost the unique channels to Beijing that it had prior to U.S.-China normalization in the 1970s and during the negotiations for the handover of Hong Kong in 1997.<sup>15</sup> Seasoned UK diplomats recognize “the importance of preventing Xi Jinping from deciding that conflict over Taiwan is inevitable.”<sup>16</sup> As such, UK policymakers would receive expert advice about the risks of actions that encourage Taiwan to declare independence, which also remains part of the “dual deterrence” in the official U.S. position of strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis the flashpoint.<sup>17</sup> Diplomatic tactics would depend on the nature and tempo of any crisis or conflict, but priorities would always include calling out Chinese aggression, forging consensus with Europe and key partners, and shaping the global narrative. To further the last of these objectives, the UK could leverage the


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<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive assessment of the importance of political and economic warfare in the possible trajectories that a war over Taiwan involving the United States could take, see Ross Babbage, *The Next Major War: Can the U.S. and Its Allies Win against China?* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Cabinet Office (UK), *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London, March 2021)  <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, “Transcript of the Conversation between Zhou Enlai and Humphrey Trevelyan,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, January 5, 1955  <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/transcript-conversation-between-zhou-enlai-and-humphrey-trevelyan>.

<sup>16</sup> UK Parliament, House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, “Tilting Horizons,” 42.

<sup>17</sup> Steven M. Goldstein, “In Defence of Strategic Ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait,” National Bureau of Asian Research, Commentary, October 15, 2021  <https://www.nbr.org/publication/in-defense-of-strategic-ambiguity-in-the-taiwan-strait>.

Five Eyes arrangement and other intelligence assets to counter Chinese propaganda and disinformation.<sup>18</sup>

Given their so-called special relationship, the UK's first priority would be close coordination with the United States, both bilaterally and via the UN Security Council. There would also be high priority placed on engagement with Australia and Japan, given close bilateral ties and the possibility that these states too could be involved in any conflict.<sup>19</sup> Most UK governments would reflexively support the United States in a crisis or conflict over Taiwan, even if the origins of the conflict were shrouded by competing accounts and disinformation. It is important to note, however, that this does not equate to the UK surrendering its agency to conduct independent diplomacy. The government would also expect British opinions to carry weight in Washington, leveraging the UK's own experiences with China and recalling the cautious counsel that prime ministers offered during the Taiwan Strait crises of the 1950s.

The United States may particularly value the UK's help in marshalling European support, including within NATO and through liaison with the EU. Within Europe, the UK would likely prioritize engagement with France, given that it is the only country with comparable power-projection capabilities in the Indo-Pacific and because French leaders sometimes advocate an independent European stance toward Taiwan.<sup>20</sup> The United States could also encourage the UK and other European partners to engage Middle Eastern countries, hedging against interruptions to energy supplies or critical waterways.

Most of the UK's Indo-Pacific engagements would need to be conducted bilaterally or through ad hoc small groups with the United States, especially as the UK is not party to the Quad (the United States, Japan, Australia, and India) or the U.S.-Japan-Australia and U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilaterals. The UK would likely rely on bilateralism to interact with countries in Southeast Asia, as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is unlikely to be an effective forum for managing a Taiwan crisis. The UK might pay particular attention to Singapore and Malaysia, leveraging its membership

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<sup>18</sup> Dan Lomas, "To Brief, or Not to Brief: UK Intelligence and Public Disclosure," RUSI, Commentary, February 2, 2022 ~ <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/brief-or-not-brief-uk-intelligence-and-public-disclosure>.

<sup>19</sup> Although there is no consensus, Indo-Pacific security experts tend to assess that Australia and Japan are the U.S. regional allies most likely to join a Taiwan conflict. Opinion is more divided about South Korea and the Philippines.

<sup>20</sup> "Macron Criticised for Saying Europe Should Take Independent Stance on Taiwan," Reuters, April 11, 2023 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/macron-criticised-saying-europe-should-take-independent-stance-taiwan-2023-04-10>.

in the Five Power Defence Arrangements to gauge their stance on maritime access through the Malacca Strait.<sup>21</sup> Working with partners, the UK would also seek to engage India, which has a key role in Indian Ocean security and networks in the global South.

