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# Troubled Waters: the Taiwan Issue since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis

## Abstract

*Over the last seventy years the Taiwan Strait has been widely seen as a place where the next major conflict between the great powers could start. The last time when Asia found itself on the brink of war over the future of the island nation was the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–1996. In this article, the author examines the crisis background, events and consequences and suggests that the confrontation marked the emergence of a new status quo in the strait area, the one of a structural deadlock. This paper provides an analysis of the three subsequent periods (2000–2008, 2008–2016 and since 2016 until the present) in the evolution of that status quo. The author argues that in the recent years the situation in the Taiwan Strait has been shifting towards increased turbulence. The study identifies the major factors that are eroding the “pillars” of the status quo and, thus, have a destabilizing effect on the relations between Beijing, Washington and Taipei. As such factors are of a structural nature the author concludes that the room for maneuver for each side of the triangle is becoming increasingly narrow. It enhances the risk of a structural deadlock escalating into an armed conflict.*

**Keywords:** PRC, Taiwan issue, cross-strait relations, crisis, USA, status quo

## 1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the retreat of the Kuomintang leadership of the Republic of China (ROC) to Taiwan the cross-strait reconciliation has been one of the main priorities of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In the

report delivered at the 20<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress Xi Jinping stated that “resolving the Taiwan issue and realizing the complete reunification of the motherland are a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the Party, a shared aspiration of all Chinese people, and an essential requirement for realizing national rejuvenation” (Xi, 2022).

However, it has proved to be a difficult task for the several generations of the CPC leadership to complete. Due to the United States’ active involvement in the cross-strait affairs the Taiwan issue has never been confined to Beijing and Taipei only. Different interest and strategies of the players in the PRC-ROC-US triangle, fluid and tricky domestic politics, mutual suspicion, and misperception of each other have determined the long-term conflict dynamics in the Taiwan Strait area (Sheng, 2001, p. 2). It has led to the outbreak of several serious crises there over the past seventy years. After the military clashes between Beijing and Taipei over the Jinmen (Kinmen or Quemoy), Mazu (Matsu) and Dachen (Tachen) island groups (in 1954–1955 and 1958), the crisis of 1995–1996 once again brought the region to the brink of war. Those events marked a critical turning point in the PRC-ROC-US relations and had far-reaching consequences for the situation in the Taiwan Strait and the regional security architecture.

The purpose of this chapter is to look back at this crisis, identify what forces brought it to life, and examine its impact on the situation in the Taiwan Strait while tracing the dynamics in the PRC-ROC-U.S. triangle over the years.

The hypotheses of the paper are the following. Firstly, the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis is seen as a by-product of the emergence of a new *status quo* in the PRC-ROC-U.S. triangle, a process which had started since the beginning of 1990-s. A large number of authors agree that in the first half of 1990-s Taipei and Washington substantially revised their policies, which eventually led to the PRC’s harsh backlash in 1995–1996 (Chen, 1996, pp. 1055–1060; Porch, 1999, pp. 16–18; Ross, 2000, p. 88; Sheng, 2001, p. 2). Associate of the Fairbank Center at Harvard University Steven M. Goldstein (2002, p. 85), professor of the William & Mary College Tun-jen Cheng and senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute Vincent Wei-cheng Wang (2002, p. 241) share the view that the post-1996 situation in the Taiwan Strait became a new type of a *status quo* which can be defined as “structural deadlock” (or “structural stalemate”).

Secondly, this *status quo* has turned out to be a dynamic phenomenon due to the ambivalence of policies pursued by each player of the China-Taiwan-U.S. triangle. But the set of internal and external pressures has

created somewhat “check-and-balances” system for Beijing, Taipei and Washington that has helped to preserve the very foundation of the post-1996 *status quo* over the years.

Thirdly, in the recent years the new factors have come in play, which are eroding the pillars of the fragile equilibrium that has existed since 1996. This process has serious negative implications for the stability in the Taiwan Strait area and creates preconditions for the outbreak of a new crisis.

For the purpose of this study the following methods of political science and interdisciplinary analysis have been used: historical, comparative and process-tracing methods. This article also draws on the neorealist theory to identify new factors which could erode the equilibrium that has existed since 1996 and have a destabilizing effect on the situation in the Taiwan Strait area. Based on the works by the pre-eminent American scholars and international relations theoreticians Kenneth Waltz, David Singer, and Robert Gilpin, the approach gives the opportunity to examine the issue through the three levels of analysis – the system, the state, and the individual – which helps to get better understanding of the current dynamics in the Taiwan Strait.

## 2. The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–1996 and emergence of a new *status quo*

The pretext for the crisis was the visit of a sitting Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui to America on 7–11 June 1995, which became an unprecedented protocol deviation given the break of formal relations between the U.S. and Taiwan in 1979. Lee attended the alumni reunion at his alma-mater, Cornell University, where he gave a speech “Always in My Heart.” He praised Taiwan’s transformation into a democracy and stated the determination to break out of the diplomatic isolation. “The world will come to realize that the Republic of China on Taiwan is a friendly and capable partner for progress,” he said (Taiwan Today, 1995). Lee’s repeated use of the terms “Republic of China on Taiwan,” “country” and “nation” and emphasis on Taiwan’s determination to play an active role on the international arena could not go unnoticed by Beijing. The mainland saw those statements as a direct challenge to the “one China” principle. It turned Beijing’s deep distrust of Lee into a conviction that he was going to lead Taiwan towards eventual official independence from China.

