



# U.S. evolving strategic thinking about Taiwan

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## Abstract

In the context of the intensified United States–China great power competition under Presidents Donald Trump and Joseph Biden, the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan has evolved. While the U.S. still expresses concern for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, it has more recently come to covet Taiwan as a strategic U.S. asset. As such it perceives Taiwan’s continued separation from the Chinese mainland to be in the U.S. national interests. The enhancement of U.S. existing economic, political, and security interests as regards Taiwan and a “rediscovery” of Taiwan’s intrinsic military value have combined to drive the evolution of the U.S. strategic thinking. Concurrently the policies and behaviors of both Beijing and Taipei have served to complement and facilitate this evolution. The new U.S. strategic thinking, even if it is incomplete and has limits, means that U.S. and Chinese perspectives on Taiwan have become much more incompatible, and that Chinese trust in the U.S.’ long-term intentions has all but evaporated. Unless the Taiwan issue is managed with greater caution and restraint, the U.S. and China will likely be on a collision course to conflict over Taiwan.

**Keywords** Taiwan · The United States · Chinese mainland · Strategic thinking · Cross-strait relations

## 1 Introduction

In its May 2021 cover story, the *Economist* labeled Taiwan as “the most dangerous place on earth” (Economist 2021). This was before the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in February 2022 and U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022. The former heightened the concern about a possible parallel development across the Taiwan Strait, while the latter and its aftermath was regarded as the “fourth Taiwan Strait crisis” (Liu 2022; Bonny et al. 2022; Harris

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2022). Amid these mounting tensions, the U.S. is adjusting its Taiwan policy in significant ways, mostly by elevating its security, political, and economic relationships with Taiwan. The U.S. Congress is also trying to push through the *Taiwan Policy Act of 2022*, major legislation that is touted as “the most comprehensive restructuring of U.S. policy toward Taiwan” since 1979 (U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee 2022; Harris 2022). Meanwhile, U.S. experts and analysts are busy debating how best to deter and respond to what they perceive as a looming use of force by Beijing against Taiwan<sup>1</sup>. Beneath those dramatic developments is a less noticed and discussed gradual evolution of the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan. In contrast to policies, strategic thinking is by definition more resilient and long-lasting, and thus its impact more fundamental and far-reaching.

After the end of the Second World War, the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan had undergone an abrupt change due to the shock of the Korean War, i.e., the shift from a hands-off approach to one perceiving Taiwan at the frontline for fending off communist expansion. Two decades later, Washington’s strategic thinking about Taiwan changed again as a result of the normalization of U.S.–China relations in the 1970s. In Dr. Henry Kissinger’s memoir, he recalled negotiating the 1972 Shanghai Communique, and best summarized his thinking: “on Taiwan it was to leave the ultimate outcome to a future that in turn would be shaped by the relationship which would evolve from the rest of the communique.....” (Kissinger 1979, 1076). To translate this somewhat convoluted formulation into plain language, it was that the rapprochement between Washington and Beijing would create more favorable conditions for Taiwan’s reunification with the mainland, a development that Kissinger and President Richard Nixon believed Washington should not actively oppose.<sup>2</sup>

After the end of the Cold War, and particularly after the turbulence of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the U.S. preoccupation across the Taiwan Strait was peace and stability. In practice, that meant the U.S. would put pressure on either side of the Taiwan Strait that is perceived by Washington to be at fault for escalating tensions or causing crises (DeLisle 2018, 20). Moreover, any peacefully and non-coercively achieved outcome would be acceptable to the U.S. Former Chinese top diplomat Dai Bingguo recounted in his memoir a revealing private conversation with senior Pentagon official Paul Wolfowitz in March of 2004. In the conversation, Wolfowitz indicated that the U.S. would welcome a peaceful reunification across the strait because that would relieve the U.S. of a major conundrum and burden in East Asia (Dai 2016, 81). With the end of the U.S. engagement policy and the rise of strategic competition vis-à-vis China under Presidents Trump and Biden, the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan has evolved yet again. To an increasingly greater extent, the U.S. now views Taiwan as a strategic asset and its separation from the Chinese mainland is believed to be in the U.S. national interests. The following

<sup>1</sup> For a small portion of the voluminous works, see Haass and Sacks (2020); Blackwill and Zelikow (2021); O’Hanlon (2021); and Colby (2021).

