
REVIEW OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Dynamics of China-Taiwan Relations and the Possibility of Open Conflict: An Overview

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On August 2, 2022, United States (US) House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, paid a visit to Taiwan, which prompted a strong response from Beijing. Following the visit, Beijing launched a large-scale military exercise that raised global concerns about the possibility of crisis escalation in the Taiwan Strait, fearing it will end in an open war like in Ukraine. Nonetheless, some experts have predicted that the open war was unlikely to occur.¹ China perceived the formal visit of US representative to Taiwan as a violation of sovereignty resulting in a raising tension in the Indo-Pacific area. In a statement, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "The US side claimed that China is muddling the situation, but the basic facts are that the United States first provoked China on the Taiwan question and blatantly violated China's sovereignty and territorial integrity".² On the other hand, the Biden's administration argued that the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including the firing of a short-range ballistic missile at Taiwan, was an overreaction of Beijing to Pelosi's visit.³

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This article examines beyond the temporary tensions occurring in the second half of 2022 and discusses the dynamics of relations between China-Taiwan, the possibility of an open war, and the implications of the conflict on Indonesia.

History of China-Taiwan Relations

The tension between China and Taiwan began as the civil war in mainland China between the Nationalist and Communist Party government forces ended in 1949. The communist party, led by Mao Zedong, successfully seized the victory and declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in mainland China with Beijing as their capital city.⁴ In the meantime, the nationalist forces led by Chang Kai-shek also proclaimed the establishment of a new China's state on an island separated from the mainland by the Taiwan Strait. This state is known as the Republic of China (ROC), which is often referred to as Taiwan or China Taipei.

Although PRC never acknowledged ROC's independence, even prevented Taiwan from joining the numerous international organizations such as United Nations and other regional organizations,⁵ PRC never had a strong influence in Taiwan where the people adhere to democratic political system. The same statement can be said for Taiwan, which had no influence on mainland China. PRC had maintained a peaceful relationship with Taiwan on the premise of the 1992 Consensus. However, the 1992 Consensus had never been interpreted in the same way by both sides. In addition, the consensus was never intended to address the question of Taiwan's legal status. For the PRC, as China's President Xi Jinping had stated, the consensus reflects an agreement that "the two sides of the strait belong to one China and would work together to seek national reunification". On the other hand, Taiwan has a different understanding of the "One China" policy approach, which is a political stance that considers the two territories separated by the Taiwan Strait as one country and therefore Taiwan to be under Beijing's authority.⁶ For Taiwan, One China indicates that both the PRC and ROC acknowledged that there is only one "China," but disagreed on whether "China" is represented by the PRC or ROC. The ROC government regarded itself as the sole legitimate government of Taiwan, contesting sovereignty over its own constitutionally defined territories. For the PRC, the ROC is part of its territorial sovereignty, thus other countries must respect Beijing if

they wish to visit Taiwan and also the ROC is prohibited from carrying out postures and maneuvers of diplomatic relations that give the impression that the territory is an independent state.

In 2005, mainland China approved an anti-secession law providing China's PLA the power to intervene militarily should Taiwan formally declare independence. As a result, the relationship between the two countries began to deteriorate. China's mainland has maintained missiles within close reach of Taiwan for decades. Since then, tensions between the two Chinas separated by the Taiwan Strait have gradually increased, especially in 2016 when Taiwanese President Tai Ing-wen refused to accept the formula endorsed by her predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou, to allow increasing cross-strait relations.⁷ In the meantime, Beijing has taken even more aggressive measures, such as flying fighter jets near the island. Relations between Taiwan and China appear to have worsened significantly after Nancy Pelosi's visit, which Beijing deemed "extremely dangerous".

US Foreign Policy in Taiwan

In 1979 the United States and the PRC established formal diplomatic relations. Simultaneously, it severed diplomatic ties with the ROC and terminated their mutual defense pact. Nevertheless, the United States maintains a solid unofficial relationship with Taiwan and continues to sell defense equipment to its military, despite China's protest to stop selling weapons to Taiwan and also to cut off contact with the country. According to a statement from the United States Department of State, the United States' approach to Taiwan has been consistent through decades and administrations. The United States has a long-standing one China policy, which is governed by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three US-China Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances. Under those agreements, the US opposes any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side; US does not support Taiwan's independence; and US expects cross-Strait differences to be resolved by peaceful means. In conclusion, the US's interest in peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait remains unwavering. In accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act, the US provides Taiwan with the necessary defense articles and services to enable Taiwan to maintain an adequate self-defense capability, and maintains the capacity of US to resist any use of force or other forms of coercion that would threaten Taiwan's security, social, or economic system.⁸

Through its ambiguous policy, the United States has for decades managed to maintain a delicate balance between supporting Taiwan and preventing a war with China. However, President Joe Biden has seemingly rejected the policy. He stated several times that the United States would come to back up Taiwan's defense, should China attack. White House officials have walked back his comments, saying the policy has not changed. Nevertheless, in the end, the president is the one who gets to decide how to respond if such scenario happens.⁹ Although the US always says to maintain the status quo, the public has highlighted the fluctuating US's commitment to Taiwan. Especially, when Nancy Pelosi, who is well-known for her pro-Taiwan attitude and strong opposition to China, decided to visit Taiwan during her Asia Tour. Her visit certainly drew China to its fury. Pelosi, known as the most senior US official to visit Taiwan in 25 years, has also further complicated President Biden's efforts to manage China-US relationship that reached new lows.