The mainland responded with a series of missile tests and life-fire drills in the waters surrounding Taiwan. The two of vast military exercises took place right before the island's legislative elections of December 1995 and the presidential election of March 1996. The drills in March were conducted in three stages, which included ground-to-ground missile tests close to Keelung and Kaohsiung, Taiwan's two most important seaports, a live-ammunition military exercise, and a large-scale simulated amphibious invasion.

As Warren Christopher (1998, p. 427), who served as the U.S. Secretary of State at the time, later recalled, "although neither we nor the Taiwanese leadership believed that these actions were precursors to invasion, they were dangerously provocative. In a tense environment of mutual hostility and deep distrust, the Administration was concerned that a simple miscalculation or misstep could lead to unintended war." In December 1995, Washington sent the aircraft carrier *Nimitz* and four escort vessels through the Taiwan Strait. In March 1996, President Clinton ordered to deploy two aircraft carrier battle groups to the area near Taiwan to monitor China's exercises. Thus, in March, there were fourteen American navy ships and three nuclear-powered attack submarines deployed to Taiwan in total, which had become the largest show of force in the strait since the 1950s.

Despite the tense situation, Taiwan held its first direct presidential election which Lee Teng-hui won with 54% of the popular vote. Two days later China's military exercises ended, and the confrontation began to ease.

This crisis was over but the forces that had brought it to life did not go anywhere. In our point of view, the crisis became a culmination of the undergoing emerging of a new in the Taiwan Strait in the 90-s.

The main driver of this process became Taiwan's democratization which had started since the late 80-s. The Taiwanese people became an influential force in determining their own future. In 90-s their participation in politics was constantly growing. They were enfranchised to elect the Taiwanese legislative bodies and the president. New parties that represented the interests of various groups of the island population emerged on Taiwan's political scene. Influential pro-independence force was the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Founded in 1986 and legalized in 1989, it turned into the major opponent of the Kuomintang (KMT). The Taiwanese representation in the KMT itself had increased. Between 1952 and 1993, the proportion of the KMT members of Taiwanese origin increased from 26.1 to 69.2%; members of the ruling Central Standing

Committee of the party from 0 to 57.1%; and members of the cabinet from 5 to 45% (Goldstein, 2015, p. 72). The first Taiwan-born president Lee Teng-hui became the symbol of those changes.

The democratization and “Taiwanization” of the island’s politics had dramatic effect on its policies toward mainland China and the international community. The Taiwan issue was mainly the matter of U.S.-China relations previously, but since 1990-s Taipei has become an equal player in the PRC-U.S.-Taiwan triangle, and the growth or decline of tensions in the Taiwan Strait would largely depend on the policies of the elected administration.

As a result, Taipei turned into the most proactive player in challenging the *status quo*. The democratization made Taiwan revise its stance on its status and a unification issue. Under Chiang Kai-shek’s (1949–1978) and Chiang Ching-kuo’s (1978–1988) rule, there was a consistent position that the ROC was the government of entire China, and the mainland was the part of the country temporary occupied by rebels. Under Lee Teng-hui, it was replaced by the assertion of the ROC as a sovereign country *de-jure* governing all of China, but *de facto* ruling only territories of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu. In 1991, the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion were repealed. The ROC’s lack of authority on the mainland was officially recognized that effectively severed the lingering political bond between Taipei and Beijing (Campbell & Mitchell, 2001, p. 15). On the one hand, the KMT did not challenge the “one China” principle *de jure* and it let the so-called “1992 Consensus”<sup>1</sup> emerge (which Beijing sees as the foundation for the cross-strait relations). On the other hand, assertion of *de-facto* separation gave birth to Lee’s constructs as “one China, two governments,” then “one China, two entities,” followed by “one China, two equal entities,” “one China, two equal political entities,” “one China, two legal entities in the international arena,” then “two equal political entities” without mentioning “one China” (Sheng, 2001, p. 99). In 1999, Lee (1999, p. 12) put forward even more radical notion of the cross-strait ties as a “special state-to-state relationship.”

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1 The exchange of statements from non-governmental organizations of the PRC and ROC on their positions regarding the “one China” during the 1992 consultations. Beijing sees it as a confirmation that the cross-strait relations are within the framework of “one China” and not of a state-to-state nature.

From the point of view of Beijing, these changes and the unrealistic pre-conditions for unification set by Taipei, which included political and economic reforms in the PRC, demonstrated that Taiwan had embarked on the path of separation from the mainland.

The role of the U.S. in shifting the *status quo* in the early 1990s was also significant. In the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident and collapse of the Soviet Union that led to the disappearance of a common strategic threat to Washington and Beijing, the U.S.-PRC relations rapidly deteriorated. The decision to issue Lee a visa was just an episode in the U.S. revision of its China and Taiwan policies that had already been underway. The prominent examples were the Bush administration's sale of 150 F-16 fighters to Taiwan in 1992 and the Clinton administration's decision to formally upgrade its relations with Taiwan in 1994.

As for the former case, in 1992, the U.S. government disclosed sales of F-16 jet fighters and some other equipment to Taiwan for a total of 6.5 billion USD (Reuters, 2010). The move was a violation of the U.S. pledge to reduce the quality and quantity of its arms sales to Taiwan, which was given in the 1982 Joint Communiqué, one of the three Communiqués seen by China as the Sino-U.S. political foundation for handling the Taiwan issue. The trend toward reversing the ban on sales of advanced weaponry continued in the Clinton years with transfer of Hawkeye early-warning aircraft and renting frigates to Taiwan in 1993.

