US Narratives Versus Reality on Taiwan

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ZHEHAO DU, MAY 13 2025

As Sino-US relations deteriorate, the Taiwan question has become an increasingly dangerous flashpoint—one that some analysts believe could even spark a third world war. The dominant, US-led, Western narrative casts the "Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis" as the product of mainland China's expanding military power and alleged "authoritarian turn," illustrated by its handling of Hong Kong and its purportedly coercive posture toward Taiwan. Within this frame, a mainland "invasion" is treated as the logical, almost inevitable outcome of Sino-US rivalry. Conversely, Taiwan is depicted as a lone democracy bravely resisting authoritarian menace, its own cross-Strait policy largely ignored; Taipei appears merely a passive target. Paradoxically, although Western discourse often presents Taiwan as an "independent state," it simultaneously strips Taiwan of agency—even though Taipei's policy choices decisively shape cross-Strait stability.

Before analysing the triangular dynamics among the United States, mainland China, and Taiwan, the historical character of the dispute must be clarified. Contrary to the prevailing US portrayal of a major power seeking to invade a small, independent neighbour, post-war instruments—the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Declaration and the Hirohito surrender broadcast—restored sovereignty over Taiwan to China. After Japan's defeat, the Chinese Civil War resumed; the Kuomintang-led Republic of China retreated to Taiwan following its defeat by the Chinese Communist Party. Because no peace treaty has ever been signed, the two sides remain, de jure, in a state of civil war.

Regarding Taiwan's legal status, both the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China constitutions claim sovereignty over the whole of China, encompassing both Taiwan and the mainland. The United Nations designates Taiwan as "a province of China," and the 2016 South China Sea arbitral award referred to its administration as the "Taiwan Authority of China Taiwan Authority of China." Globally, 180 states maintain diplomatic relations with the PRC: some accept the One-China Principle (explicitly recognising PRC sovereignty over Taiwan), while others, notably the United States, adopt a more ambiguous One-China Policy—acknowledging Beijing's claim without formally recognising it and opposing formal Taiwanese independence.

The dispute is therefore one of contested sovereignty, not a case of an independent state confronting foreign aggression. Reunification has remained Beijing's core objective since the ROC government retreated to Taiwan. In the 1990s, under Jiang Zemin, mainland policy shifted from advocating armed "liberation" to promoting peaceful reunification—a position that has largely persisted. Within this wider strategy of peaceful reunification, the mainland has pinned its hopes on the people of Taiwan while concentrating on its own modernisation and economic growth. The premise is that, by becoming economically advanced and fostering Taiwan's dependence on the mainland—supported by shared historical and cultural ties—Taiwan will be drawn toward reunification. Complementing this "carrot" is a "stick": Beijing signals it will step up military activity and diplomatic pressure if Taipei pursues de jure independence.

The coercive and intimidating measures Washington now attributes to Beijing have, in fact, occurred before. The dynamic involves three moves, which marks US–mainland China–Taiwan interactions. First, a crisis is triggered when Taiwanese leaders push for de jure independence, provoking mainland military and diplomatic pressure. Second, the United States intervenes, reaffirming its One-China policy and urging Taipei to halt provocative initiatives. This dynamic began under Lee Teng-hui (1988–2000), who defined cross-Strait ties as a "special state-to-

state" relationship, and continued under Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), who promoted independence-leaning measures such as referendums and a UN membership bid. Both episodes prompted increased mainland military activity; in each case, the United States—particularly under the Bush administration—essentially co-managed the issue with the mainland against Taiwan's independence moves.

Cross-Strait relations have not always been this tense. Only a decade ago, the two sides' leaders met in Singapore—the first face-to-face encounter since the Chinese Civil War. Under Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016), a high level of economic, cultural, and political links expanded markedly. Beijing and Taipei even observed a "diplomatic truce": the mainland stopped pressuring other states to switch recognition, and Taiwan joined several international organisations. Writing in *International Security*, Scott Kastner concluded that the risk of conflict had fallen considerably. These gains rested on Ma's acceptance of the 1992 Consensus that both sides belong to "One China."

