



## STRATEGIC EMPATHY

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## UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S PERCEPTION OF TAIWAN TO UNDERSTAND THE THREAT

**D**ESCRIBED as the most dangerous place on Earth,<sup>1</sup> the risk posed to international security and global economic stability by a conflict in the Taiwan Strait has been at the forefront of contemporary foreign and security policy debates. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine heralding the return of military force as a tool for great powers to pursue territorial revisionism, concerns over the

<sup>1</sup>*The Economist*. *The Most Dangerous Place on Earth: America and China Must Work Harder to Avoid War Over the Future of Taiwan*. May 21.

<sup>2</sup>Kerry Brown and Kalley Wu Tzu-Hui. *The Trouble with Taiwan: History, the United States and a Rising China*. Zed Books. 2019. P54

<sup>3</sup>Brown and Wu. *The Trouble with Taiwan*. P32

threat posed to Taiwan by the People's Republic of China (PRC) have grown. However, to fully understand the risk of conflict in the Strait, it is necessary to look beyond the media headlines and political posturing and to examine the underlying dynamics that shape the PRC's perception of Taiwan and the threat it poses to it.

### WHY UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S PERSPECTIVE MATTERS

The PRC's political and security considerations fundamentally define the cross-strait environment. As the actor whose long-term objectives pose the greatest threat to the status quo, the PRC and its strategy for achieving its goals in the Taiwan Strait, will play a pivotal role in driving the evolution of cross-strait

relations and their impact on the wider international environment. Consequently, understanding these considerations and their impact on the PRC's interpretation of key issues and events is an essential pre-requisite for understanding the long-term trajectory of PRC-Taiwan relations.

### WHY TAIWAN MATTERS TO THE PRC

Any attempt to understand the PRC's perception of Taiwan must consider why Taiwan occupies a position of such political significance for it and the implications this has for its framing of the Taiwan dispute. For the PRC, Taiwan's significance as a physical space is limited,<sup>2</sup> a factor that has influenced Taiwan's marginalisation by the mainland's rulers for much of its history.<sup>3</sup> Instead, it is Taiwan's symbolic

value that is the source of its significance for the PRC.<sup>4</sup> The symbolic importance of Taiwan for the PRC is deeply rooted in the PRC's carefully curated historical narrative, the primary purpose of which is to serve the interests of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>5</sup> For the PRC, Taiwan is one of the last remaining legacies of the 'Century of Humiliation,' a period which according to the PRC, saw the decaying Qing Empire and its corrupt Republican successor ruthlessly exploited and fragmented by predatory foreign powers. The influence of this historical narrative has been evident in portrayal of Taiwan by the PRC's political leadership. In his 2017 report to the 19th Party Congress, President Xi Jinping described China's "national division" as an "historical tragedy".<sup>6</sup> He repeated this theme in 2019, when he claimed: "The Taiwan question originated from national weakness and disorder."<sup>7</sup>

Redressing this historical humiliation and realising the "Chinese dream" of the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation",<sup>8</sup> has become a central goal for the CCP and, amidst declining economic growth, an increasingly important

“TAIWAN’S SUCCESS AND PROSPERITY EXPOSES THE MYTH THAT ONLY THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY AND SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS CAN DELIVER A PROSPEROUS, MODERN, AND STABLE CHINESE STATE.”

source of its legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> The PRC's framing of Taiwan as an enduring legacy of national weakness has resulted in the resolution of the cross-strait dispute becoming a key requirement for realising China's rejuvenation. For the PRC's leadership, a divided China is a weak China,<sup>10</sup> and the continued division of Taiwan from mainland China represents a key barrier to rejuvenation. It is this belief that has led Xi to repeatedly assert that reunification is an essential prerequisite for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.<sup>11</sup> It is this political imperative that provides the ends of the PRC's

Taiwan strategy, the complete incorporation of Taiwan into the PRC.

