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The Internationalisation of the Taiwan Question: Lessons for the UK and Wider Europe

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Key Points

- ▶ Rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait make the possibility of a military confrontation that leads to an all-out war more likely, although not inevitable.
- ▶ Alongside the three main protagonists in the crisis (the PRC, Taiwan, and the US), there is a surge of interest in Taiwan from other actors, including the European Union (EU) and its member states, and the UK.
- ▶ The UK and wider Europe have a strong interest in preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait because their prosperity is linked with it.
- ▶ Taiwan is an important ally in the region for economic and political purposes:
 - It is the EU's twelfth trading partner, and it has a thriving trade relationship with the UK. It produces most of the world's microchips, key components in almost every electronic device that we use. Nearly half of the global container fleet and most of the world's largest ships pass through the Taiwan Strait.
 - At the political level, Europe and Taiwan share common values, such as democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights.
- ▶ In promoting peaceful management of the Taiwan question, Europe must strike a balance between principles and pragmatism: alongside expanding economic and unofficial relations with Taiwan and supporting its participation in multilateral fora, it must also provide credible assurances to the PRC of its commitment to the "One-China" policy.
- ▶ In the absence of a final and mutually agreed political settlement between Beijing and Taipei, maintaining the Cross-Strait "status quo" where the two sides live together in mutual tolerance is the best way of preserving peace.

Introduction

For decades, the question of the Republic of China (ROC, usually, as in this paper, referred to as Taiwan) has been a complex and sensitive geopolitical conundrum with foreign, security and trade implications extending well beyond the Taiwan Strait. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979, Deng Xiaoping, then paramount leader of the PRC, proposed in 1984 a "[one country, two systems](#)" solution post reunification, where the mainland would practise socialism while Taiwan could retain capitalism. Acknowledging the difficulty in agreeing a solution, Deng chose to set aside US-PRC differences over Taiwan, leaving the contentious issue to the "wisdom of future generations."

The drastic changes in the international landscape of the past forty years have affected the Sino-US balance of power. Most notably, the PRC's extraordinary development and rise to an economic superpower have shifted this balance in their favour. Under the current PRC leadership there is a sense of urgency in restoring China's territorial integrity and not leaving the Taiwan issue unresolved for generations. Indeed, in 2013 President Xi Jinping told a senior Taiwanese envoy that a political solution of the Taiwan question [cannot be postponed forever](#). In 2019, he then delivered his first speech focused exclusively on [policy towards Taiwan](#), stating that while pursuing peaceful reunification, China did not renounce the use of force and reserved "the option of taking all necessary measures". More recently, at the October 2022 National CCP Congress, Xi reiterated the same points by emphasising that "reunification" with Taiwan "[must be realised](#)", pointing to the possible use of force to achieve this.

The UK and wider Europe should pay special attention to the evolving situation in the Taiwan Strait. Since 2016 relations between the three main protagonists (the PRC, Taiwan, and the US) have been caught in a downward spiral that has raised the probability of a military confrontation, whether by [accident](#) or [intent](#), that could potentially lead to war.

While China has increased its bellicose rhetoric and actions, heightened rhetoric in the US — in particular statements by President Joe Biden that the US would defend the island in case of a PRC invasion — suggests a shift away from the US' traditional position of "[strategic ambiguity](#)" over the nature of its commitment to defend Taiwan. Caught in between, Taiwan has been confronted with increased Chinese military pressure, especially through frequent violations of its air defence identification zone (ADIZ). In August 2022, there were reportedly [446 incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ](#), more than the number recorded for the entirety of 2021. Following a visit to Taiwan by the then Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, in August 2022, which PRC leaders decried as an "extremely dangerous" provocation, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) held its biggest show of force around Taiwan, de-facto blockading the island for a few days. The PRC also escalated the crisis diplomatically and economically. A formal protest was presented to the US ambassador in Beijing while the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement of condemnation. A few days after the visit, the PRC released a [white paper on Taiwan](#), which includes a section on "defeating separatism and external interference". A set of economic sanctions were also levied against Taiwan. On 25 December, following the approval by the US of a defence spending bill which authorised increased security cooperation with Taiwan, the PLA conducted a "[striking exercise](#)" around Taiwan, with [forty-seven aircraft entering Taiwan's southwest ADIZ](#).