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that President Nixon and Kissinger understood the domestic opposition against normalization of relations with Beijing or turning its back on Taipei, so they chose more ambiguous language about their position in public. The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for this point.

section elaborates the shift of the U.S. strategic thinking in greater detail, followed by a section on the drivers of the shift. The essay concludes by discussing the limits and implications of the new U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan.

## 2 The shift: from a challenge to be managed to an asset to be utilized?

As can be seen from Table 1, the topic of Taiwan appeared to catch the most attention in the National Security Strategies (NSS) of Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. This is not surprising given that cross-strait peace and stability were frequently jeopardized during both presidencies. In contrast, Taiwan figured more prominently as a security and economic partner in the NSSs under the Trump and Biden administrations. Furthermore, in the November 2019 Department of State's Indo-Pacific strategy report, Taiwan was highlighted multiple times in the domain of bilateral partnerships, digital economy, and good governance (U.S. Department of State 2019). In the Pentagon's Indo-Pacific strategy report, Taiwan is notably listed together with Singapore, New Zealand, and Mongolia as "reliable, capable, and natural partners" of the United States. The report also states that the objective of the defense engagement with Taiwan is "to ensure that Taiwan remains secure, confident, free from coercion, and able to peacefully and productively engage the mainland on its own terms" (U.S. Department of Defense 2019). Likewise, in the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, Taiwan is included as a "leading regional partner" of the U.S. on par with India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Pacific Islands (The White House 2022).

The above characterizations may seem innocuous at first glance. But if one compares them with statements of President Barack Obama's administration regarding the "Asia-Pacific pivot/rebalancing," the recent exceptional treatment of Taiwan is brought into sharp focus. Most of the Obama administration's landmark speeches and statements about the Asia-Pacific pivot/rebalancing did not mention Taiwan, including President Obama's remarks to the Australian parliament on November 17, 2011. Likewise, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's October, 2011 essay published in *Foreign Policy* titled "America's Pacific Century", and then National Security Advisor Tom Donilon's speeches in 2012 and 2013 refrained from mentioning Taiwan (The White House 2011, 2012; Clinton 2011). An analysis by leading U.S. Asian experts confirmed that the U.S. rebalance had "generally avoided explicit reference to Taiwan" (Sutter et al. 2013). To a great extent the relatively amicable cross-strait relations during Obama's two terms minimized Washington's attention to the Taiwan issue. But still the total omission of Taiwan from discussions of its Asia-Pacific strategy is evidence that the Obama administration did not attempt to leverage the "Taiwan card" to counterbalance Beijing's rising influence.

Former and current senior officials of the Trump and Biden administrations have been blunter on Taiwan. Randall Schriver, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs from January 2018 to December 2019 under President Trump, delivered a speech in September 2020 to the Global Taiwan Institute shortly after he left the Pentagon. Schriver stated that "it is in our strategic interest for Taiwan's