Although Xi's assertions reflect the PRC's long standing and absolute commitment to reunification,<sup>12</sup> his adoption of an increasingly assertive tone, coercive diplomatic, economic and military measures, and the growing sense of urgency that has characterised his stance towards Taiwan, has raised concerns over the PRC's intent in the Strait. While Xi's predecessors were willing to indefinitely postpone a settlement to the Taiwan question, Xi has made it clear that the issue can no longer be "passed down from generation to generation".<sup>13</sup> Concerns have been reinforced by the linking of national rejuvenation to the CCP's second Centenary Goal of "building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects and to advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts".<sup>14</sup>

Although Xi has stopped short of setting a timeline for reunification,<sup>15</sup> reunification's fundamental importance to achieving rejuvenation makes the implications of the Centenary Goals for Taiwan clear. The CCP's stated aim to achieve its second Centenary Goal by the hundredth anniversary of the PRC's founding in 2049 raises significant concerns about the urgency of the PRC's intent to achieve its political ends in the Taiwan Strait and the risk this

<sup>4</sup>Brown and Wu. *The Trouble with Taiwan*. P55

<sup>5</sup>Charles Parton. *Taiwan: Invasion is Not Likely, but Deterrence Remains Vital*. Council on Geostrategy. Sep 22. P3

<sup>6</sup>Xi Jinping Report to the 19th Party Congress. *China Daily*. Nov 17.

<sup>7</sup>Xi Jinping Highlights of Xi's Speech at Taiwan Message Anniversary Event. *China Daily*. Jan 19.

<sup>8</sup>Xi Jinping Report to the 20th Party Congress. *China Daily*. Oct 22.

<sup>9</sup>Brown and Wu. *The Trouble with Taiwan*. P111.

<sup>10</sup>US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*. *Annual Report to Congress*. 2022. P3.

<sup>11</sup>Xi Jinping Report to the 19th Party Congress.

<sup>12</sup>Brown and Wu. *The Trouble with Taiwan*. P109

<sup>13</sup>Richard Bush. *From Persuasion to Coercion: Beijing's Approach to Taiwan and Taiwan's Response*. Brookings Institute. Nov 19. P7.

<sup>14</sup>Xi Jinping Report to the 20th Party Congress.

<sup>15</sup>Lyle Morris. *Listen to Xi Jinping about Taiwan*. *War on the Rocks*. Nov 22.



Picture: Lisanto/Unsplash



poses to security and stability in the region.

Taiwan's political significance for the PRC is not just limited to its role in achieving the CCP's Centenary Goals and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. As a modern, prosperous, Chinese state, which is frequently ranked amongst the most successful democracies in Asia,<sup>16</sup> the very existence of Taiwan challenges one of the cornerstones of the CCP's legitimacy. Specifically, it brings into question the CCP's claim that its political leadership is essential for ensuring China's prosperity, modernisation and stability. While Xi may claim that "upholding the leadership of the Communist Part of China and socialism with Chinese characteristics" are essential requirements for Chinese

<sup>16</sup>Taiwan is regularly ranked 'Free' by Freedom House and in 2020 its democracy was ranked as 11th in the world and first in Asia by the Economist Intelligence Unit.

<sup>17</sup>Xi Jinping, Report to the 20th Party Congress.

<sup>18</sup>Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *How Does China Think About National Security?* In *The China Questions 2*. Ed. Carrui, M. Rudolf, J. Szonyi, M. Harvard University Press, 2022. P172.

<sup>19</sup>Chong Ja Ian, *The Many One Chinas: Multiple Approaches to Taiwan and China*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Feb 23.

<sup>20</sup>Brown and Wu, *The Trouble with Taiwan*. P54.

<sup>21</sup>Bush, *From Persuasion to Coercion*. P1.

<sup>22</sup>Xi Jinping, *Highlights of Xi's Speech at Taiwan Message Anniversary Event*. China Daily, 2019.

<sup>23</sup>Xi Jinping, *Highlights of Xi's Speech at Taiwan Message Anniversary Event*. China Daily, 2019.

<sup>24</sup>Xi Jinping, Report to the 20th Party Congress.

<sup>25</sup>Helen Davidson, *China Ends Military Drills After Simulating Strikes on Taiwan*. *The Guardian*, 10 Apr 23.

<sup>26</sup>Derek Grossman, *Why China Should (Still) Feel Good About Taiwan... But Maybe Not for Long*. *RAND*, Jan 18.

<sup>27</sup>Xi Jinping, Report to the 19th Party Congress.