As for the second case, in 1994, the Clinton administration launched a major Taiwan Policy Review, the first of its kind since Washington shifted recognition to Beijing in 1979. The policy adjustments allowed visits of high-level officials from U.S. economic and technical agencies to Taiwan; visits of officials from Taiwan, other than the President, the Vice President, the Premier and the Vice Premier, to the U.S.; and meetings in an official setting. Taiwan's office in Washington changed its name from the nondescript "Coordinating Council for North American Affairs" to the more specific "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office" (Lord, 1994). But it was the decision to allow Taiwan's leader to enter the U.S., which happened despite private reassurances of Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen that Lee would not be granted a visa (Kissinger, 2015, p. 504), that became a wake-up call for the PRC.

Beijing, who sees Taiwan as an unalienable part of the PRC territory and itself as the sole legitimate representative of the Chinese people, used its military force to halt unfavorable shifts in the policies of both Taipei

and Washington. In Beijing's eyes, one of the major problems with Lee's visit was that if China failed to react strongly and express its determination to defend its territorial integrity, it could lead to the "domino effect" in erosion of "one China" principle. Other countries would follow the U.S. steps and review their policies towards Taiwan. Lee Teng-hui had already been actively pursuing his "practical diplomacy" to bolster ties between Taiwan and other countries. Only a few days after Lee's United States visit, the ROC premier Lien Chan visited three East European countries, which had no diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and met their leaders (Sheng, 2001, p. 202). The PRC was especially worried by the U.S. stance. As Deng Xiaoping (Deng, 1988, pp. 28, 111) once argued, "the ruling circles of the United States have never given up the attempts to create "two Chinas" or "one-and-a-half China" while seeing Taiwan as an American immovable 'aircraft carrier' and as a sphere of American influence." Chinese leaders had long considered the U.S. involvement to be the major obstacle on the way towards the cross-strait reunification. The impressive arms sales and the Clinton administration's renewed support of Taiwan's authorities were a definite proof for Beijing that the U.S. was encouraging Taiwan's separatist sentiments to contain China's rise.

Thus, the 1995–1996 confrontation became the product of the emergence of a new *status quo* in the strait area. The PRC, Taiwan and the U.S. were not able to solve the problems that had caused the confrontation, and in the wake of the crisis they found themselves in the situation of a "structural deadlock."

Beijing could not make Taipei change its stance on unification to the pre-1990 state. China had to deal with the changed, democratized Taiwan. As the results of the 1996 presidential election showed, the islanders were not ready to give in to coercion – 75% of the popular votes went to the candidates who were opposed to the unification with the communist mainland.<sup>2</sup>

Taiwan, in its turn, found itself in non-state limbo. Developing a stronger sense of its national identity and being eager to play an active role on the international scene, it was not able to become a "normal" state.

The United States, on its part, had to perform a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, in order to keep Taiwan in the orbit of its influence Washington continued supporting Taiwan in the framework of its Taiwan

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2 Lee Teng-hui won 54% of the popular vote, while the DPP candidate received 21%.



Relations Act (TRA) and "Six Assurances." After 1996, the Pentagon expanded the military ties with Taiwan to levels unprecedented since 1979. Taiwan received 15.4 billion USD in arms in 1997–2000 (and 5.6 billion USD in 1993–1996, for comparison). The broader exchanges encompassed discussions over strategy, training, logistics, command and control. On the other hand, the growing economic, political and military weight of the PRC made Washington cautious about the risk of its involvement into armed conflict with Beijing. Its position became clear when during the 1998 visit to China Bill Clinton stated his "three no's" policy: the U.S. does not support independence for Taiwan, or "one China, one Taiwan," or "two Chinas," or its membership in any international bodies whose members are sovereign states.

The unique nature of the stalemate which the PRC, Taiwan and the U.S. found themselves in was in ambivalence of the policies pursued by each player. This feature is well explained by Steven M. Goldstein (Goldstein, 2002, p. 87). Beijing, Taipei and Washington faced a set of internal and external pressures, somewhat "check-and-balances" system, that could make them reverse the policies they pursued at some moment of time.

For example, Beijing's use of peaceful and patient tactics in dealing with Taipei would improve relations with Taiwan and the United States as well as its international image. However, at some moment of time pursuing this policy could jeopardize the other PRC's interests. The international community might start thinking that Beijing was satisfied with the existing *status quo* or ready to accept Taiwan's independence aspirations. The image of the Chinese leadership within the country would be affected as well. The opposite is also true. On the one hand, the "big stick" policy would deter Taipei from declaring official independence, but, on the other hand, it would affect the attitudes of Taiwan's population towards the mainland and have a detrimental effect on Beijing's international standing.

Taiwan faced a similar contradiction. Promoting dialogue with the mainland would have a positive impact on the cross-strait relations, it would reduce tensions in the region, bring benefits to the business community and give the sense of security to the island population. However, pro-Beijing policy might cause concerns of Taiwanese population over the deepening dependence on the mainland and eventual Taiwan's absorption. Such public sentiments would put pressure on the government to adjust the policy. Taiwan's pro-independence agenda and expansion of the international space could get the support of some Taiwanese, but majority



of population who prefer *status quo*, as well as Chinese and American authorities would pressure the island to reverse this policy.