**Table 1** “Taiwan” in the U.S. National Security Strategy Reports (National Security Strategy Archive 2022)

Administration	Year	On Taiwan
Joseph R. Biden	2022	<p>U.S. interests are best served when our European allies and partners play an active role in the Indo-Pacific, including in supporting freedom of navigation and maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait</p> <p>We have an abiding interest in maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, which is critical to regional and global security and prosperity and a matter of international concern and attention. We oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side, and do not support Taiwan independence. We remain committed to our one China policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances. And we will uphold our commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act to support Taiwan’s self-defense and to maintain our capacity to resist any resort to force or coercion against Taiwan</p> <p>We will support Taiwan, a leading democracy and a critical economic and security partner, in line with long-standing American commitments</p>
Donald Trump	2017 <sup>a</sup>	<p>We will maintain our strong ties with Taiwan in accordance with our “One China” policy, including our commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act to provide for Taiwan’s legitimate defense needs and deter coercion</p>
Barack Obama	2015	N/A
George W. Bush	2010 2006	<p>We will encourage continued reduction in tension between the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan</p> <p>Our assistance efforts will also highlight and build on the lessons learned from successful examples of wise development and economic policy choices, such as the ROK, Taiwan, Ireland, Poland, Slovakia, Chile, and Botswana</p> <p>China and Taiwan must also resolve their differences peacefully, without coercion and without unilateral action by either China or Taiwan</p>
	2002	<p>When we see democratic processes take hold among our friends in Taiwan or in the Republic of Korea, and see elected leaders replace generals in Latin America and Africa, we see examples of how authoritarian systems can evolve, marrying local history and traditions with the principles we all cherish</p> <p>The United States has led the way in completing the accession of China and a democratic Taiwan to the World Trade Organization</p> <p>There are, however, other areas in which we have profound disagreements. Our commitment to the self-defense of Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act is one</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Administration	Year	On Taiwan
Bill Clinton	2001	<p>To help maintain peace, security, and stability in the Western Pacific, and to promote our broad foreign policy objectives, we are implementing fully the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act by maintaining unofficial relations between the American people and the people of Taiwan. We are keeping the focus on peaceful resolution by working assiduously to encourage the PRC and Taiwan to reestablish direct dialogue, while maintaining our firm commitment to Taiwan's self-defense by providing defensive arms to Taiwan</p> <p>Our key security objectives for the future include ... enhancing stability in the Taiwan Strait by maintenance of our "one China" policy, promoting peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues, and encouraging dialogue between Beijing and Taipei...</p>
	2000	<p>To help maintain peace, security, and stability in the Western Pacific and to promote our broad foreign policy objectives, we are implementing fully the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act by maintaining robust unofficial relations between the American people and the people of Taiwan</p> <p>Our key security objectives for the future include ... enhancing stability in the Taiwan Strait through maintenance of our "one China" policy, peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues and encouraging dialogue between Beijing and Taipei...</p>
	1998	Our economic objectives in East Asia include ... WTO accession for the China and Taiwan on satisfactory commercial terms
	1997	Our economic objectives include ... WTO accession for the PRC and Taiwan on satisfactory commercial terms
	1996	The United States continues to follow its long-standing "one China" policy; at the same time, we maintain fruitful unofficial relations with the people in Taiwan, a policy that contributes to regional security and economic dynamism. We have made clear that the resolution of issues between Taiwan and the PRC should be peaceful
	1995	N/A
	1994	N/A

Table 1 (continued)

Administration	Year	On Taiwan
George H. W. Bush	1993	N/A
	1991	The United States maintains strong, unofficial, substantive relations with Taiwan where rapid economic and political change is underway. One of our goals is to foster an environment in which Taiwan and the People's Republic of China can pursue a constructive and peaceful interchange across the Taiwan Strait
	1990	The phenomenal growth in East Asia will likely to continue, and by early in the next century, the combined output of Japan, the Republic of Korea, China, and Taiwan may exceed our own
Ronald Reagan	1988	N/A
	1987	N/A

<sup>a</sup>It is an "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance" issued by the Biden administration in March 2021, not a formal National Security Strategy Report

continued existence, survival, and success. [...] It is against our interest for Taiwan to be absorbed into the ‘One-China’ system as long as the CCP is in power and well beyond that” (Hsiao 2020, 2). Toward the end of the Biden administration’s first year in office, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee convened a hearing on “the Future of U.S. Policy on Taiwan.” At the hearing, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel J. Kritenbrink described Taiwan as “a leading democracy, a technological powerhouse, and a force for good” (Kritenbrink 2021). Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner’s testimony at the same hearing is worth reading in full. Departing from Washington’s long-standing emphasis on the peaceful resolution of cross-strait dispute, Ratner (2021) instead highlighted Taiwan’s intrinsic security value:

“Taiwan is located at a critical node within the first island chain, anchoring a network of U.S. allies and partners—stretching from the Japanese archipelago down to the Philippines and into the South China Sea—that is critical to the region’s security and critical to the defense of vital U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific. Geographically, Taiwan is also situated alongside major trade lanes that provide sea lines of communication for much of the world’s commerce and energy shipping. It is in part for these strategic reasons that this Administration ... has affirmed our commitment to our one-China policy...”