*Protecting nationals.* The UK government would need to consider the safety and, if need be, evacuation of British citizens caught up in any crisis or conflict. Based on historical data, there is probably only a small number of British citizens in Taiwan, although many more people will have ties there.<sup>22</sup> The majority of British citizens in China live in Hong Kong, and millions of people there are also potentially eligible to reside in the UK through possession of British National (Overseas) status.<sup>23</sup> Even if transportation were functioning in a crisis, China may deliberately restrict migration for a variety of reasons, including to exert political leverage over foreign nationals. Any major crisis or conflict would also have regional effects beyond China and Taiwan. There are over 1.7 million British citizens living across the Indo-Pacific, mainly in Australia.<sup>24</sup> Evacuation planning would be complicated by the dearth of safe havens among regional partners, as countries such as Japan and Australia may be targeted in a conflict. Although there would likely be tremendous competition for transportation, the Ministry of Defence would likely reserve its limited strategic uplift capabilities for military contingences. As such, the government would have limited capacity to help nationals in any conflict or fast-moving crisis and would need to manage public pressure to do more.

*Sanctions and trade.* Policymakers in London are concerned about the economic consequences of any crisis or war, as evidenced by former foreign secretary Cleverly's observation that the global cost of war over Taiwan

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<sup>21</sup> The Five Power Defence Arrangements are a series of defense agreements between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK. See Pek Wee Kian, "The Five Power Defence Arrangements: A Contemporary Assessment," *Pointer: Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces* 42, no. 4 (2016): 1–10 ~ <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/oms/safti/pointer/documents/pdf/V42N4.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> See "Brits Abroad," BBC ~ [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/in\\_depth/brits\\_abroad/html/asia\\_pac.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/brits_abroad/html/asia_pac.stm).

<sup>23</sup> Home Office (UK), "Impact Assessment: Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Visa," October 22, 2020 ~ [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukia/2020/70/pdfs/ukia\\_20200070\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukia/2020/70/pdfs/ukia_20200070_en.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> "UK Commitment to Indo-Pacific Reaffirmed as Global Summit Takes Place in Singapore," Ministry of Defence (UK), Press Release, June 3, 2023 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-commitment-to-indo-pacific-reaffirmed-as-global-summit-takes-place-in-singapore>; and Department of Home Affairs (Australia), "Permanent Migration from the United Kingdom" ~ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/country-profiles/profiles/united-kingdom>.

could exceed \$2.6 trillion.<sup>25</sup> The UK's resilience measures are intended both to cushion against economic shocks and to protect government agency against coercion.<sup>26</sup> Reflecting its concern, the UK government reportedly conducted a scenario exercise to gauge the impact of a Taiwan conflict on semiconductor supply chains prior to launching the country's national semiconductor strategy in May 2023.<sup>27</sup> But the scale of economic disruption in a Taiwan conflict cannot be fully mitigated, especially if the United States were to attempt to blockade all maritime trade with China.<sup>28</sup>

In a conflict, the United States would expect, and likely receive, UK support for comprehensive sanctions, potentially including the suspension of financial services and the freezing of assets by the City of London. But the UK government would have greater difficulty persuading businesses and partners to support sanctions packages implemented as a deterrent prior to a conflict, which reinforces the case for pre-crisis coordination.<sup>29</sup> An expanded G-7, including Australia, Japan, and India, as well as the EU, may be the ideal mechanism for sanctions coordination, but the UK could also work flexibly in smaller like-minded formats.

*Military options.* The UK and France are the two European countries most capable of contributing military force to a Taiwan contingency, although others may offer niche capabilities.<sup>30</sup> It is almost inconceivable that the UK would commit combat forces except as part of coalition response led by the United States. As with diplomacy and sanctions, much would depend on the trajectory of any crisis or conflict.

A Chinese armed attack against U.S. territories in North America would trigger Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, potentially requiring an armed response by the UK and other NATO allies, but this does

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<sup>25</sup> Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, "Our Position on China: Foreign Secretary's 2023 Mansion House Speech," Gov.uk, April 25, 2023 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/our-position-on-china-speech-by-the-foreign-secretary>.

<sup>26</sup> Cabinet Office (UK), *The UK Government Resilience Framework* (London, December 2022) ~ [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63cff056e90e071ba7b41d54/UKG\\_Resilience\\_Framework\\_FINAL\\_v2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63cff056e90e071ba7b41d54/UKG_Resilience_Framework_FINAL_v2.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (UK), *National Semiconductor Strategy* (London, May 2023) ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-semiconductor-strategy/national-semiconductor-strategy>.