"THE PRC'S TERRITORIAL CLAIM TO TAIWAN IS BASED ON THE PRC'S PORTRAYAL OF ITSELF AS THE LEGITIMATE HEIR TO THE QING DYNASTY, WHOSE BOUNDARIES, WHICH INCLUDED TAIWAN, ARE PRESENTED AS THE HISTORICAL AND LAWFUL BORDERS OF CHINA."

modernisation,<sup>17</sup> Taiwan's success and prosperity exposes the myth that only the CCP and socialism with Chinese characteristics can deliver a prosperous, modern, and stable Chinese state. For a regime that prioritises preserving its rule and ensuring its security above all else,<sup>18</sup> Taiwan's continued existence as an alternative and successful model of political governance poses a potentially existential political threat.

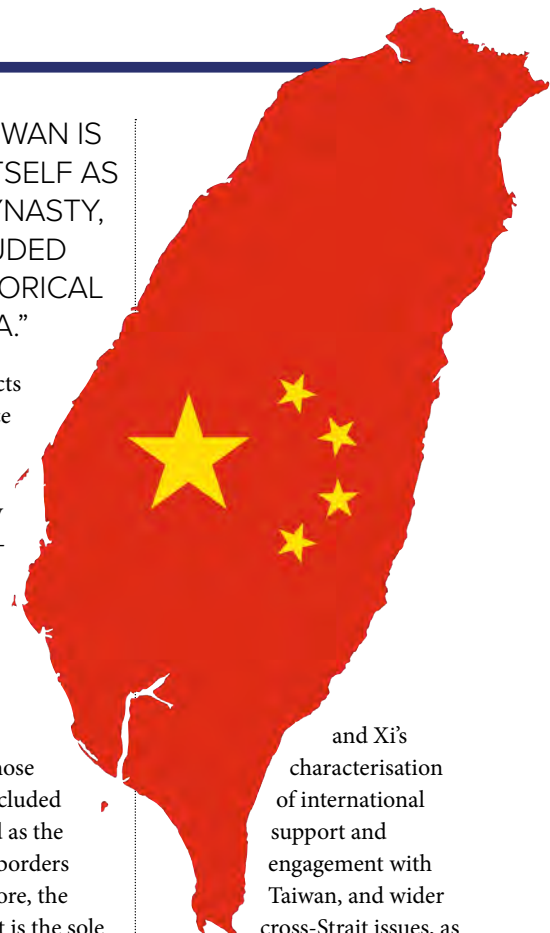
**THE CENTRALITY OF THE ONE-CHINA PRINCIPLE FOR THE PRC**

The PRC's engagement with Taiwan is anchored around the One-China Principle. This asserts that there is only one China, that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory, and the Government of the PRC is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.<sup>19</sup> The influence of the principle fundamentally defines the PRC's perception of Taiwan and provides the framework which has set the political ways and means employed by the PRC in its attempts to achieve political reunification.

It also defines the terminology employed by the PRC when discussing Taiwan. Alongside characterising the activity of international actors as external interference in Chinese affairs, the PRC also refers to the political incorporation of Taiwan as 'reunification' and frames Taiwanese independence as 'secession'. This is despite the fact that Taiwan has never fallen under the rule of the People's Republic and has only been ruled from the mainland for 13 of the 136 years since it was made a province under the Qing.

This latter point reflects the powerful influence of the PRC's curated version of history in underpinning the key assertions of the One-China Principle. The PRC's territorial claim to Taiwan is based on the PRC's portrayal of itself as the legitimate heir to the Qing Dynasty, whose boundaries, which included Taiwan, are presented as the historical and lawful borders of China.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the PRC's assertion that it is the sole legal government representing the whole of China is a product of Taiwan's status being an unresolved legacy of the Chinese Civil War. The conclusion of which in 1949 saw the defeated 'Republic of China' government flee to Taiwan.<sup>21</sup> The historical anchoring of the PRC's claims continues to be a cornerstone of its framing of the cross-Strait environment, and its influence was reflected in Xi Jinping's remarks in 2019, that it is a "historical and legal fact" that "Taiwan is a part of China".<sup>22</sup>