What is striking is that this constituted the first time after the normalization of U.S.–China relations that a serving senior U.S. government official openly articulated “strategic reasons” for supporting Taiwan. Echoing Kritenbrink, Ratner went on to commend Taiwan for being “integral to the regional and global economy” and “a beacon of democratic values and ideals” (Ratner 2021). U.S. analyst Paul Heer observed that the above statements “essentially make the case that Washington is opposed to even peaceful unification of Taiwan with the mainland, because the island’s autonomy from Chinese control is critical to vital U.S. interests and regional security.” Consequently, Heer hinted that Washington’s policy toward Taiwan might have crossed the Rubicon (Heer 2021). Michael Swaine concurred that the statement was “reckless” since “it clearly implies that ... Taiwan should be regarded primarily as a strategic asset to be kept separate from Beijing” (Swaine 2021a). Swaine also noted that Ratner’s speech was approved by the White House (Swaine 2021b). A piece in *Financial Times* even compared Ratner’s statements to General Douglas MacArthur’s famous formulation that strategically speaking, Taiwan is akin to “an unsinkable aircraft carrier” (Hille 2021).

Following the December 2021 hearing and a subsequent April 2022 Congressional Delegation’s visit to Taiwan, on June 16, 2022 the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez and Senator Lindsey Graham introduced the *Taiwan Policy Act of 2022* noted earlier. The committee passed the legislation with an amended version on September 14, 2022.<sup>3</sup> It stated blatantly that among a

<sup>3</sup> At the time of this writing, much of the defense components of the Taiwan Policy Act was included in the Senate’s National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2023. The NDAA is expected to be voted on after the U.S. November midterm elections. Harris and Gould (2022).

number of things, “the defense of Taiwan” is critical to “mitigating the PLA’s ability to project power and establish contested zones within the first and second island chains and limiting the PLA’s freedom of maneuver to engage in unconstrained power projection beyond the first island chain to protect United States territory, such as Hawaii and Guam” and to “defending the territorial integrity of Indo-Pacific allies, such as Japan” (S. 4428. 2022).

Meanwhile, many more mainstream U.S. scholars and analysts have begun to discuss Taiwan on the premise that its continual separation from the Chinese mainland is in the U.S. national interests. In January 2020, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) completed a congressionally mandated study on U.S. strategy toward China. The report proclaimed that “Taiwan’s continued success as a flourishing democracy is an important ingredient to realizing a free and open Indo-Pacific” (Ratner et al. 2020). In October 2020, a report titled “Toward a Stronger U.S.–Taiwan Relationship” was released by a task force co-chaired by Bonnie S. Glaser, Richard C. Bush, and Michael J. Green. Authored by a dozen prominent experts on the subject, the report argued that one of the major reasons Taiwan matters to the U.S. is that Taiwan “sits at the middle of the first island chain stretching from Japan to the Philippines and the South China Sea,” and went on to observe that following cross-strait unification, “Japan would be flanked and its sea lanes put at risk” (Glaser et al. 2020, 4). This concern was echoed by Bonny Lin from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), who pointed out shortly after the December 2021 Senate hearing on Taiwan that unification “would give China extra power projection capabilities that would also have an immense impact on the security of U.S. allies, including Japan and the Philippines” (Hille 2021). More recently, Ashley Tellis from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace commented that “there are persuasive arguments” for the conclusion that “the current separation of Taiwan from China is judged to be in U.S. interests” (Tellis 2022). Lastly, in the most rigorous and sophisticated analysis of Taiwan’s military value, Brenden Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge argued that unification would “significantly hinder the ability of U.S. naval forces to operate in the Philippine Sea” and alter the military balance in the region (Green and Talmadge 2022).