<sup>28</sup> Babbage, *The Next Major War*, chap. 6.

<sup>29</sup> UK Parliament, House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, "Tilting Horizons," 22.

<sup>30</sup> Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2023 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>.



not apply in the Pacific.<sup>31</sup> Although NATO is deepening some forms of engagement in the Indo-Pacific, allies decide for themselves whether to deploy military assets to the region as the UK and others have in recent years.<sup>32</sup> While the UK is a member of the Five Power Defence Arrangements and has expanded defense cooperation with Australia, Japan, and other Indo-Pacific partners, it does not have binding treaty commitments to collective defense in the region.

The UK is already contributing to Indo-Pacific deterrence through what the 2023 Defence Command Paper calls “campaigning,” competing short of conflict. This includes the AUKUS technology partnership with Australia and the United States and the Global Combat Air Program with Japan and Italy. Additionally, the persistent presence in the Indo-Pacific of the Gurkha garrison in Brunei and two offshore patrol vessels will be complemented by periodically deploying carrier strike groups (CSG), nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN), and the Indian Ocean-based Littoral Response Group (South). The UK and France are also exploring sequencing their CSG deployments to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>33</sup> When Royal Navy assets are present, the UK takes opportunities to transit the Taiwan Strait, as HMS *Richmond* did by breaking off from the CSG deployment in September 2021. The UK-Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement and the expansion of Australia’s force posture initiatives are also increasing the tempo and scope of joint exercises, training, and temporary deployments. Through AUKUS, the UK is engaged in joint training, research, and demonstrations of advanced technological capabilities, reinforcing deterrence. Later this decade, the Royal Navy will be able to maintain an SSN in the region for extended periods through the facilities being built at HMAS Stirling in Western Australia for Submarine Rotation Force–West.<sup>34</sup>

While the UK has no official defense ties with Taipei, it is reportedly already increasing the supply of some technologies necessary for Taiwan’s

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<sup>31</sup> NATO, “Collective Defence and Article 5,” July 4, 2023 ~ [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_110496.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm).

<sup>32</sup> Luis Simon, “NATO’s China and Indo-Pacific Conundrum,” NATO Review, November 22, 2023 ~ <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2023/11/22/natos-china-and-indo-pacific-conundrum/index.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Prime Minister’s Office (UK), “UK-France Joint Leaders’ Declaration,” March 10, 2023 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration/uk-france-joint-leaders-declaration>.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Defence (UK), *Defence Command Paper 2023*; and “AUKUS Defence Ministers Meeting Joint Statement,” Department of Defence (Australia), December 2, 2023 ~ <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2023-12-02/aukus-defense-ministers-meeting-joint-statement>.

submarine program.<sup>35</sup> Direct UK arms sales to Taiwan would invite economic and diplomatic blowback from Beijing,<sup>36</sup> but the complexity of weapon systems and the crossover between civilian and military applications create leeway to discreetly help arm Taiwan through the supply of civilian components and research collaborations with potential dual use. The UK could also expand nondefense cooperation to improve Taiwan's resilience to hybrid threats.<sup>37</sup>

Further UK commitments in a crisis or conflict would depend on strategic circumstances both in the Indo-Pacific and globally. An International Institute for Strategic Studies report on the military options available to the UK and a handful of other European countries concludes that their greatest contribution would likely be reinforcing conventional deterrence in Europe as U.S. forces redeploy to the Indo-Pacific, as well as offering cyber support to Taiwan and contributing to an airlift in the event of blockade.<sup>38</sup> Even so, the UK might consider additional bespoke military contributions for reasons that include U.S. alliance management and deterrence of China, although putting trip-wire forces on Taiwan that could lock the UK into a potential conflict seems a remote possibility.<sup>39</sup> The UK's National Cyber Force also provides a means for defense and intelligence agencies to conduct offensive cyber operations, which could be deniable, as well as defending against political warfare and hybrid threats.<sup>40</sup> The UK would expect U.S. extended deterrence to manage most nuclear escalation scenarios, although the UK's continuous-at-sea nuclear deterrent has global range if required. Similarly, some UK conventional capabilities in the

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<sup>35</sup> Mari Saito et al., "T-Day: The Battle for Taiwan," Reuters, November 29, 2021 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/taiwan-china-submarines>.