The present downturn, and Washington's recalibrated Taiwan policy, began after Tsai Ing-wen (2016–2024) and Donald Trump took office. Tsai rejected the 1992 Consensus and adopted policies edging toward de jure independence. Beijing in turn reverted to the more coercive stance it had used against the Chen Shui-bian administration. Notably, the mainland conducted no major exercises in Tsai's first two years, waiting to see whether she would return to the One-China framework. Of ten large-scale drills held between 2018 and 2024, eight responded directly to US initiatives that deepened security and political ties with Taiwan.

As argued above, Beijing's recent increase in military activity and diplomatic pressure does not mark a fundamental shift toward armed reunification. These moves remain consistent with earlier patterns, and some studies even suggest the mainland's response fell short of the intensity of its previous actions than past episodes. Contrary to the dominant Western narrative that blames the current crisis on China's military build-up, Beijing's Taiwan policy has largely remained stable.

If the Mainland had genuinely decided to pursue forcible reunification, its behaviour would contradict basic strategic logic. A campaign almost certain to trigger U.S. intervention would compel the PLA to avoid giving Washington grounds to deepen military ties with Taipei. The exercises around Taiwan were chiefly reactive—aimed at deterring pro-independence steps and U.S. interference—rather than proactive efforts to gain a decisive advantage. Encouraging closer U.S.–Taiwan cooperation would, in fact, weaken the PLA's relative position. Moreover, a strategy dependent on surprise would not involve widely publicised, live-streamed drills. In short, had Beijing adopted an offensive reunification strategy since 2016, its observable behaviour would look markedly different from what we have seen.

Most scholars who scrutinise the CCP's rhetoric and behaviour toward Taiwan find no evidence that Beijing has adopted an "armed-reunification" policy or that Taiwan has never been treated as a threat that needs to be defeated. Alarms about an imminent invasion typically rest on ambiguous indicators—such as the CIA director's unsubstantiated claim that force will be used by 2027—and focus mainly on the potential damage to U.S. strategic interests if Washington "loses" Taiwan. Driven by this Munich-type fear, the United States has shifted its own policy: both the Trump and Biden administrations declined to criticise President Tsai's pro-independence moves while markedly deepening U.S.–Taiwan security ties.

A more immediate concern is President Lai Ching-te's rhetoric, which frames the cross-Strait relationship as "authoritarianism versus democracy" and, for the first time, officially designates the mainland a "foreign hostile force." This step is unprecedented: it is the first occasion on which the Republic of China has labelled the mainland "foreign," contradicting its own constitution, and the first since democratisation in the late 1980s that it has called the mainland "hostile." Although the civil war remains unresolved, both sides tacitly pursued peaceful engagement for more than three decades. Lai's departure from that consensus—coupled with domestic power plays such as the eight-month detention of an opposition leader and mass recall campaigns against opposition legislators—is destabilising cross-Strait relations and deepening polarisation within Taiwan.

The Trump administration still lacks a coherent Taiwan policy. Nevertheless, it removed from the State Department Fact Sheets the long-standing statement that Washington "does not support Taiwan's independence," adopted when

the United States shifted diplomatic recognition to the PRC. Since the advent of the Lai administration, Taiwan has already played its most valuable card—TSMC, the world's leading chipmaker—by committing to relocate significant assets and portions of its value chain to the United States. If Lai continues provocative moves reminiscent of the Chen era, Trump's Taiwan policy is likely to become increasingly volatile. Should the current Sino-US trade talks yield even a preliminary accord, Trump may scale back US commitments to Taiwan; if the negotiations collapse, he is likely to continue wielding the "Taiwan card" to pressure Beijing.

Looking ahead, the Taiwan question is poised to grow more dangerous and unpredictable. Even a reduction in US security commitments would not deter the Lai administration from edging toward the "red line," a course that would compel Beijing to intensify military exercises around the island. Lai's strategy deliberately exploits Beijing's established pattern of reacting forcefully to moves toward *de jure* independence, thereby creating a self-fulfilling narrative of a "threatening China" that sustains his domestic support. Tellingly, while depicting Beijing as bent on invasion, he has not sought economic decoupling: the mainland remains Taiwan's largest trading partner. To restore a measure of stability and prosperity in cross-Strait relations, Washington may need to revert to the Bush-era approach—checking Lai's manoeuvres and co-managing the issue with Beijing.

About the author:

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