The One-China Principle is the foundation for the PRC's portrayal of the dispute as a matter of Chinese internal sovereignty and territorial integrity, and its characterisation of the dispute as one between the legitimate Chinese government and a rival government that maintains illegal and illegitimate control of an inalienable part of its territory. This influence is reflected in the PRC's assertion that the Taiwan dispute is a 'Chinese people's affair', that should be 'decided by the Chinese people'.<sup>23</sup> It also shapes the PRC's



and Xi's characterisation of international support and engagement with Taiwan, and wider cross-Strait issues, as 'gross provocations of external interference'.<sup>24</sup> It is through this lens of gross provocation that the PRC interprets events such as Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022 and Kevin McCarthy's hosting of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen in 2023. The perception that both events were provocative actions intended to foster Taiwanese separatism, although contestable, provided the framework through which the PRC rationalised and calibrated its response. In both instances, the PRC responded to these gross provocations by launching large-scale military exercises in the Taiwan Strait and rehearsing strikes against targets in Taiwan.<sup>25</sup>

The One-China Principle also provides the conceptual foundation for the PRC bilateral engagement with Taiwan. The PRC has described the '1992 Consensus', a political understanding which saw both sides acknowledge the existence of only one China, but which left open the question of what that actually meant,<sup>26</sup> as defining the 'fundamental nature of cross-Strait relations'.<sup>27</sup> Characterised

by the PRC as the embodiment of the One-China Principle,<sup>28</sup> it has made productive cross-strait relations conditional on Taiwan's recognition of the consensus, and, since President Tsai Ing Weng's election in 2016, has refused to enter any formal dialogue with Taiwan until it accepts the PRC's view of the consensus.<sup>29</sup> This has come even as the PRC has demanded adherence to an increasingly distorted version of the agreement originally reached by the two sides in 1992. For the PRC, adherence to the consensus is critical for embedding the One-China Principle in cross-strait relations. In doing so, it not only defines Taiwan's engagement with the PRC and wider international actors based on the PRC's interpretation of the cross-strait dispute, but also entrenches its preferred political parameters into its resolution.

The influence of the One-China Principle on the PRC's political parameters for a settlement of the cross-strait dispute are evident in the One Country, Two Systems

“DESCRIBED IN PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY PUBLICATIONS AS THE KEY POINT IN THE ‘FIRST ISLAND CHAIN’, PRC MILITARY THINKERS HAVE PRESENTED TAIWAN AS BOTH A THREAT AND AN OPPORTUNITY.”

framework. The PRC has presented this framework, which would see Taiwan incorporated into the PRC under similar terms to Hong Kong, as the only basis for the peaceful resolution of the cross-strait dispute.<sup>30</sup> For the PRC, the One-China Principle requires any cross-strait settlement to include Taiwan's incorporation into a single Chinese state under the rule of the PRC. Consequently, any alternative to the One Country, Two Systems framework which does not result in the restoration of China's territorial integrity and internal sovereignty would be unacceptable. It is in this context that Taiwan's adherence to the 1992 consensus has its greatest significance for the PRC. Binding Taiwan into recognising that there is only one China pre-determines the settlement of the cross-Strait dispute as being the restoration of China's territorial integrity and internal sovereignty under the PRC as part of 'One Country'. Once that is decided, all that there is left to discuss is Taiwan's half of the 'Two Systems'.

The One-China Principle also provides the framework for setting the PRC's red lines in the Strait. The clearest example

is provided by the 2005 Anti-Secession law. This states that should Taiwan declare independence or if the possibilities for peaceful reunification have been completely exhausted, the PRC would employ non-peaceful means to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>31</sup> Although the PRC has never renounced the use of force against Taiwan,<sup>32</sup> the anti-secession law reflects the influence of the One-China Principle in setting the conditions that would lead to its use. While some observers may view a Taiwanese declaration as simply formalising its already de-facto independent status, for the PRC it fundamentally challenges the organising principle of its relationship with Taiwan and presents an unacceptable threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is in this context that it becomes clear why the PRC Foreign Ministry considers Taiwanese independence and cross-strait peace to be 'mutually exclusive'.<sup>33</sup>

The influence of the One-China Principle extends beyond the bilateral PRC-Taiwan relationship. Since its founding in 1949, the PRC has made diplomatic relations with it conditional on counterparts recognising it as the sole legitimate government representing the whole of China and severing diplomatic ties with the Taiwanese authorities.<sup>34</sup> Demanding widespread international adherence to the One-China Principle has not only allowed the PRC to diplomatically isolate Taiwan, but to also promote a narrative that its territorial claim over Taiwan and framing of the cross-Strait dispute enjoys widespread international support and legitimacy.