America also faced the need to find a balance between the sets of contradicting interests. On the one hand, closer U.S.-Taiwan ties and demonstration of Washington's readiness to defend Taiwan's democracy under the TRA would confirm the strength of American security obligations and reassure the allies' concerns over Washington's commitment to the region. Playing the "Taiwan card" could be strategically useful: instability in the strait area would divert a great share of China's strategic attention from its development tasks. However, such policy would also have a detrimental impact on the relations with the PRC and might encourage Taiwan's reckless actions, which could lead to conflict escalation. The possibility of being drawn into a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait was the one that the U.S. would like to avoid. A decision not to provoke Beijing on the Taiwan issue would improve Sino-American relations and help the U.S. to make Beijing compromise in the other areas of interest. However, this policy might make Taiwan and regional states raise concerns about the U.S. getting "too cozy" with Beijing and eventually undermine their confidence in American security guarantees. Thus, the U.S. has chosen the strategic ambivalence as a core element of its approach to the Taiwan issue. America did not make explicit security guarantees for Taiwan and tried to balance keeping the "Taiwan card" in its strategic toolbox with developing its relations with the PRC.

This ambivalence of the policies and contradictory objectives of all the players of the China-Taiwan-US triangle have determined the dynamic and cyclical nature of the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait. Further we will examine the relations within the China-Taiwan-U.S. triangle over the years to understand how the *status quo* has evolved.

### **3. China-Taiwan-USA triangle in 2000–2008: movement towards conflict**

The period of 2000–2008 is a demonstration of how the *status quo* can shift towards conflict. That happened mainly due to the risky political moves of Chen Shui-bian, the first non-Kuomintang president of the ROC. A native Taiwanese and early member of the DPP, he had devoted a large part of his career to the struggle for establishing statehood for Taiwan.

In his campaign for the presidency, he stressed the importance of Taiwan's national identity but tried to avoid provoking another controversy in the relations with Beijing and thus de-emphasized the independence/unification issue. In his inaugural speech he put forward five pledges, also known as "five no's" policy: not to declare independence, not to change the national title, not to push forth the inclusion of the so-called "state-to-state" description of the cross-strait ties in the Constitution, not to promote a referendum to change the *status quo* regarding independence or unification, and not to abolish the Guidelines for National Unification and the National Unification Council (Xinwen, 2000). Chen tried to balance sending Beijing and Washington a signal about his readiness to maintain stability in the Taiwan Strait, on the one hand, with keeping the support of his party's grassroots, on the other hand. He did not recognize the "one-China" principle and "1992 Consensus." Instead, he proposed an ambiguous concept of "1992 Spirit," which was defined as the spirit of dialogue, exchanges and "reconciliation by agreeing to disagree" (Wang, 2002, p. 100), and stated that "the leaders on both sides [of the Taiwan Strait] possess enough wisdom and creativity to jointly deal with the question of a future "one China" (Xinwen, 2000). But Beijing did not find those statements acceptable to resume the cross-strait consultations which had been suspended since 1999.

However, in the summer of 2002, it became clear that Chen Shui-bian had decided to abandon his conciliatory rhetoric in favor of assertion of a separate Taiwanese identity. In August 2002, Chen stated that there was "one state on each side of the Taiwan Strait." President Chen, in fact, adopted the tactics of "creeping separatism": he was taking one step after another to somehow emphasize Taiwan's statehood (Larin, 2014, p. 231). Those steps were the promoting of an idea of creating a new constitution; the abolition of the National Unification Council and the National Unification Guidelines in 2006; the campaign for entering the UN under the name "Taiwan"; as well as the assertion of Taiwan's sovereignty and efforts to solidify the island's sense of separate identity. The belief that such an agenda would let him score more political points at home and President Bush's initial strong support for Taiwan boosted Chen Shui-bian's confidence. But his policy was putting the existing *status quo* in jeopardy and was unacceptable for both the PRC and the United States.

The Chinese leadership acted on several fronts. In 2005, it adopted the Anti-Secession Law which legitimized the PRC's right to "employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's

sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Xinhua, 2005). By doing this Beijing aimed to set the clear red line for Taiwanese authorities. At the same time, according to the "principle of placing hope on the Taiwan people" (China Daily, 2013) the mainland actively sought to establish and build up the contacts with the DPP opposition and with different groups of Taiwanese society. This policy was a success, it led to the establishment of a platform for regular contacts between the CPC and the KMT, which, in turn, laid the foundation for improving cross-strait relations after the DPP's defeat in the 2008 presidential elections.

In response to Chen Shui-bian's actions the United States also made adjustments to its Taiwan policy. At the first two years the Bush administration showed a lot of support for Taiwan. It treated the island as a "major non-NATO ally" for selling certain types of weapons, further expanded military ties with it and let Chen Shui-bian make numerous transits stops in the United States. However, by 2003 the priorities of the American leadership had changed significantly. The U.S. started Afghanistan and Iraq wars and launched a "global war on terrorism" campaign. There was an incentive for cooperation with the PRC and the last thing Washington wanted was to let Chen's risky moves draw it into a military conflict with Beijing in the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, the American administration preferred to make its position clear: at a press conference in December 2003, President Bush openly criticized Chen Shui-bian for his "comments and actions" that "indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the *status quo*, which we oppose" (The U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2003). In 2007, Thomas Christensen (Christensen, 2007), Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, explicitly stated that America "does not recognize Taiwan as an independent state, and... [does] not accept the argument that provocative assertions of Taiwan independence are in any way conducive to maintenance of the *status quo* or peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait."

Thus, the "checks-and-balances" described above came into play: Chen Shui-bian's policy which was shifting the *status quo* came into conflict with the interests of China and the United States and even ones of Taiwanese population. The DPP's failure to establish constructive cross-strait relations as well as poor economic performance and a number of corruption scandals led to its defeat in the 2008 legislative and presidential elections.

#### 4. China–Taiwan–USA in 2008–2016: *détente*

The victory of the KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou in the 2008 Taiwan's presidential elections changed the atmosphere in cross-strait relations and led to a vigorous intensification of cooperation.