Prior to Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, there have been several unannounced visits by US delegation. In May 2022, US Senator Tammy Duckworth visited Taiwan for three days to meet Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and other senior government officials, including those from Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During her visit, Duckworth aimed to discuss several issues, such as regional security, trade and investment, and global supply chains. It was Duckworth's second visit to Taiwan as she visited Taiwan in June 2021 with fellow senators Dan Sullivan and Chris Coons to announce that the US would be donating 750,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Taiwan at a time when Taiwan was short of vaccines during a surge in coronavirus cases.¹⁰ Duckworth's visit in June was one of the three visits that the US delegation made in 2021. Five US lawmakers met the Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen back in November 2021.

It was a one-day surprise visit aimed to reaffirm the US' "rock solid" support for the self-governing island. Six weeks before this visit, a group of six Republican members of Congress had already visited the island.¹¹ Even though US delegates had been to Taiwan before and it barely caused much trouble between the PRC-ROC relations, Pelosi's visit is exceptional considering she is second in line of succession to the US presidency.¹² This is another thing that bothers PRC. In addition, Pelosi's trip came at the worst possible time. According to the media, Biden himself had privately warned her that the timing of her visit was unsuitable, as President Xi Jinping was facing a crucial party congress in November while under significant domestic pressure and could not afford to

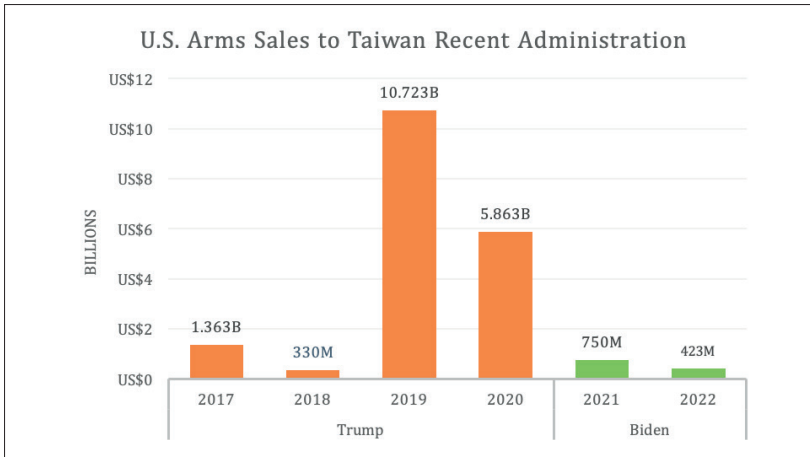
appear weak.¹³ The administration was forced to defend Pelosi’s decision and downplayed its significance, emphasizing that it did not indicate a change in the “One China” policy. In a two-hour phone call, President Joe Biden assured China’s President Xi Jinping that the United States will maintain its current policy. Biden emphasized that “the United States policy has not changed and that the United States strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait”.¹⁴

Comparing five-year administrations to examine whether there is a contrast between the Republican Party (President Donald Trump) and the Democratic Party (President Joe Biden), it can be assumed that the US-Taiwan relationship during the Biden administration is relatively similar to its predecessor during the Trump administration. For instance, in terms of arms and defense equipment sales (see Table 1). Despite China’s objections, the United States tightened the ties with Taiwan under President Donald Trump, including the sale of more than USD18 billion in arms to the military and the unveiling of a USD250 million complex for its de facto embassy in Taipei.¹⁵ In 2016, Donald Trump broke decades of US diplomatic tradition by speaking directly with President Tsai Ing-wen via telephone. Since 1979, this has represented the highest level of contact between the two sides. In 2018, the US State Department approved the sale of up to USD330 million worth of spare parts for F-16 fighter jets and other military aircrafts to Taiwan, prompting a warning from China that it jeopardized Beijing and Washington’s cooperation.¹⁶

The Biden administration has maintained arms sales and affirmed the Trump administration’s decision to permit the US officials to meet with Taiwanese officials more freely. Biden was the first president of the United States to invite Taiwanese representatives to the inauguration. The United States engages in military training and dialogue with Taiwan, sails ships regularly through the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate its military presence in the region, and urges Taiwan to enhance its military budget.¹⁷