**MILITARY AND SECURITY DYNAMICS SHAPING THE PRC'S THINKING**

Security and military considerations are the second critical dynamic that influence the PRC's perception of Taiwan and frame its employment of military resources in the Strait. Taiwan occupies a central role in the PRC's military and security thinking. Described in People's Liberation Army (PLA) publications as the key point in the 'First Island Chain',<sup>35</sup> PRC military thinkers have presented Taiwan as both a threat and an opportunity for the PRC's security and ability to project military power. While some PLA thinkers have pointed to the threat that Taiwan's independence and alignment with the US would pose to the PRC's territorial security and access to key shipping routes,<sup>36</sup> others point out that its successful incorporation would enable the PLA Navy to break out into the Pacific and significantly enhance its ability to deter US forces based in Guam.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Xi Jinping Report to the 19th Party Congress.

<sup>29</sup>US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*. P123.

<sup>30</sup>Xi Jinping Report to the 20th Party Congress.

<sup>31</sup>Edward Cody. *China sends Warning to Taiwan with Anti-Secession Law*. *The Washington Post*. 8 Mar 05. Here.

<sup>32</sup>Xi Jinping Report to the 20th Party Congress.

<sup>33</sup>Davidson. *China Ends Military Drills After Simulating Strikes on Taiwan*.

<sup>34</sup>Jessica Drun. *One China, Multiple Interpretations*. *Center for Advanced China Research*. Dec 17. Here.

<sup>35</sup>Andrew Erickson and Joel Wuthnow. *Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks: China Conceptualises the Pacific 'Island Chains'*. *The China Quarterly*. Vol 225. 2016. DOI:10.1017/S0305741016000011 P9.

<sup>36</sup>Erickson and Wuthnow. *Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks*. P9.

<sup>37</sup>Erickson and Wuthnow. *Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks*. P13.



The importance of Taiwan in the PRC's military and security thinking has also been evident in its defence policy. Taiwan occupies a central role in the Central Military Commission's 2019 White Paper, titled *China's National Defence in the New Era*. Notably, of the nine national defence aims outlined in the paper, four, including opposing and containing Taiwan independence, cracking down on proponents of separatist movements, safeguarding national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security, and safeguarding the PRC's maritime rights and interests, are directly relevant to Taiwan.<sup>38</sup> The importance of Taiwan is also reflected in the membership of

<sup>38</sup>Ministry of Defence of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defence in the New Era*, Jul 19.

<sup>39</sup>US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*. P5.

<sup>40</sup>Ministry of Defence of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defence in the New Era*.

<sup>41</sup>Ministry of Defence of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defence in the New Era*.

<sup>42</sup>Ministry of Defence of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defence in the New Era*.

<sup>43</sup>Oriana Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation: Why Beijing Might Resort to Force*. *Foreign Affairs*. 100:4. PP58-67. 2021.

<sup>44</sup>Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation*.

<sup>45</sup>US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*. p38.

<sup>46</sup>US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*. p38.

<sup>47</sup>Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation*.

<sup>48</sup>Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation*.

<sup>49</sup>Cancian et al. *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan*. *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, Jan 23.

<sup>50</sup>Nike Ching. *Blinken 'Very Different China' Emerging Under Xi Jinping*. VOA. Oct 22.