Normalizing relations with the PRC was one of the central promises of Ma's political platform. He offered the "three no's" formula for maintaining the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait: "no unification, no independence, and no use of force." He embraced the KMT version of the "1992 Consensus" and on that basis Beijing and Taipei were able to restore the consultations between the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait and the Straits Exchange Foundation, the two sides' semi-official organizations. As the result, by the end of 2008, the two parties had established "three links": direct air, sea transport and postal services across the Taiwan Strait; they had launched a mechanism for discussing food safety issues; and tourists from the mainland had been allowed to visit Taiwan.

In June 2010, the parties signed the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, which cut tariffs on more than 500 Taiwanese exports to China and more than 250 Chinese exports to Taiwan (Chen & Cohen, 2018, p. 26). In total, during Ma's presidency the mainland and Taiwan managed to conclude 23 agreements, mainly on economic issues.<sup>3</sup>

Beijing sought to convert these breakthroughs into progress in the cross-strait political consultations. As Xi Jinping (2014, p. 316) stated in 2013, "the longstanding political differences between the two sides must eventually be resolved step by step and not passed down from generation to generation." On the one hand, Beijing and Taiwan succeeded in bringing the consultations to their highest level. In 2014, the heads of the Mainland Affairs Council and the Taiwan Affairs Office exchanged visits. On 7 November 2015, President Xi Jinping and President Ma Ying-jeou met in Singapore, which had become the first meeting of the leaders from both sides of the Taiwan Strait since 1949. On the other hand, those consultations did not produce any substantial results. The Ma Ying-jeou administration was under strong pressure from the DPP and other forces, opposed to the development of closer ties with the

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3 However, two of them, the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement and the Cross-Strait Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Enhancement of Tax Cooperation, have never been approved and have not gone into effect.

mainland. The manifestation of it was the Sunflower Movement (SFM) of 2014. The SFM, that consisted mainly of students and members of civic groups, attempted to block the ratification of the Cross-Strait Services and Trade Agreement of 2013. The protesters shared discontent with the Ma administration's "behind-closed-doors" politics (the president tried to minimize the opportunity for legislative review of the new cross-strait agreements) and concerns over political consequences of Taiwan and mainland China's increasing economic interdependence.

The SFM and the KMT's major defeat in the local elections in November 2014 became a wake-up call for the CPC, which highlighted the need to "proactively create conditions for expanding contacts between people from all walks of life on both sides of the strait, communicate face to face, heart to heart and constantly improve understanding and reduce psychological distance" (Xi, 2014, p. 332). The Chinese leadership launched a number of initiatives, aimed at Taiwanese small and medium businesses, people with middle or low income, populace in Central and Southern Taiwan and Taiwan's youth ("*san zhong yi qing*" policy). Beijing believed that through the expansion of exchanges and offers of economic benefits to these groups of Taiwanese population it would drum up more local support for its agenda.

The changes in the cross-strait relations in 2008–2016, however, did not mitigate the U.S. and China strategic differences over Taiwan. Washington continued to support Taipei and provide it with weapons. Moreover, the residents of Taiwan were included in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, the level of officials visiting Taiwan increased.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, trying to develop constructive relations with China, Washington avoided openly provoking Beijing on the Taiwan issue and did not play the "Taiwan card" in the framework of its "rebalancing" strategy. The arms sales authorized in 2010 (6.4 billion USD), 2011 (5.9 billion USD) and 2015 (1.83 billion USD) did not cross Beijing's bottom line that the United States should not include F-16 C/D fighter-jets or attack submarines into the sales packages. Moreover, before its arms sales to Taiwan in 2011, the United States had consultations with China, despite Reagan's "Six Assurances" to Taiwan (Liu et al., 2015, p. 48). This led to Congress's pressure on the Obama administration to confirm its commitment to the

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4 In April 2014, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy visited Taiwan, which became the highest-level U.S. government visit in 35 years.

Taiwan Relations Act and “Six Assurances” as a cornerstone of American policy towards Taiwan.

America’s decision not to play the “Taiwan card” was noted by the Chinese side. For example, after the talks with Secretary of State John Kerry in September 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi confirmed that “the Taiwan issue is under control” (Takungpao, 2013).

Thus, the situation in the Taiwan Strait did not evolve into a new *status-quo*, as “checks-and balances” mentioned before again came into play. The SFM demonstrated considerable anxiety in Taiwan over the future of cross-strait relations. Taiwanese public and the continued involvement of the United States in the cross-strait relations were the factors that brought the situation back to a *status-quo* of “structural deadlock.” In the 2016 elections, the KMT suffered a crushing defeat. The DPP formed a legislative majority, and their candidate Tsai Ing-wen became the ROC president with more than 56% of popular votes.

## 5. China–Taiwan–USA since 2016: a return to the structural deadlock?

Since 2016, the cross-strait relations have again been locked at a tension-riddled stalemate. Although in her inaugural speech of 2016 Tsai Ing-wen resorted to rhetorical ambiguity, after two and a half years she unequivocally refused to recognize the “1992 Consensus” and emphasized that “Taiwan absolutely will not accept ‘one country, two systems’” (Office of the President, 2019). Tsai put forward the “four-musts” for the positive development of cross-strait relations: China must face the reality of the ROC (Taiwan) existence; it must respect the commitment of the 23 million people of Taiwan to freedom and democracy; it must handle cross-strait differences peacefully, on a basis of equality; and it must be governments or government-authorized agencies that engage in negotiations. In her 2021 National Day address President Tsai stressed that the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China should not be subordinate to each other, which Beijing called an “open propaganda of ‘two Chinas’ theory.”