There is rich commentary on the factors that have shaped the development of what has been described as [the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis](#), with conflicting opinions among Chinese and Western policy makers and scholars on who is to blame for the "[the making of a perfect storm](#)". Chinese analysts blame Taiwanese and US internal politics for undermining the "One China" policy, which recognises only one Chinese government, the PRC, citing – amongst others – US arms sales to Taiwan, US pro-Taiwan laws, and high-profile visits to Taiwan by Western politicians as provocations that incite Taiwan's separatism and undermine security in the Taiwan Strait. Such actions, in China's view, contravene previous undertakings such as the [1992 consensus](#) and the [three joint communiqués](#) issued by the US and China in 1972, 1979, and 1982. Chinese policy experts reiterate that the PRC's proposal for an eventual political settlement envisages a peaceful reunification within the framework of the "one country-two systems" policy. However, such views usually disregard Taiwan's customary democracy, in addition to the fact that the majority of the Taiwanese people embrace [a distinct Taiwanese identity](#), and that China's belligerent approach to Taiwan is part of the problem.

There is also no acknowledgement of the fact that the “one country-two systems” concept has been largely discredited by the PRC’s handling of the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests in 2019.

On the other hand, Western analysis tends to put the onus of rising tensions and the erosion of the “status quo” in the Taiwan Strait on Chinese internal politics, nationalism, and the PRC’s aggressive military posture in the South China Sea. Western policy makers and analysts emphasise that while a solution lies in the hands of the PRC and Taiwanese authorities, it should be peaceful and respect the will of the 23.5 million Taiwanese as masters of their own destiny. Nevertheless, Western analysis often disregards the need to accommodate, or even acknowledge, Chinese perceptions. There is insufficient appreciation for the PRC’s differing threat perceptions, which largely explain why Western reassurances to China are often perceived to lack sincerity. In particular, the shift in international relations, including US-Taiwan relations, and the assumed support for the erosion of the “One China” policy, are for the PRC deeply threatening and result in the support offered in Beijing by the West to be deemed hollow. Moreover, there is often no full appreciation of the acute sensitivity of symbolism, as shown by the angry controversies surrounding both the opening of a Taiwanese representative office in Lithuania and Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan.

Taiwan's International Profile

Taiwan has an ambiguous international status. With the exception of a handful of countries that still recognise Taiwan as the legitimate government of "China", Taiwan is officially separated from world politics. However, even without the benefits associated with statehood, thanks to its economic strength and effective diplomatic initiatives, Taiwan has been able to acquire a unique international standing and to thrive internationally.

Over the past seventy years, Taiwan has become an important global economic actor. As a key manufacturer of semiconductors, it produces most of the world's microchips, essential components in almost every electronic device we use today. Moreover, the Taiwan Strait is one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Currently, nearly half of the global container fleet and eighty-eight percent of the world's largest ships pass through it.

While the US remains Taiwan's most important political ally and – through the provision of arms and training – its guarantor of territorial defence, Taiwan has also established informal relations with many other countries. New comparative analysis of the Taiwan policies of key international actors, including Australia, the EU and European countries, India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, shows that these countries have a robust unofficial relationship with Taiwan based on deep and dynamic ties in trade and investment, health, culture, and science. While there are different levels of support to Taiwan, these countries share a common interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and seek to find adequate responses to managing the security and economic risks of rising Cross-Strait tensions. Taiwan has also been able to expand its presence on the international stage by pursuing intergovernmental cooperation and participation in international fora where sovereignty is not a prerequisite. Taiwan has obtained full membership or observer status in a number of intergovernmental organizations, adopting global norms, providing humanitarian assistance, and engaging with external actors through its civil society. Such engagement has contributed to raise Taiwan's international profile, with an increasing number of countries being confronted with the uneasy question of how best to deal with the unresolved Taiwan question, while preserving a good relationship with the PRC.