### 3 Drivers of the evolution: old interests enhanced, new interests emerging

The most important driver of the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan is an intensifying U.S.–China strategic competition wherein the U.S. has a growing interest in perpetuating the separation of Taiwan from the Chinese mainland.<sup>4</sup> Broadly speaking, the U.S. has three sets of major interests in Taiwan, namely economic, political, and security. First of all, Taiwan has been an important economic partner of the U.S. in terms of trade and investment. With the U.S.–China technological and economic decoupling, the disruption to supply chains caused by both the decoupling and the

<sup>4</sup> For a similar view, see Xin (2020).



pandemic, and Taiwan's prominent status in advanced semiconductor production, the U.S. incentive to strengthen economic relations with Taiwan is much greater. In a period of less than 2 years, Washington and Taipei have established three new economic frameworks. In November 2020, the U.S. and Taiwan launched the U.S.–Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue (EPPD) covering a broad range of areas including 5G networks, telecommunications security, supply chain resiliency, investment screening, infrastructure cooperation, renewable energy, global health, science and technology, and women's economic empowerment (American Institute in Taiwan 2020). On December 6, 2021, the U.S. and Taiwan established the Technology Trade and Investment Collaboration (TTIC) framework to expand cooperation on critical supply chains (U.S. Department of Commerce 2021). Although Taiwan was not included in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, Washington and Taipei initiated the U.S.–Taiwan Initiative on twenty-first Century Trade on June 1, 2022. The initiative's ambitious agenda includes issues such as digital trade, standard setting, labor rights, environmental protection, anti-corruption, and non-market policies and practices (American Institute in Taiwan 2022).

Second, the U.S. has political interests in Taiwan. As a Western-style multi-party democracy, Taiwan's democratic transition and consolidation is fully in line with the U.S.' democracy promotion policies since the end of the Cold War. In the past few years, Taiwan has obtained special importance in Washington's ideological competition vis-à-vis Beijing. High-ranking officials in the Trump administration frequently used the Taiwan example to attack the Chinese political system. On October 4, 2018, in a major speech exclusively focusing on China, then Vice President Mike Pence did not mince words when he stated that "America will always believe Taiwan's embrace of democracy shows a better path for all the Chinese people" (Pence 2018). On May 4, 2020, then Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger delivered a speech deliberately in Chinese on the 101st anniversary of the historic May Fourth Movement, a watershed event in Chinese modern history and important impetus for the birth of the Chinese Communist Party. Pottinger asserted that "Taiwan today is a living repudiation" of "the cliché that Chinese people cannot be trusted with democracy" (Pottinger 2020). On August 31, 2020, then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell opened his remarks at the Heritage Foundation with the observation that tourists from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan during the pre-pandemic era would "huddle around the TV in their hotel rooms at night" to have a taste of the freedom of speech. Stilwell echoed Pence and Pottinger by maintaining that Taiwan represents "a vision of a democratic Chinese society and polity that is prosperous, harmonious, free, and highly respected by people all around the world" (Stilwell 2020).

The Biden administration's approach to ideological competition with China is more measured, as both President Biden and other senior officials explicitly ruled out attempting to change China's political system and instead vowed to prove the superiority of democracy by example (Blinken 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021). Yet as the Biden administration has put defense of democracy at home and abroad at the centerpiece of its agenda, Taiwan's role remains prominent. In the testimony in November 2021 mentioned earlier, Ely Ratner adopted similar language to that of Trump administration officials by saying

that “Taiwan has proven the possibilities of an alternative path to that of the Chinese Communist Party” (Ratner 2021). To showcase Taiwan’s democratic achievements and increase its international visibility, the Biden administration also continued the U.S.–Taiwan Consultations on Democratic Governance in the Indo-Pacific that was launched in September 2019 and invited Taiwan to the Summit for Democracy in December 2021.