The political foundation for cross-strait interaction has been destroyed, and the mechanisms of consultations between the two sides have stagnated. Beijing has adopted a selective approach towards the implementation of the cross-strait agreements, which were signed in 2008–2015 (Chen & Cohen, 2019, p. 25).

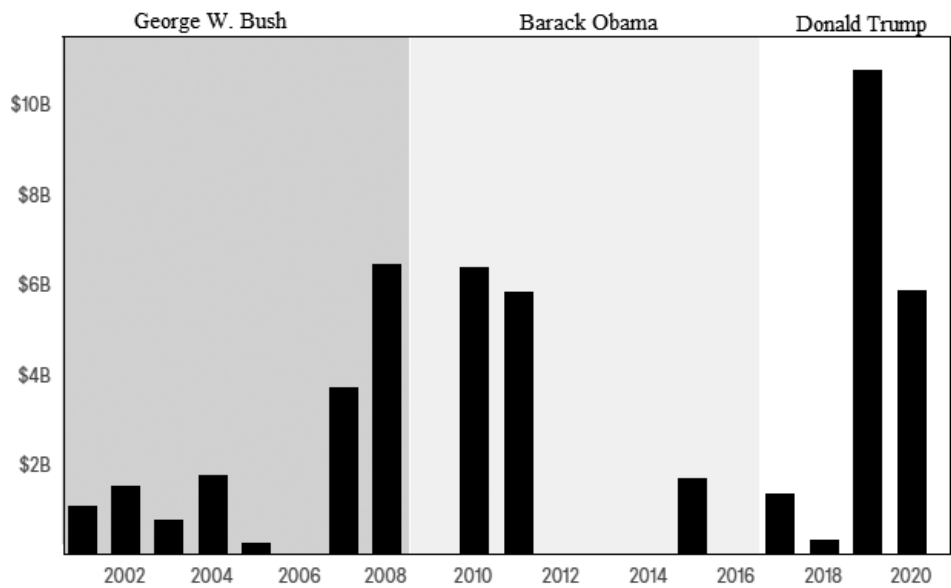
To deal with this situation China applies the “carrots-and-sticks” approach. On the one hand, it increases the number of air and naval exercises in the Taiwan Strait area and takes steps to reduce Taiwan’s international space. Since 2021 the Chinese authorities have imposed several rounds of personal sanctions on some DPP officials as well as trade restrictions on Taiwanese imports, which mainly applied to fishing and agriculture products. But on the other hand, Beijing demonstrates readiness for dialogue with Taiwan’s opposition and continues promoting the cross-strait economic and social integration. For example, in 2018, in the framework of its Taiwan’s people-oriented policy (“*yi dai yi xian*”) Beijing launched a package of 31 measures (adding 26 measures in 2019) to expand the business, employment and education opportunities for Taiwanese in the mainland. The Chinese authorities rolled out 11 measures to support the development of Taiwan-funded enterprises and advance Taiwan-funded projects in the mainland amid the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, and 22 measures to support Taiwan-funded enterprises development in agriculture, forestry in the mainland in 2021. In March 2021, during his visit to Fujian, Xi Jinping urged officials to explore new paths of crossstrait integration and economic development. In May 2023, at the Work Conference on Taiwan Affairs China’s top political advisor Wang Huning stressed that cross-strait exchanges should be restored and expanded step by step, and friendship with people from all social strata in Taiwan should be cultivated.

Beijing and Washington’s ties have also experienced a dramatic deterioration. The Trump administration (2017–2021) radically rethought the U.S. approach to China. The strategy of “engagement” with Beijing was rejected in favor of the paradigm of “strategic competition” with the Taiwan issue being used as a lever by Washington. Taiwan’s security role was expanded in the framework of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. The 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (Department of Defense 2019) released by the U.S. Department of Defense indirectly designated Taiwan as a country and stated that “as democracies in the Indo-Pacific, Singapore, Taiwan, New Zealand, and Mongolia are reliable, capable, and natural partners of the United States.” Meaningful actions showing the U.S. support to Taiwan were frequent transition of American naval vessels through the Taiwan Strait and the U.S. aircraft operations in the area. In the Trump’s years the U.S. authorized more than 18 billion USD worth of arms to be sold to Taiwan (Figure 1). The arms sales became annual and included sensitive for Beijing items. The Taiwan’s purchase of 66 F-16s, which



was finalized in August 2020, had marked the first U.S. sale of advanced fighter-jets to Taipei since 1992. In the autumn of the same year, the U.S. announced the sale of 135 AGM-84H SLAM-ER missiles (a range of about 270 km), 11 HIMARS M142 Launchers, and 64 Army Tactical Missile Systems (a range of nearly 300 kilometers). This had been the first sale of weapons systems with offensive capabilities since 1979.

Figure 1. U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan (2001–2020)



Note: Includes sales of defense equipment of \$14 million or more, defense articles or services of \$50 million or more, and design and construction services of \$200 million or more.

Source: Council on Foreign Relations ([www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org)).

The support of the U.S. Congress for Taipei was evident in laws, such as the Taiwan Travel Act of 2018, which allowed senior U.S. officials to travel to Taiwan and vice versa, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018, reaffirming U.S. commitment to Taiwanese security and containing provisions supporting closer U.S.–Taiwan relations, and the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act of 2019, which encouraged states in the Indo-Pacific to strengthen, enhance or upgrade relations with Taiwan and called for calibrating Washington’s economic, security and diplomatic relations with other nations depending on how they treat Taiwan.