Table 1. Comparison between Trump and Biden Administration’s Arms Sales to Taiwan

Trump	2017	USD1.363.000.000
	2018	USD330.000.000
	2019	USD10.723.560.000
	2020	USD5.863.100.000
Biden	2021	USD750.000.000
	2022	USD423.000.000



(Source: <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales>)

Although China's President Xi Jinping was unable to prevent Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, he did order his country's military to practice a much more aggressive step: a blockade crucial to take the island by force. China's People's Liberation Army conducted, for the first time, a military operation aimed at blockading the island, which was said to be the early step towards an invasion. China deployed aircraft and fired missiles in close proximity to Taiwan on Thursday, August 11, 2022, during its largest military exercise in the Taiwan Strait, just one day after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan. Moreover, China's ships have apparently violated the unofficial median line in the Taiwan Strait, which was defined by the United States in the 1950s but was never officially recognized by China.¹⁸ China's military revealed several launches of conventional missiles in Taiwanese waters as part of planned drills in six zones that would last until noon on Sunday, August 14, 2022.¹⁹ The escalation of the conflict that may lead to Russia-Ukraine crisis has been anticipated as China has been closer to use forces to intimidate Taiwan. However, most experts argue that the war will not occur soon.

Possibility of China-Taiwan Excalation

Analyzing the dynamics of China-Taiwan relations, there are several reasons why China will not choose invasion in the same manner as Russia. China and Russia have different priorities, to begin with. China, since its rise, has been known as a country with strong

economic growth. This is due to the fact that the China's economy grows rapidly every year. China has the second largest gross domestic product (GDP) in the world, just right behind the US. In 2021, China's GDP was 76% of the United States'. In comparison, Russia's GDP was less than 10% of United States'. Moreover, China's growth in the economy is more sustainable compared to Russia.²⁰ It also means that China has stronger and more complex trade relations with more countries than Russia given that China itself has become the world's largest trading partner.²¹ If China declares war and launches an attack directly to Taiwan, China has to be ready to face serious sanctions that will severely damage its economy.

Clearly, China's emergence as one of the world's largest economies has resulted in a number of advantages, but it has also increased the country's economic dependence on other nations, making it more vulnerable in times of crisis. In this case, the United States and its allies make up eight of China's top ten trading partners. In the circumstance that China uses force to achieve reunification with Taiwan, the United States and its allies will impose harsh sanctions on China. If that actually occurs, China's economy will suffer greatly. China will experience a severe economic downturn, with far-reaching social and political implications at home.²² Therefore, before starting an invasion to Taiwan, China will evaluate the economic consequences that it will face.

Furthermore, concerning military capabilities, Russia has the largest nuclear arsenal in terms of the number of nuclear warheads. It also possesses an impressive conventional force, particularly on land. Ukraine, which shares a land border with Russia, is a relatively simple battleground for Russia to demonstrate its military superiority. In contrast, China's military is rapidly modernizing, but it is still decades behind the US military. China did not begin modernizing its navy and air force until the late 1990s, after the Taiwan Straits crisis in 1996, giving it nearly three decades to prepare. Similar to Russia, China's land forces have always been superior to its navy and air force since it is trained to secure China's territory. However, Taiwan is a more difficult target for an invasion due to its geographic location. At its narrowest point, the Taiwan Strait has a width of less than 100 miles, and China has deployed a large number of missiles aimed at Taiwan along its coastline. However, the United States has provided Taiwan with a significant number of advanced weapon systems, making it difficult for China to seize the territory without committing severe violations of international humanitarian law and launching a massive attack.²³

Lastly, economically and strategically, Taiwan is more significant than Ukraine. Taiwan is a global production hub and supplier of information technology, particularly semiconductors and microchips used not only for computers and mobile phones, but also for advanced defense equipment such as the F-35 Lightning II fighter jet.²⁴ This makes Taiwan an important asset for the region and the world, including China. In fact, the US recently encouraged Taiwan to contribute more to a global effort to alleviate a semiconductor shortage.²⁵ Many countries will not remain silent if China invades Taiwan since it will create a global supply crisis. Japan, for instance, will not remain passive if the China-Taiwan war happens, as the country's energy transportation relies on the Taiwan Strait.²⁶ Japan will prefer the status quo to unification as there is also a concern if China will become more aggressive in future.

Implications of China-Taiwan Conflict on Indonesia

Faced with escalating tensions between China and the United States over Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement on the Taiwan Strait conflict. The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through its spokesman, emphasized that Indonesia would continue to encourage all parties to take meaningful efforts to minimize tensions that could worsen the situation. The statement concluded with the Indonesian government's decision to maintain the "One China Policy".²⁷ The effort to maintain the One China Policy is an agreement that become a foundation in China-Indonesia diplomatic relations.