<sup>51</sup>Ching. *Blinken 'Very Different China' Emerging Under Xi Jinping*



“OPINION POLLING HAS CONSISTENTLY INDICATED GROWING TAIWANESE SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE AND DECLINING SUPPORT FOR REUNIFICATION.”

the six-person Central Military Commission, which Xi, as its chair, has ensured includes figures with Taiwan focused operational experience.<sup>39</sup>

The White Paper also provides an important insight into how the PRC perceives the cross-strait security environment and the role of its military within it. Its assertion that “the fight against separatists is becoming more acute”, and description of “Taiwan Independence separatist forces” as the “gravest immediate threat to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait”,<sup>40</sup> presents a pessimistic PRC vision of growing instability and insecurity in the Strait. The PRC's concerns over the increasing threat posed by ‘separatist forces’ and external interference plays a powerful role in influencing how it frames its use of its military power in the Strait. For the PRC, the deployment of ships and aircraft around Taiwan is aimed at ‘safeguarding national unity’ and sending “a stern warning to the Taiwan independence separatist forces”.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, it emphasises that such deployments are “by no means targeted at our compatriots in Taiwan, but at the interference of external forces and the very small number of Taiwan Independence separatists”.<sup>42</sup>

Taiwan has also played a critical role in shaping the modernisation of the PLA. Over 25 years on from being forced into a humiliating de-escalation in the face of two US Carrier Strike Groups, the PLA has undergone a transformational modernisation.<sup>43</sup> Much of the PLA's modernisation has been anchored around increasing its ability to invade and occupy Taiwan, with particular emphasis being placed on developing joint capabilities.<sup>44</sup> One of the most notable features of the PLA's modernisation has been the targets of its 2027 modernisation goals. The purpose of the 2027 modernisation programme, which coincides with the centenary of the PLA's founding, has been described by PLA sources as designed to deliver the capabilities required to compel Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC on its terms.<sup>45</sup> If successful, the achievement of the 2027 modernisation goal would see the military instrument becoming an increasingly credible and effective means for the PRC to pursue its political ends in the Strait.

This emphasis on acquiring capabilities that will enable the PLA to become a credible military tool for pursuing unification with Taiwan,<sup>46</sup> has transformed the PRC leadership's perception

of the utility of military force in the Strait. It has underpinned the PRC's growing willingness to use aggressive military exercises to intimidate Taiwan, signal its displeasure in response to events and demonstrate its growing ability and resolve to enforce reunification if required. Furthermore, while the PRC's leaders used to view a military campaign to take the island as a fantasy, they now consider it a real possibility.<sup>47</sup> This has led some commentators to conclude that, although a PRC invasion of Taiwan may not be imminent, for the first time in three decades, it is time to seriously consider the possibility that the PRC could soon use force to resolve the Taiwan question.<sup>48</sup>

**THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS**

The PRC's sharpening political rhetoric, modernised military capabilities and increasingly assertive actions in the Taiwan Strait have led to growing concerns about the sustainability of the cross-Strait status quo. In April 2021, Admiral Philip Davidson, the then Commander of the US' Indo-Pacific Command, stated that a PRC threat to Taiwan could manifest in the next six years.<sup>49</sup> Davidson's concerns were echoed by the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, in October 2022, when he claimed that under Xi the PRC deemed the status quo to be “no longer acceptable”<sup>50</sup> and that the PRC was seeking to bring Taiwan under its control on a much faster timeline, possibly by force.<sup>51</sup>

However, when assessing the threat posed by the PRC, it is important to consider its potential decision making and actions through the powerful interpretative lens that shapes its perception of Taiwan and the ends, ways and means of its strategy. By doing so, it is possible to better understand how contemporary developments



may set the conditions for the PRC to use military force. The implications of some events and issues for PRC decision making may be obvious. A declaration of Taiwanese independence will cross a well-established PRC red line and almost certainly trigger a PLA military intervention. Alternatively, the increasing levels of PLA activity in the Taiwan Strait and the aggressiveness of its interactions with US forces significantly increases the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. However, in order to understand the full risk of the PRC employing military force in the Strait, it is important to look beyond these clearer cut issues and events at some of the underlying dynamics that are set to shape them.

One of the key developments set to influence the PRC's actions in the Strait, is the evolution of Taiwanese public support for reunification. While the PRC may characterise the independence movement as representing a very small proportion of the Taiwanese population, opinion polling has consistently indicated growing Taiwanese support for independence and declining support for reunification. In part, this is a product of the PRC's own actions. Its imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong catastrophically discredited the One Country, Two Systems model for much of the Taiwanese population.<sup>52</sup> With polling suggesting that just seven per cent of the Taiwanese population support unification, while 30 per cent support independence,<sup>53</sup> the PRC is facing a scenario where it is becoming increasingly unlikely that Taiwan will voluntarily agree to a peaceful unification.