The Biden administration has continued a “salami-slicing” upgrade of its relations with Taiwan. It has already authorized 3.5 billion USD

worth of arm sales;<sup>5</sup> 10 billion USD in security assistance and fast-tracked weapons procurement; and up to 2 billion USD of military grant assistance for Taiwan per year from 2023 through 2027. The U.S.–Taiwan military contacts are being strengthened. In March 2021, the two sides reached an agreement on the establishment of a coast guard working group. In October 2021, the Taiwanese authorities for the first time spoke publicly about the presence of the U.S. military personnel on the island (nearly 40 people). Within 2023, the number of troops is planned to increase up to 200 people. The level of military exchanges is also increasing: in the second half of 2023, the first battalion-level unit of the Taiwanese army is scheduled to be sent to the United States for training.

The contacts between U.S. officials and their Taiwanese counterparts are expanding. In August 2022, Taiwan was visited by then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the third-ranked person in the U.S. political hierarchy. In February 2023, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Michael Chase made his trip to the island. The level of bilateral contacts on the U.S. soil is also increasing. Taiwan's de-facto representative to the U.S., Hsiao Bi-khim, has become the first envoy to represent the island at the U.S. presidential inauguration since 1979. In February 2023, Joseph Wu visited the greater Washington area, which made him the first Taiwanese Foreign Minister to do so since 1979. Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with the House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in April 2023 was the first meeting of a Taiwanese president with an official of this level on the U.S. soil after the severance of diplomatic relation between the two sides.

To expand the contact between their government officials, the U.S. and Taiwan are currently working on the details of the Taiwan Fellowship Program which would allow U.S. federal employees to study and work in Taiwanese government agencies for up to two years.

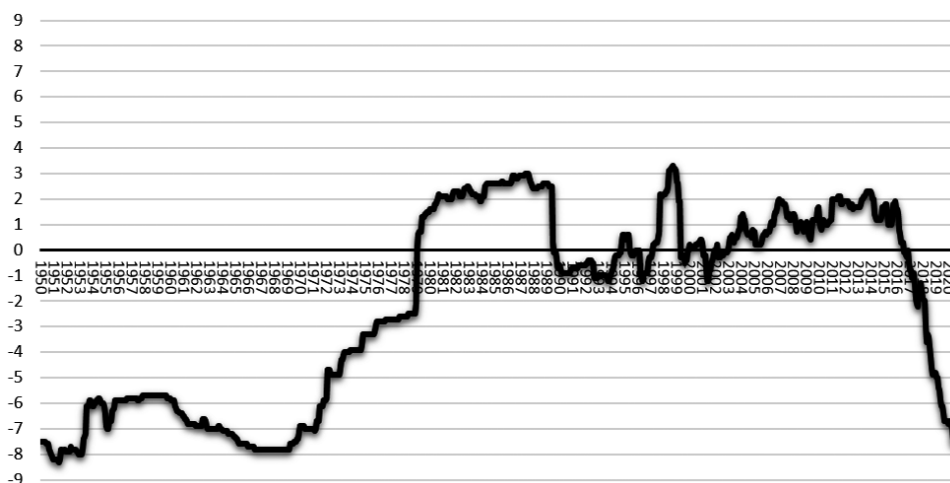
In addition, Washington helps Taiwan to raise its "visibility" in the international arena, supports its "meaningful" participation in the international organizations, the UN system in particular, and mobilizes its allies and partners to pressure Beijing and to prepare to joint actions in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

The analysis above reveals that the situation in the Taiwan Strait is shifting towards increased turbulence. It seems that some "pillars" that tended to preserve the *status quo* have eroded and are likely to continue to erode. To identify the key factors that are affecting the relations in the

<sup>5</sup> As of May 2023.

PRC-ROC-U.S. triangle we will apply the neorealist approach and look at the situation through three levels of analysis (system, state, and individual levels). At system level the main factor is the shifting balance of power in the international system resulting in the growing competitive trends in Sino-American relations. To visualize the distress of the current U.S.-China relations we can turn to the research on the quantitative assessment of China's bilateral relations conducted by the scholars of Tsinghua University (Figure 2). According to the research methodology the relations can be "antagonistic" (-9 to -6), "tense" (-6 to -3), "discordant" (-3 to -0), "normal" (0 to 3), "good" (3 to 6), "friendly" (6 to 9).

Figure 2. Sino-American relations (1950–2020)



Source: compiled by the author with the use of the database on China's relations with major powers, Tsinghua University ([www.imir.tsinghua.edu.cn](http://www.imir.tsinghua.edu.cn)).

The graph shows that these bilateral relations have hit the lowest point in their development for the last 50 years, coming to a confrontational state close to the times of the Korean and Vietnam wars. Taiwan is gaining strategic and economic value in the eyes of both Beijing and Washington. As Neil Ferguson put it, losing Taiwan will mark the end of the American Empire: "[It] would be seen all over Asia as the end of American predominance in the... Indo-Pacific. It would confirm the long-standing hypothesis of China's return to primacy in Asia after two centuries of eclipse and "humiliation." It would mean a breach of the "first island chain" that Chinese strategists believe encircles them, as well as handing Beijing control of the microchip

Mecca that is TSMC... It would surely cause a run on the dollar and U.S. Treasuries. It would be the American Suez" (Ferguson, 2021). Thus, the U.S. is more incentivized to provide support to Taiwan and less incentivized to respect Beijing's "red lines" on the Taiwan issue. The sign of the changes in the U.S. approach to the Taiwan issue has become the shifts in its decades long policy of "strategic ambiguity" when President Biden made several statements about the U.S. obligations to protect Taiwan.