Europe-Taiwan Relations

For the PRC, the Taiwan issue is an internal Chinese matter and, as a PRC diplomat bluntly told this author, it does not want the United States, let alone European countries, to interfere in the methods that will be used to resolve it. There are, however, many factors that unite Europe and Taiwan, and Europe has important stakes in how the PRC-Taiwan issue evolves. In 2021, Taiwan was the EU's twelfth trading partner in the world, with bilateral trade in goods worth nearly €64 billion, while the UK-Taiwan trade partnership worth £8 billion has increased by fourteen percent in the last two years. Europe and Taiwan also share common values, such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights, which makes political cooperation inevitable. There is a track record of exchanges and cooperation between Europe and Taiwan in the fields of human rights, research and innovation, environment and climate change, culture, and education.

Over the past two years, there has been a surge of European interest in the Indo-Pacific region. In March 2021, the UK government published an Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, which signalled, with its purported "Indo-Pacific Tilt", a more proactive British approach to the Indo-Pacific region. In April 2021, the EU released its EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which aims to contribute to the region's stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development, and recognises that the Taiwan question "may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity". A few months later, the European Parliament condemned China's aggressive behaviour in the Taiwan strait and praised Taiwan as a partner during the pandemic with "a capacity to provide equally valuable contributions to the international community". Two weeks later, the first European Parliament delegation visited Taipei. In November 2021, Lithuania became the first country in the EU to allow Taiwan's representation in its capital under the name of Taiwan¹, rather than Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO), Taipei Representative Office (TRO) or Taipei Mission, the usual designations for Taiwan's de facto embassies or consulates. To the PRC, this gave the "false" assumption of "one China, one Taiwan", in contravention of the "one-China" principle and PRC sovereignty and territorial integrity. The diplomatic row involved the whole EU, which viewed China's downgrading of diplomatic ties with Lithuania and a de facto trade boycott as an attack on the European single market, while the UK criticised as "unacceptable" the pressure exerted by China against Lithuania.

Russia's war against Ukraine has further increased European interest in Taiwan, with parallels being drawn between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a possible future PRC invasion of Taiwan. Although there are substantial differences between the two contexts – not least the fact that Russia recognises Ukraine as an independent and sovereign state, while the PRC has never recognised Taiwan – and it is quite unlikely that China, at least in the short and medium term, would militarily intervene in Taiwan, the war in Ukraine has made [Europe more aware of its vulnerabilities](#). Whereas European politicians have historically seen Taiwan primarily through an economic lens, Europe now also looks at Taiwan from a security perspective. [Some analysts](#) also contend that increased Eastern European countries' dependence on US military support could expand US' influence in these countries' foreign policy, which could make them more amenable to take on US positions in the Asia-Pacific region, especially regarding Taiwan.

The PRC's precarious [balancing act on the war in Ukraine](#) and its strategic partnership with Russia may well have played a role in the decision by [Latvia and Estonia](#) to withdraw from the China and Central and Eastern European countries' initiative, a cooperation platform between the PRC and fourteen countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The PRC's stance on the war in Ukraine and its close bond with Russia have also reiterated the many divergences that have, in recent years, soured UK-Sino relations and marked the end of the so-called "golden era" of UK-China ties, as announced by [UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak](#) in November 2022. While the "golden era" became associated with pursuing closer economic ties and side-lining geopolitics, the UK now sees China as a "systemic challenge". An official [visit to Taiwan by UK parliamentarians](#) from 29 November to 2 December 2022 came amid renewed debate regarding the UK's relationship with the PRC, and an inquiry by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee into UK foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region and how the UK can maximise its influence in the region.