The implications of this shift in Taiwanese public opinion are considerable. For the PRC, declining support for unification represents the failure of its attempts to use positive political engagement and economic



incentives to advance the cause of peaceful reunification.<sup>54</sup> The result is an increased risk that the PRC may conclude that coercion and military force are the only ways now capable of realising its goal of reunification.<sup>55</sup> This risk is compounded by the growing sense of urgency shaping the PRC's stance towards Taiwan and the tendency of its leadership to make worst case judgements on trends that affect its interests.<sup>56</sup> While his predecessors may have been content to wait for public opinion to eventually swing back in the PRC's favour, under Xi there is a far greater risk that the PRC will conclude that the possibilities for peaceful reunification have been completely exhausted and launch military action against Taiwan.

There is also a risk that domestic political developments could place increasing pressure on the PRC's leadership to use force to seize Taiwan. No longer able to rely on meteoric economic growth and faced with numerous societal challenges, including significant levels of youth unemployment, nationalism and progress towards national rejuvenation have become core sources of legitimacy for the CCP.<sup>57</sup> With the PRC's economy struggling to recover in the aftermath of its damaging zero-Covid policy, the CCP's ability to deliver on these goals is set to become increasingly important to its ability to maintain domestic legitimacy and control.

“UNDER XI THERE IS A FAR GREATER RISK THAT THE PRC WILL CONCLUDE THAT THE POSSIBILITIES FOR PEACEFUL REUNIFICATION HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY EXHAUSTED AND LAUNCH MILITARY ACTION AGAINST TAIWAN.”

This increasing reliance on nationalist causes poses a real risk to security in the Taiwan Strait. According to a survey run in the state controlled *Global Times*, 70 per cent of the PRC's population strongly supports using force to unify with Taiwan, while 37 per cent believe that this would be best done in the next three to five years.<sup>58</sup> In the event of a miscalculation or incident in the Strait, such levels of nationalist sentiment would leave little room for the PRC to de-escalate and navigate towards an off-ramp that would be domestically acceptable. Alternatively faced with a crisis in domestic legitimacy, there is a strong possibility that the PRC could seek to satisfy nationalist demands and demonstrate its progress towards rejuvenation by using force to seize Taiwan.

However, the most important factor that will shape any PRC decision to use force will be the risk it poses to the security of the CCP regime. For the CCP, survival in power is paramount,<sup>59</sup> and this logic permeates all its decision making, including when it comes to Taiwan. Although concerns about the PRC's growing ability to seize Taiwan militarily have increased, wargames have highlighted the significant risks associated with an invasion. A CSIS wargame, which was run 24 times, saw a PRC conventional invasion of Taiwan defeated in most scenarios.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the losses associated with the conflict threatened to destabilise the CCP's

rule on the mainland.<sup>61</sup> Even in the event of a successful invasion, question marks remain about the PRC's ability to maintain control of a restive population and its capacity to bear the costs that would accompany an occupation. The result is that, in the near term at least, for the CCP the risks associated with an outright invasion of Taiwan continue to outweigh the potential benefits that could come from it.

Concerns about the stability of the CCP regime also extend to scenarios that involve the use of military force below the level of an outright invasion. Faced with the prospect of being subjected to overwhelming sanctions in the event of using military force to isolate Taiwan or to seize an outlying feature controlled from Taipei, the PRC is likely to proceed carefully. It understands the inevitable and irresistible logic that sanctions will lead to an economic disaster that

<sup>52</sup>Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation*.

<sup>53</sup>Hui-ling Chen. *Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1992/06 ~ 2022/12)*. Election Study Centre National Chengchi University. Jan 23. Here.

<sup>54</sup>Corey Lee Bell and Andrew Yang. *The Impact of Brexit on East Asian Security: A Taiwanese Perspective*. In: *A New Beginning or More of the Same: The European Union and East Asia after Brexit*. Ed Reilly, M. and Lee C-Y. Palgrave Macmillan. 2021. P159.

<sup>55</sup>Bell and Yang. *The Impact of Brexit on East Asian Security: A Taiwanese Perspective*. P159.

<sup>56</sup>Bush. *From Persuasion to Coercion*. P5.