Third, the U.S. security interests as regards Taiwan have long centered around maintaining Washington’s credibility. The fact that there is a long-running debate in the academia about whether and to what extent credibility matters in international politics and that Washington only has an ambiguous security commitment to Taiwan does not undermine the belief in the foreign policy establishment that “abandon” Taiwan would seriously damage Washington’s credibility as a security ally and partner in the eyes of U.S. Asian and even European allies (Tucker and Glaser 2011).<sup>5</sup> Again the intensifying U.S.–China strategic competition seems to have magnified the importance of Washington keeping its security commitment to Taiwan to maintain U.S. credibility overall. As Matt Pottinger commented in July 2021, if Taiwan were to be “coercively subjugated,” it would undermine the “credibility of the U.S. as an ally and military partner in the Western Pacific” and would even lead to nuclear proliferation as other countries search for alternatives to the U.S. extended deterrence (Global Taiwan Institute 2021). In 2016 Kurt Campbell, the current Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs on the National Security Council (NSC) under President Biden, also noted that if the U.S. failed to live up to its promises to Taiwan, it “would be antithetical to American interests and would indeed undermine the American position not only across the Taiwan Strait, but also within the wider region, by calling into question the credibility of American security commitments” (Campbell 2016, 188). Rush Doshi, Campbell’s protégé and the current China Director on the NSC, wrote in an influential book about China’s grand strategy that “a decision by Washington to voluntarily terminate its commitment to Taiwan will startle U.S. allies in the region like Japan, South Korea, and Australia and may even induce bandwagoning behavior if they believe balancing is futile, undermining the U.S. regional position” (Doshi 2021, 305).

The U.S. economic, political, and security interests in Taiwan are not new, but they are being enhanced as a new paradigm in the U.S.–China relationship and is taking shape. Meanwhile, new U.S. interests in Taiwan’s intrinsic military value are reemerging. In fact, Taiwan’s unique position and military value have been a widely acknowledged geostrategic reality and has never been a secret.<sup>6</sup> Yet, at least since the normalization of the U.S.–China relationship in the 1970s, Taiwan’s military value did not loom large in Washington’s calculations. The lack of attention to Taiwan’s military value is also reflected in scholarly works. As Green and Talmadge recently pointed out, most of the literature focuses on the military balance across the Taiwan Strait, and discussion over Taiwan’s potential strategic military value “remains

<sup>5</sup> For a recent review on scholarly discussion about credibility, see Jervis, Yarhi-Milo and Casler (2021).

<sup>6</sup> There is also a view that the Chinese mainland has historically viewed Taiwan through geostrategic lens. See Wachman (2007).

surprisingly underdeveloped and vague” (Green and Talmadge 2022). Actually, this is not all that surprising. When the U.S. enjoyed unchallenged military dominance in the Western Pacific and the cross-strait unification, whether it occurred through peaceful or coercive and forcible means, seemed to only be a remote possibility, the U.S. simply did not have to think about the question of Taiwan’s military value. Now that U.S. military dominance is being contested and Beijing’s use of force against Taiwan is believed to be a distinct possibility in the near future, many in Washington have thereby “rediscovered” the military value of Taiwan and concluded that it must be denied to Beijing (see Heginbotham et al. 2015; Shelbourne 2021; Hille 2022).<sup>7</sup>

Those enhanced old interests in economic, political, and security realms and perhaps most importantly, the new interests in Taiwan’s intrinsic military value, have combined to drive the evolution of the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan. Meanwhile, the policies and behaviors of both Beijing and Taipei have been facilitating factors. On the part of Beijing, the strategic importance of reunification across the Taiwan Strait as well as the sense of urgency seems to have increased in recent years. In an important speech on Taiwan in January 2019, President Xi Jinping tied reunification with Chinese rejuvenation more closely than ever before. Xi proclaimed that reunification is “critical to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the new era,” and that “the Taiwan question originated in a weak and ravaged China, and it will definitely end with China’s rejuvenation.” He also reiterated that “we should not allow this problem to be passed down from one generation to the next” (Xi 2019). Conceivably, Beijing’s policies and behaviors compelled Washington to think more seriously about Taiwan’s strategic value, something that Washington could comfortably avoid doing before.

Across the Taiwan Strait, Taipei’s tactics dovetailed almost perfectly with Washington’s changing strategic thinking. The government of Tsai Ing-wen has attempted to tie Taiwan’s security with Indo-Pacific security by promoting a kind of “domino theory”, in which Taiwan sits at the frontline of resisting Beijing’s regional expansion, and that Beijing’s use of force against Taiwan would have tremendous impact upon the entire region. Moreover, the Tsai government also followed the Trump and Biden administration’s approach by framing cross-strait relations in terms of an ideological competition between democracy and authoritarianism (Tsai 2021). One of Tsai’s more recent speeches exemplified Taipei’s efforts to emphasize Taiwan’s integral importance to the region and beyond: “greater economic growth for Taiwan means complete and resilient global supply chains; a more secure Taiwan means a more peaceful and prosperous region and world; and a more democratic Taiwan means a stronger global democratic alliance” (Tsai 2022). Taipei’s tactics complement and probably reinforce Washington’s new strategic thinking.