The Role of Europe amid Escalating Tensions

As tensions have increased in the Taiwan Strait, Europe has shown solidarity with Taiwan amid increasing calls to intensify cooperation with Taiwan. In September 2022, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) that condemned the PLA military exercises around Taiwan and opposed the threat of force. The resolution called on EU countries to strengthen their relations with Taiwan, encouraging countries that have yet to operate a trade office in Taiwan to do so. It also demanded that the European Commission makes progress towards assessing the feasibility of a Bilateral Investment Agreement with the Taiwanese authorities. In advance of the European Parliament's resolution, Josip Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, [summarised the EU's Taiwan policy](#) as upholding the "One China" policy, safeguarding the status quo and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and emphasising that the "One China" policy does not prevent the European Union from persisting and intensifying cooperation with Taiwan.

Despite rare efforts by some European countries – namely [France](#) and the [UK](#) – to assert freedom of navigation in the international waterways of the Taiwan Strait, military means in the European deterrence toolkit are quite limited compared to those of the US and are very unlikely to deter any Chinese military actions in and around Taiwan. Europe does, however, have a range of economic and political instruments of influence that, together with an active diplomatic role, can deliver a more pro-active approach vis-à-vis Taiwan that helps to advance the cause of peace in the Taiwan Strait.

It is legitimate for Europe to engage with Taiwan at different levels within the framework of a principled "One China" policy. The [EU Strategy on China](#) states that the EU's engagement with China will be flexible and pragmatic, "enabling a principled defence of interests and values". A principled approach under the "One China" rule is to intensify cooperation and interactions with Taiwan and support its existence as a democracy. Despite the PRC's denunciations, this approach carries a deterrence element in reducing the risk of military action by Beijing. As [Raphael Glucksmann](#), a member of the European Parliament, argued during a 2021 visit to Taiwan, increased interactions between the international community and Taiwan contribute to make the situation in the Taiwan Strait less dangerous. There is indeed logic in the argument that promoting Taiwan's international space will make it more onerous for Beijing to take coercive actions.

In this context, continuing to support Taiwan's meaningful participation through an observer status into a larger number of multilateral fora – including the World Health Assembly (WHA), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Interpol and the World Customs Organization (WCO) – despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations, is of moral and practical value in managing tensions. A similar approach is pursued by the UK, which despite the lack of formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, regularly lobbies in favour of [Taiwan's accession to international institutions](#) where statehood is not a prerequisite.

Increasing economic cooperation and trade relations is another appropriate framework for increasing interactions with Taiwan, which safeguards European economic interests while reducing the economic dependence of Taiwan on the PRC. In this context, there are potential avenues for the EU and EU countries to pursue, including deepening the [EU-Taiwan annual Trade and Investment Dialogue \(TID\)](#) and negotiating towards a comprehensive bilateral investment agreement (BIA). Such measures would help Taiwan strengthen its resilience and diversify its economy, while also having a positive impact on the European economy through potential Taiwanese investments especially in the European technological sector. Politically, they would increase other countries' stakes on Cross-Strait peace and stability, which may incentivise Beijing to de-escalate and Taipei to avoid actions that the PRC may perceive as provocations. As to the UK, ongoing [talks to boost UK-Taiwan ties](#) on technology, energy, business, and trade should pave the way to negotiating a BIA.

There is also significant scope for the UK and the wider Europe to strengthen relations with Taiwan in other areas, including international development cooperation, science, culture, and people-to-people exchanges.

