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Sino-American Tensions on Taiwan: Recent Developments

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About the Contributor

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U.S-China clash over Taiwan has reemerged as one of the world's biggest geopolitical risks in 2022. While the two nuclear powers have plenty of incentives to avoid war, China's rapid military rise has raised the risk of miscalculation. Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea is an apparent warning that it's military could threaten the ships Washington has long relied on to project power in the Asian region. Taiwan has long been the most volatile issue between the US and China. Both sides have avoided serious conflict by leaving this issue unsettled. But it is becoming harder for the US to remain in low profile in the Taiwan Strait. U.S and its Pacific allies have been standing in the way of Xi Jinping's ambition to unify the territory under "One China Policy". US Pacific Fleet near Taiwan has been an issue of confrontation between Washington and Beijing. The tensions are rising in a massive scale for the United States and President Joe Biden to manage a growing superpower rivalry with China.

Recent Developments of U.S.-China Confrontation

In 2021, Chinese Foreign minister Wang slammed U.S for politicizing, weaponizing and ideologizing economic means to coerce regional countries to choose sides between China and Taiwan. Chinese Ambassador to the United States issued a warning that U.S. could face military conflict with China over the future status of Taiwan. Biden administration has repeatedly used language about Taiwan that appeared to change in US policy. In May 2022 Biden answered on a positive note when he had been asked about US willingness to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan. Biden replied that the US would provide military equipment to Taiwan but would not engage in any direct military operation and would not send troops. Biden's comments had appeared to reverse the longtime policy of strategic ambiguity regarding U.S. willingness to defend

Taiwan. The comments came during the second half of his four-day Asia trip designed to counter China's growing economic, diplomatic and military influence in the region. After that Beijing had responded by cutting off communication, curbing travel, resuming efforts to lure away Taiwan's few remaining diplomatic partners and pressing multinationals to revise policies that treat Taiwan as a country. The Biden administration has pledged to defend Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack.

After President Biden suggested the United States would get involved militarily to defend Taiwan if China attacked it, China described organizing combat drills in the seas and airspace around Taiwan. In 2022 Beijing and Moscow did first joint military exercise since Russia's war of Ukraine on February 24. The PRC leadership has been increasingly vocal in its demands for Cross-Strait unification. In recent years, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has conducted a growing number of air and naval patrols in Taiwan's vicinity. In 2021 China has sent military aircraft into Taiwan's air defense identification zone. China Defense Ministry tested the passage of the guided-missile destroyer USS Ralph Johnson through the Taiwan Strait. China routinely protests against US contact with Taiwan's government and announced in November that its military conducted air and naval readiness patrols in the direction of the Taiwan Strait after five US lawmakers met with Tsai on an unannounced one-day visit. Other factors contributing to a confrontation are Taiwan's growing capacity for self-defense, the accelerating tempo of Taiwanese-U.S. ties, and the island's expanding non-diplomatic relations with foreign countries.

The PLA Eastern Theater Command recently organized multiple military services and branches to conduct a joint alert patrol and realistic combat exercises in and above the waters around the island of Taiwan. The announcement of the drill comes a day after China and Russia sent air force bombers over the seas in northeast Asia coinciding with the in-person Tokyo summit of the leaders of the Quad countries India, the US, Australia and Japan.

Biden Administration and Taiwan

Under President Donald Trump, the United States deepened ties with Taiwan over Chinese objections, including by selling more than \$18 billion worth of arms to the military and unveiling a \$250 million complex for its de facto embassy in Taipei. The Biden administration has taken a similar approach, continuing arms sales and

affirming the Trump administration's decision to allow U.S. officials to meet more freely with Taiwanese officials. Biden was the first U.S. president to invite Taiwanese representatives to attend the presidential inauguration. The United States participates in military training and dialogues with Taiwan, regularly sails ships through the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate its military presence in the region which has encouraged Taiwan to increase its defense spending. Taiwan has prioritized increasing defense spending, with a record budget of nearly \$17 billion for 2022. China's spending is still estimated to be around twenty-two times Taiwan's. In 2022, Taiwanese government has planned to spend an extra \$8.6 billion on defense over the next five years.

The latest arms deal between Washington and Taipei amounts to contractor technical assistance and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$95 million. This is the third such arms sale to Taiwan under the Biden administration since it came to power in January 2021. The Biden administration has sold Taiwan the first consignment of arms last year in August for \$750 million which included 40 Paladin M109A6 self-propelled howitzers. US arms sales have triggered angry responses from Beijing which has often called on Washington to stop such practices. It has also sanctioned firms involved in such arms transfer to the island nation. The second consignment of \$100 million was made in early February this year. Taiwan's Foreign Ministry said the latest sale fully demonstrated the US government's high regard for Taiwan's defense capabilities. Taiwan topped \$100 billion in U.S. trade for the first time in 2021 on the backs of increasing.