<sup>36</sup> Darren Spinck, *Securing the Strait: Engaging Taiwan in the UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt* (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2022), 34 ~ <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/HJS-Securing-the-Strait-Engaging-Taiwan-in-the-UKs-Indo-Pacific-Tilt-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> "Minister Audrey Tang Visited OneWeb in the UK, Hoping to Promote Taiwan-UK Digital Resilience Cooperation," Ministry of Digital Affairs (Taiwan), Press Release, June 14, 2023 ~ <https://moda.gov.tw/en/press/press-releases/5449>.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Boyd et al., "Taiwan, Cross-Strait Stability and European Security: Implications and Response Options," International Institute for Strategic Studies, March 2022 ~ <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2022/03/taiwan-cross-strait-stability.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the UK's use of trip-wire forces in the Falklands, see Andrew Carr and Stephan Frühling, "Forward Presence for Deterrence: Implications for the Australian Army," Australian Army Research Centre, 2023 ~ <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/occasional-papers/forward-presence-deterrence>.

<sup>40</sup> "About Us," National Cyber Force (UK) ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-cyber-force/about>.

region, notably SSNs, are capable of targeting or protecting ballistic missile submarines.<sup>41</sup>

The UK acknowledges that “all levers of government” are engaged in crisis planning to respond to “a wide range of possible scenarios globally” that could threaten the country and its interests around the world.<sup>42</sup> The extent and detail of UK scenario planning with allies and partners are not publicly disclosed, although discussions about Taiwan are reportedly taking place.<sup>43</sup> In 2022, the UK and Australian defense ministers committed to a series of tabletop exercises relevant to tensions in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>44</sup> The UK government has offered to provide a private briefing to the House of Commons Defence Committee on the Ministry of Defence’s crisis-planning process.<sup>45</sup>

### *Conclusions and Policy Options*

The stability of the Taiwan Strait is a global concern. The UK remains committed to issues being settled peacefully through dialogue by the peoples on both sides of the strait. However, the UK has agency and could play a meaningful role in deterring or responding to a Taiwan crisis or conflict, but it would not act unilaterally. Barring a major shock to the special relationship, the UK would be inclined to support the United States, especially if Japan and Australia take similar approaches. Even so, UK policymakers will likely strive to maintain dialogue channels with China while remaining mindful of the wider strategic context, notably Russia’s threat to Europe. The UK can act as an effective middle power on the issue of Taiwan by identifying niche contributions that leverage its expertise and resonate with its partners.

We propose that the UK focus on the following three areas to be effective on this issue:

≈ *Deterrence through resilience.* The UK’s whole-of-government approach to resilience and niche capabilities in areas like cyber and countering

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<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Defence (UK), *Defence Command Paper 2023*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> UK Parliament, House of Commons, Defence Committee, “UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific: Government Response,” 4.

<sup>43</sup> Demetri Sevastopulo and Kathrin Hille, “U.S. Holds High-Level Talks with UK over China Threat to Taiwan,” *Financial Times*, May 1, 2022 ≈ <https://www.ft.com/content/b0991186-d511-45c2-b5f0-9bd5b8ceee40>.

<sup>44</sup> Minister for Foreign Affairs (Australia), “AUKMIN 2022 Joint Statement,” January 21, 2022 ≈ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/aukmin-2022-joint-statement>.

<sup>45</sup> UK Parliament, House of Commons, Defence Committee, “UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific: Government Response,” 4.

disinformation could be used for capacity building in Taiwan and across the region, thereby strengthening deterrence.

- ≈ *Scenario planning.* Institutions such as universities, think tanks, and the Ministry of Defence's Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre provide the UK government with options for scenario planning across a range of topics (e.g., economic coercion, sanctions, hybrid threats), partner countries, and levels of sensitivity. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's consular training and exercises at overseas posts could focus on hypothetical geopolitical emergencies without mentioning China or Taiwan.
- ≈ *Changing the narrative.* The UK could quietly encourage its businesses, universities, and civil society to convene dialogue and cooperation with a broad range of international counterparts, including from both China and Taiwan, on global issues of mutual interest like climate, trade, and health. Avoiding state-to-state engagement would somewhat mitigate Chinese lobbying to exclude people from Taiwan. However poor the prospects for such engagement, Cold War history includes examples of people-to-people exchanges yielding unforeseen benefits. ◆