Support to Taiwan that contributes to raising its international profile will likely face criticism by Beijing of furthering Taiwan's statehood, a threat for the PRC that goes beyond the boundaries of what it considers "acceptable" interactions with Taiwan. Citing the works of conflict behaviour scholar Thomas Schelling, the [Task Force on US-China Policy](#) has highlighted that in deterring an opponent from taking proscribed actions, credible threats must be accompanied by credible assurances. The authors argue that in the case of Taiwan "deterrence has begun to break down on all sides". Whereas the PRC has boosted the reliability of its military and economic threats, its actions have undermined the second component of a successful deterrence: credible assurances that if Taiwan refrains from steps towards independence, it will face restraint rather than succumb to China's terms of unification. Taiwan's threat — that if attacked it will make the PRC pay an unacceptable military cost — has never been compelling, while its assurance that it will not declare independence if it is not attacked has diminished. For the US, military commitments that are formulated ambiguously remain a powerful deterrence, although the guarantee of protection is weaker than it used to be due to the changing balance of power in the Taiwan Strait. However, assurances that the US will not support Taiwanese independence, or change the status quo in a way that is detrimental to the PRC, have diminished.

The lesson for Europe is that any involvement in the Taiwan question that relies on defiance, threats, or principled actions, without conveying credible assurances to the PRC that it will not be taken advantage of, is not going to deter Beijing from taking coercive actions against Taipei. Here, the main political assurance that Europe, and indeed other international actors, in particular the US, should provide to the PRC is that of unequivocal adherence to the "One-China" policy and opposition to Taiwan declaring independence. Economically, there are potentially effective reassurances and incentives Europe can provide that would feed into Beijing's geo-economic and geopolitical calculations. Preserving the extensive economic partnership, despite political and ideological disparity, is already part of the political and diplomatic Sino-European discourse. But the potential for expanding economic ties, especially through a revival of the stalled negotiations on the ratification of a new [Comprehensive Agreement on Investments \(CAI\)](#) between the EU and the PRC, which would facilitate trade and investment between European and Chinese companies, would be of greater practical value and significance and it could incentivise the PRC to de-escalate.

Conclusions

The Taiwan question is becoming more difficult and dangerous because the possibilities for a peaceful solution are narrowing. There are no reliable indications of plans for an imminent takeover of Taiwan by force as the PRC's efforts are primarily aimed at achieving political concessions without fighting. However, since the end of Maoist China in 1976, the cause of Taiwan's reunification is higher than ever on the agenda of PRC policy planners. The military build-up across the Taiwan Strait continues unabated and growing distrust and tensions between the PRC, Taiwan and the US have reached a dangerous level. All this makes a military confrontation - the consequences of which would be devastating for all parties directly involved and quite negative across the globe - more likely, although not inevitable.

Global awareness of the challenges and risks posed by the unresolved Taiwan question has increased. EU member states and the UK have important stakes in their relationship with both the PRC and Taiwan. Their prosperity is linked with peaceful Cross-Strait relations and a free and open Taiwan Strait. A more or less stable and peaceful status quo where Taiwan maintains its autonomy and international personality while the PRC is recognized as the sole legal government of China, is the best guarantee for peace. It is not an ideal arrangement because by deferring the decision on Taiwan's final status it does not conclusively resolve the Taiwan question, but in the absence of a compromise with political conditions that are acceptable to both Beijing and Taipei, preserving the status quo is the best option for safeguarding peace.

Europe faces the need to better calibrate relations with both Taipei and Beijing in order to find a delicate equilibrium between increased cooperation with an autonomous, pluralistic and democratic Taiwan and adherence to the "One China" policy. With crafted diplomacy and statesmanship, Europe should cultivate a common and principled approach vis-à-vis relations with Taiwan, which allows for growth in economic and unofficial exchanges, while issuing credible assurances to the PRC that Taiwan is not becoming independent and the mutually beneficial economic partnership between Europe and the PRC will grow and thrive. While falling short of a solution, such an approach will help preserve the status quo and ensure a peaceful management of the Taiwan issue.

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Endnotes

- 1 Outside of the EU, the Holy See is the only European land that has a formal diplomatic relationship with Taiwan and allows it to have an embassy under the name "Republic of China (Taiwan)".

About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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