These changes are worrisome because since the mid-1990s the main constraint to independence-focused policies of Taiwanese authorities has been pressure on Taipei by Washington (Culver & Hass, 2021). Thus, one of the main pillars of the "check-and-balances" system in the discussed *status quo* is eroding.

The PRC's emergence as a great power with growing capabilities to defend its interests by military means and alter the regional strategic landscape to its liking has also shifted the *status quo*.

At the second level of analysis, the important factors are changes in the public opinion and the strengthening of national identity in Taiwan, and the impact of these processes on the political parties' platforms. In 2022, 2.7% of Taiwanese residents identified themselves as "Chinese" (17.6% in 1996), 32.9% – "both Taiwanese and Chinese," while the number of people identifying themselves as "Taiwanese" increased to 60.8% (24.1% in 1996). Although the majority of Taiwanese are in favor of maintaining the *status quo* and making a decision on independence/unification later (28.7%) as well as maintaining the *status quo* indefinitely (28.5%), the number of people who are in favor of the *status quo* now, and then moving towards independence, has increased dramatically – to 25.4% in 2022 (from 9.5% in 1996) (Guoli Zhengzhi daxue xuanju, 2022). These processes have affected the KMT standing, causing disagreements within the party about its direction. In 2020, trying to appeal to the Taiwanese public the younger wing of the KMT urged for reassessment of the party stance towards the cross-strait relations and calling the "1992 Consensus" a "historical description" of cross-strait interactions. Although this proposal was criticized by the party heavyweights and the KMT's commitment to the "1992 Consensus" was reaffirmed in the 2021 political platform, this trend needs to be taken into account.

Thus, with Taiwan shifting further away from any form of unification under any timeline, another pillar of the "check-and-balances" system is also eroding.

At the individual level of analysis, the important factor is the leaders' perceptions and judgements that play crucial role in decision-making. At present it does not seem that the players of the China–Taiwan–U.S. triangle would like the military conflict scenario to come true. Xi Jinping's words that political differences between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait "should not...be passed down from one generation to the next" are widely cited, and as Bonnie Glazer and Matthew Funairole presume, "these statements indicate that Xi has the ambition to set in motion an irreversible trend toward reunification and wants to make progress toward this goal during his term in office" (Glazer & Funairole, 2020). There is no clear evidence, though, that top Chinese leadership has abandoned "the peaceful development of cross-strait relations" guideline and fundamentally altered their strategy. As Michael Dalzell Swaine reasonably argues, there is "no indication that this view [about the urgency of a military attack on Taiwan – A.V.] has reached some kind of clear consensus within [Chinese] leadership circles. The political, economic, and military disincentives and uncertainties involved in a Chinese attack on Taiwan, of whatever kind, remain extremely high" (Swaine, 2021).

Despite its increasingly pro-Taiwan stance, the U.S. leadership also emphasizes the need for Beijing and Washington to manage their competition responsibly, establish the "guardrails" to prevent their tensions from veering into armed conflict.

Taiwan's administration, on its part, is also unlikely to push for formal independence any time soon if it does not want to lose the grassroots support – as it has been mentioned, the majority of the Taiwanese population would like to live in a conflict-free *status quo*.

## 6. Conclusion

The escalation of tensions in the Taiwan Strait is the recurring problem of the East Asian region, which, if mismanaged, could potentially lead to catastrophic conflict with the involvement of the two nuclear powers. Although the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, unlike the confrontation in 1954–1955 and 1958, did not result in an armed collision, it had a major impact on the development of the strategic situation in the Taiwan Strait.

This crisis became a culmination of the undergoing formation of a new type of *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait in the 90-s. The democratization

and “Taiwanization” of the island’s politics made its authorities revise the stance on Taiwan’s status and cross-strait relations, which had dramatic effect on Taiwan’s policy toward mainland China and the way it carried out its diplomacy in the international community. Against the backdrop of Taiwan’s declining interest in unification, the U.S. undertook a major revision of its Taiwan policy which manifested in the renewed support of Taipei, the decision to formally upgrade its relations with the island and impressive arms sales. Beijing’s military muscle-flexing in the Taiwan Strait in 1995–1996 was meant to halt unfavorable shifts in the policies of both Taipei and Washington and prevent a “domino effect” of erosion of the “one China” principle in the international arena.

However, the problems that had caused the confrontation were not solved and in the wake of the crisis Beijing, Washington and Taipei found themselves in the situation of a “structural deadlock.” The special feature of this *status quo* was the ambivalence in policies of all the three players. Their need to balance divergent goals created the set of internal and external pressures, somewhat “check-and-balances” system, which, as the analysis above has shown, made this *status quo* dynamic but rather sustainable, at least for the next twenty years.

Since 2016, the China–Taiwan–U.S. triangle has again been locked at a tension-riddled stalemate. However, some of the “pillars” that tended to preserve the post-1996 *status quo* are increasingly eroding which makes the situation in the Taiwan Strait more turbulent and unpredictable. The contributing factors are the shifting balance of power in the international system resulting in the heightened U.S.–China strategic competition and the changes in the U.S. policy towards the Taiwan issue; the PRC’s growing capabilities to defend its interests by military means and alter the regional strategic landscape to its liking; intensification of a sense of separate identity and declining interest in unification among the Taiwanese.

These forces are of a structural nature and will not disappear anytime soon. The new realities make the room for manoeuvring for each side of the triangle much narrower. At present it does not seem that the players of the China–Taiwan–U.S. triangle would like the military conflict scenario to come true, but there is a tangible risk that the structural deadlock will escalate into an armed conflict due to accidents and communication mishaps. The current situation requires the three sides to accurately determine their strategic goals and think of the possible costs of the decisions they make.

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