Relations between China and Indonesia have been notably tense for decades, but have recently begun to improve. In 1950, China and Indonesia established their first formal diplomatic relations. During the administrations of presidents Soekarno and Suharto, however, relations between the two nations soon deteriorated dramatically. Indonesia, under Sukarno's presidency, was one of the earliest nations to recognize the independence of the PRC. Meanwhile, under President Suharto's presidency, Indonesia broke all ties with China due to suspicions that the Communist Party was sending weapons through its network in an attempt to carry out a September 30, 1965 *coup d'état*.²⁸

In addition, there are sharp differences in the two leaders' perceptions of threats, priorities, and forces that support them.²⁹ Since the termination

of bilateral relations between Indonesia and China in 1965, Indonesia had to find new economic allies to fill the hole left by China. In 1987, Indonesia established diplomatic relations with Taiwan, which were marked by the establishment of a chamber of commerce between the two nations.³⁰ Indonesia-China relations improved when the two countries normalized relations in 1990 marked by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The agreement stated that Indonesia would adhere to the One China Policy and would not recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state. This made Indonesia develop an informal cooperative relationship with Taiwan. In the midst of the China-Taiwan dispute,³¹ this is the basis for Indonesia's commitment to the One China policy.

If the worst case scenario manifests in the continuation of the China-Taiwan conflict, Indonesia will be affected more severely than it was during the Russia-Ukrainian conflicts. This is because China and Taiwan are more crucial trading partners for Indonesia than Russia and Ukraine, accounting for a greater proportion of imports and exports. In 2021, China's import contribution reached 28.7%, or almost a third of Indonesia's total imports, while Indonesia's exports to China were estimated to be 23.21% of Indonesia's total exports.³² Based on BPS calculations, until June 2022 the value of China's imports to Indonesia reached USD6,195,673,900.00 and Indonesia's exports to China reached USD5,368,263,117.35.³³ In 2021, Indonesia's exports to Taiwan accounted for 3% of its overall exports, while its imports accounted for 2.2% of the all Indonesia's imports.³⁴

As of June 2022, Taiwan's import contribution to Indonesia was USD356,586,887.00, while Indonesia's export contribution to Taiwan reached USD785,188,616.05.³⁵ This value is much higher than the value of Indonesia's exports and imports with Russia and Ukraine. Indonesia's export share to Russia is only around 0.65% of total national exports, while its import share is only 0.64% of Indonesia's total imports. in 2021.³⁶ The contribution of Indonesia's exports to Russia is USD140,885,172.13 and the value of Russia's imports to Indonesia is USD7,289,872.00.³⁷ While the share of Indonesia's exports to Ukraine is 0.18% of total national exports and its import share is equivalent to 0.53% of total national imports in 2021³⁸ with its values amounting to around USD898,226.33 and USD2.364.086,00, respectively.³⁹

In addition to economic concerns, Indonesia must immediately protect Indonesian residents (WNI) residing in Taiwan if China-Taiwan war ends with military attacks. In the employment sector, numerous Indonesian citizens work in Taiwan. Additionally, there are

also numerous Indonesian students. Currently, there are approximately 300,000 Indonesians, of which around 237,00 are migrant workers.⁴⁰ Therefore, the Indonesian government must formulate a protection plan for Indonesian citizens in Taiwan as soon as possible, given that the number is not small.

Conclusion

For some decades, China-Taiwan relations have been fragile as tensions between the two sides have gradually risen each year. Nevertheless, in the second half of 2022 the tension has reached into the next stage just after Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan. As China claimed that Pelosi's visit to Taiwan violated the PRC's sovereignty, it therefore began to conduct military maneuvers, which consequently escalated tensions and worsening the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Not only does the visit strain China-Taiwan relations, but it is also regarded as a significant turning point in the deterioration of Sino-American relations. The impact of the regional crisis will spread wider if China chooses to use military coercion. Many countries which have strong connection with the two states will suffer serious downturn, including Indonesia.

In the worst case scenario, Indonesia will suffer a great loss as the conflict will disturb Indonesia's trade balance. Due to Indonesia's significant economic dependence on China and Taiwan, it would be wise for the Indonesian government to prepare a backup strategy in case the China-Taiwan conflict evolves into a full-scale war. In addition to ensuring the protection and safety of Indonesian citizen in Taiwan, the Indonesian government must also consider the available evacuation protocols due to the large number of Indonesians in Taiwan.

Above all, considering China and Taiwan's strategic location, the two countries are situated on the world's trade routes. It is predicted that the conflict will hamper the global movement of trade and investment. The prediction will finally drive China, Taiwan, and even the United States to choose war only as a last resort since they understand its consequences. This is mostly due to global concerns, particularly those about China, the United States, and Taiwan, which predict that a war would cause a significant rise in the price of global commodities. As a result, economic growth that has just begun to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic will once again be disrupted.

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