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the U.S.–China military balance, see Heginbotham et al. (2015). The sense of anxiety about Beijing’s possible use of force was ignited by then U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Philip S. Davidson’s comments in a congressional testimony in March 2021 that Beijing could try to take control of Taiwan “in the next decade” or even “in the next six years.” See Shelbourne (2021). The Russian–Ukraine war heightened that anxiety. See Hille (2022). For different views, see Nathan (2022) and Mastro (2022).

## 4 Implications and conclusion

In conclusion, the enhanced old U.S. interests in economic, political, and security realms and new interests in Taiwan's intrinsic military value have combined to drive the evolution of the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan. Meanwhile, the policies and behaviors of both Beijing and Taipei have facilitated this evolution. The evolution of the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan is real, but it is not a replacement of the erstwhile objective of "peace and stability" by the new one of keeping Taiwan separate from the Chinese mainland. The Biden administration still stressed repeatedly the importance of "peace and stability" across the Taiwan Strait, both by itself and with its allies and partners. Meanwhile, the belief that keeping Taiwan's separation is in the U.S. strategic interests is more an undercurrent that is growing stronger and that reveals the U.S. long-term intentions.

Furthermore, there are limits on how far this latent strategic thinking can go. First of all, the Biden administration is still pursuing "guardrails" to ensure that the U.S.–China competition "does not veer into conflict" (The White House 2021). To fixate on Taiwan's strategic importance and to actively promote Taiwan's permanent separation would bring U.S. and China into an intensified action–reaction spiral and much closer to a conflict that neither party desires. Second, to see the Taiwan issue overly through a strategic lens would alienate most of the U.S. allies and partners, whose interests in Taiwan are little more than peace and stability across the strait.

Careful U.S. experts also cautioned against the shift of U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan. In addition to the abovementioned Swaine and Heer analyses, Ryan Hass from the Brookings Institution stressed that the U.S. should support Taiwan "for its own sake and not as a tool for harming China," and that the security objective of the U.S. military engagement with Taiwan should not be "to present Taiwan as a strategic asset or power projection platform for preserving American dominance in Asia" (Hass 2022). Jessica Chen Weiss from Cornell University echoed Hass by arguing that the U.S. "should avoid characterizing Taiwan as a vital asset for U.S. interests," because such statements only strengthen Beijing's belief that the U.S. is playing "the Taiwan card" to "contain China" (Weiss 2022). Most recently, a group of U.S.–China experts warned that "shifting American policy toward support for Taiwan's permanent separation from the mainland would be more likely to provoke, rather than deter, a PRC attack on Taiwan" (The Task Force on U.S.–China Policy 2022).

Still, the evolution of the U.S. strategic thinking about Taiwan, even though still incomplete and limited, will affect U.S.–China and cross-strait relations in profound ways. It means that U.S. and Chinese interests on Taiwan are much less compatible. If the "new" thinking holds sway in Washington, then Chinese reunification, even if through peaceful means, would be an unwelcome and unacceptable outcome from the U.S. perspective. Furthermore, Chinese trust in the U.S.' long-term intentions regarding Taiwan would be non-existent. It is true that Chinese trust in Washington has always been thin at both the elite and societal level. As senior Chinese scholar Wu Xinbo commented, even after the normalization of

Washington–Beijing relations, the U.S. “worked to ensure the continuation of a state of separation across the Taiwan Strait” (Hille 2021). Yet it is one thing for the Chinese to suspect a U.S. intention to perpetuate Taiwan’s separation, and another to have Washington openly advocate a strategic rationale for such a permanent separation. Given the paramount importance that Beijing has attached to Taiwan and reunification, unless managed with greater caution and wisdom, the Taiwan issue will likely lead the U.S. and China on a collision course to conflict in the foreseeable future.

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## Declarations

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