War in Question

Donald Trump had an expansion of ties with the government in Taipei, including the first fighter jet sale in three decades. The Biden administration has sought to maintain that shift and criticized China's actions in the Taiwan Strait. It has held trade talks with Taipei to approve arms sales and conducted naval drills in nearby waters. In this case, Beijing's goal would be less to seize Taiwan and more so destroying the U.S.-based alliance network in the Indo-Pacific region. This objective would be broader than Taiwan but achieved by means of Chinese military action against the island. U.S. is concerned over China's growing military capabilities and assertiveness, as well as the deterioration in cross-strait relations which could spark a conflict between these two countries. That's because China's intention of using force to achieve Taiwan's reuni-

fication to Chinese mainland and the United States hasn't ruled out defending Taiwan if China attacks. The top U.S. military commander in the Indo-Pacific warned in 2021 that China could try to invade Taiwan within the next decade. Chinese President Xi has emphasized that unification with Taiwan is essential to achieving what he calls the Chinese Dream, which sees China's great-power status restored by 2049. Russia's military intervention of Ukraine in early 2022 reignited the debate that Moscow's moves could embolden Beijing to similarly invade Taiwan. Even there might be a possibility of Chinese leaders reexamining Russia's failures and adapt their operational plans to avoid making similar mistakes while attacking Taiwan. China is however preparing PLA and has made preparation for a Taiwan contingency. Taiwan has been a major catalyst for China's military modernization. Although China may far surpass Taiwan in its military arsenal and manpower, in terms of strategy, such an invasion would remain extremely difficult for Beijing with U.S. being an ally of Taiwan. Taiwan has also boosted its defense spending, allocating in January an extra \$8.6 billion on top of a record annual defense budget, dedicated to buying weapons like long-range precision weapons and warships. Chinese officials proclaim that Beijing's policy toward the Taiwan issue is longstanding and consistent.

Analyzing the Dynamics of Relations of Taiwan with China and U.S.A

Taiwan has faced cyber-attacks from China's government agencies. These attacks have soared in recent years. In 2020, Taipei accused four Chinese groups of hacking into at least ten Taiwanese government agencies and six thousand official email accounts since 2018 to try to access government data and personal information. Beijing has also used nonmilitary measures to pressure Taiwan. A legislation of China includes a Pacific Deterrence initiative that sets aside \$7.1 billion. It also includes a congressional support statement for Taiwan's defense. China claims Taiwan as part of its own territory and has been putting pressure on the democratic island to accept its rule. In 2016, China suspended a cross-strait communication mechanism with the main Taiwan liaison office. The current challenge for Taiwan is to balance the geopolitical interests, the trade interests, and the technology and supply chain interests with China, as well as with the United States.

Taiwan's economy remains reliant on trade with China, which is the island's largest trading partner. However, their economic relationship has experienced disruptions in recent years, partly due to Beijing's pressure on the

island and Taiwanese officials' growing concern about its overreliance on trade with China. Taiwan has succeeded boosting trade with and investment in countries in South-east Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Trade between Taiwan and the eighteen targeted countries increased by more than \$50 billion between 2016, when the initiative was unveiled, and 2021. Taiwan is the world's top contract manufacturer of semiconductor chips, and its industry is booming despite cross-strait tensions. These chips are found in most electronics, including smart phones, computers, vehicles, and even weapons systems that rely on artificial intelligence. United States' dependence on Taiwanese chip firms heightens its motivation to defend Taiwan from a Chinese attack. Beijing has also pushed for Taiwan's exclusion from multilateral trading blocs, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Taiwan also is not part of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

Concluding Remarks

The Chinese government views the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a vehicle to contain China in the name of freedom and openness. Through its policy of strategic ambiguity, the United States has for decades attempted to maintain a delicate balance between supporting Taiwan and preventing war with China. But President Joe Biden has seemingly rejected the policy, stating several times that the United States would come to Taiwan's defense if China attacked. White House officials and several members of Congress have welcomed Biden's statements, arguing that China's increased provocation needs such response. But China's top diplomat had warned the US that increased support for Taiwan would lead to a dangerous situation. Chinese military operation is currently aiming to decisively defeat the Taiwanese armed forces and secure Beijing's control over the island's major policies. Biden's unequivocal remark about Taiwan could create another scenario of limited war. United States' chief goal is to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait which has implored both Beijing and Taipei to maintain the status quo.



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