<sup>57</sup>Brown and Wu. *The Trouble with Taiwan*. P111

<sup>58</sup>Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation*.

<sup>59</sup>Parton. *Taiwan: Invasion is Not Likely, but Deterrence Remains Vital*. P2.

<sup>60</sup>Cancian et al. *The First Battle of the Next War*.

<sup>61</sup>Cancian et al. *The First Battle of the Next War*.

<sup>62</sup>Parton. *Taiwan: Invasion is Not Likely, but Deterrence Remains Vital*. P14.

<sup>63</sup>Parton. *Taiwan: Invasion is Not Likely, but Deterrence Remains Vital*. P14.

will significantly exacerbate the social challenges it is already facing.<sup>62</sup> Faced with the prospect of widespread social unrest directed against it, the CCP, which remains scarred by the experience of Tiananmen,<sup>63</sup> is unlikely to undertake such a risk-laden course of action. Consequently, the best approach to understanding the threat posed by the PRC towards Taiwan is to understand to what extent the CCP considers it to present an existential threat to its continued survival in power. When viewed from this perspective, it is evident that the current international environment poses too great a risk, and the PRC's domestic environment presents too small an incentive for the PRC to undertake military action against Taiwan. However, should dynamics in either of these environments change, there is a real risk that the PRC may seek to undertake military action to seize Taiwan.

For observers seeking to understand the relative threat of military invasion, these dynamics provide an important source of indicators and warnings. Clearly, any decision to use military force will result in a build-up of military capability and increased levels of activity that will provide a clear indicator of a growing threat. However, distinguishing a genuine move towards using force from efforts to use military resources to harass and intimidate Taiwan as part

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of a wider campaign of coercive diplomacy, requires consideration of a broader set of indicators. Specifically, observers seeking to comprehensively understand the risk of a PRC military action in the Strait should focus on indicators that can provide insights into the perceived risk that an invasion would present to the PRC alongside the relative risk appetite of the CCP's leadership.

Examples of such indicators could include declining international support for Taiwan, particularly from the US. Such a scenario would create a far more favourable international environment for a PRC intervention and reduce the risk that it would pose to the CCP's leadership. Alternatively, growing domestic dissent and dissatisfaction with the CCP regime, could increase the PRC's risk appetite. Accompanied by an increasingly existential framing of the Taiwan dispute in the PRC's political rhetoric and attempts to downplay the primacy of peaceful reunification in its Taiwan strategy, these changes in the international and domestic environment would provide a strong indication of a growing PRC military threat to Taiwan.

Given the catastrophic impact an invasion would have on international security and global economic stability, preventing the PRC from reaching this conclusion must be a central focus of the international community. International actors should look to deter the PRC from undertaking military action by convincing it of their willingness to impose unacceptable costs in response. However, such efforts will need to be balanced against the need to ensure that the PRC does not become convinced that the door to peaceful reunification has been shut. Navigating these dynamics will require a considered, internationally cohered, and consistent approach that can ease the PRC's anxieties about losing Taiwan whilst convincing it of the unacceptable risk that would accompany any military attempt to seize it.

**CONCLUSION**

In the final analysis, it is evident that the PRC's increasing assertiveness, military capabilities, and growing sense of urgency to resolve the Taiwan question are sources of real risk for security and stability in the Taiwan Strait. However, with the international

and domestic environments faced by the PRC continuing to set conditions that create an unacceptable level of risk and insufficient potential reward for the CCP, the prospects of an imminent invasion remain slim.

Nonetheless, the PRC remains committed to bringing Taiwan under its rule and there is little likelihood of it changing the ends of its Taiwan strategy. Faced with the prospect of dwindling Taiwanese support for peaceful reunification and growing domestic pressure to satisfy the nationalist goals that the CCP's legitimacy relies upon, there is a real risk that the PRC will conclude that political engagement and economic integration no longer provide effective ways for it to achieve its ends. In that context, presented with an increasingly powerful military lever and growing pressure to resolve the Taiwan question sooner rather than later, there is a distinct possibility that the PRC may, in the longer term, employ military means in a non-peaceful way to achieve its political ends. Preventing the PRC's leadership from reaching this conclusion must be an immediate and enduring priority for policy makers across the world.

