

# How to Start a War Over Taiwan

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June 24, 2024



The question of Taiwan is fraught with bad history, which muddles our understanding of what is at stake in East Asia

.Illustration by Álvaro Bernis

Catastrophic wars can start in peripheral places: Sarajevo, for the First World War; Gleiwitz, on the German-Polish border, for the Second. The contributors to “The Boiling Moat” (Hoover Institution), a short book edited by Matt Pottinger, believe that Taiwan, the democratically governed island situated off the coast of southeast China between Japan and the Philippines, could spark a major war, possibly even a nuclear one, pitting the U.S. and its Asian allies against China. According to their estimates, more than ten thousand Americans could be killed in action in just three weeks of combat. The cost in Chinese and Taiwanese lives, both civilians and soldiers, would presumably be much higher. And that is assuming that a local war doesn’t spread to the rest of the world. Pottinger was the Asia director on the National Security Council under Donald Trump, and so his opinions are worth paying attention to.

This isn’t to say that Pottinger’s hawkish views on the need for U.S. intervention in East Asia would earn him a place in a second Trump Administration. maga isolationism has always been in tension with the former President’s tough-on-China rhetoric, which, in turn, is in tension with his penchant for making deals with dictators. The contributors to “The Boiling Moat” are not maga types, either; they’re a mixture of military mavens, including a Japanese admiral and a former contractor for U.S. Special Operations Command, and hawks for democracy, such as Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the former nato secretary-general.

There are indeed good reasons to be worried about an East Asian conflict. Unlike previous Chinese leaders, who were, on the whole, content to let the Taiwan question rest until some kind of peaceful resolution could be found, Xi Jinping has avowed that “unification of the motherland” is the “essence” of his campaign to “rejuvenate the Chinese nation,” and has indicated that he is prepared to use military force to bring that about. After Lai Ching-te, the newly elected Taiwanese President, declared in his inaugural speech that the Republic of China (the official name for Taiwan) and the People’s Republic of China “are not subordinate to each other,” the P.R.C.’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, accused Lai and his supporters of betraying China and their “ancestors.”

The Chinese defense minister, Dong Jun, used even more pugnacious words. Anyone who aspired to Taiwanese independence, he said, would be “crushed to pieces.”

If a Chinese attempt to take Taiwan by force were to succeed, the consequences could be dire. East Asian countries, panicked by China’s control over their supply routes in the East China Sea and by America’s unwillingness or incapacity to protect them, might embark on a nuclear-arms race. Taiwan’s semiconductor industry, which provides the world with more than half of its chips, would fall into Chinese hands. And, because Taiwan is also the only functioning liberal democracy in the Chinese-speaking world (Singapore is an illiberal democracy), crushing Taiwan’s system of government would be a huge blow to democrats, greater even than the crackdown in Hong Kong.

Pottinger and his contributors think that the only way to stop China from launching an attack on Taiwan, and possibly starting a devastating war, is to build such a formidable system of military deterrence that China wouldn’t dare. Their book is a kind of PowerPoint briefing on how to turn the Taiwan Strait into a “boiling moat” filled with jassms (joint air-to-surface standoff missiles), lrasms (long-range anti-ship missiles), himars (high-mobility artillery rocket systems), P.J.D.A.M.s (powered joint direct attack munitions), uncrewed sea drones, and much other military hardware and software. Readers will need a taste for dense military prose to scale such sentences as “If tactical-level operators have organic I.S.R. [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] fires, and engagement authority, they can identify and attrit at close-range enemy forces that meet certain predetermined profiles (e.g., landing forces).”

Missiles, drones, and bombers are, however, insufficient to deter China, according to the book’s authors. Taiwan and Japan must be given a “new military culture.” Grant Newsham, an ex-marine who served as the Marine Corps attaché in Tokyo, thinks that the Japanese people must be prepared “physically and psychologically” for a war over Taiwan. He mentions movies that might “increase morale (the *Top Gun* effect).”

Pottinger holds up the Israelis as a model: “Since the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, the benefits of Israel’s warrior ethos have been on display again as Israelis have unified, despite bitter domestic political differences, to wage a war to destroy Hamas.” (This might not be the most happily chosen example.) And to tell the Japanese to become a nation of warriors again would be to push for complete reversal of the irenic nature of postwar Japan, and of the pacifist constitution written by Americans in 1947.

One can agree that Taiwan deserves to be defended against military aggression, but what’s missing in all this talk of missiles, drones, and the fighting spirit is any sense of politics or history. References to the past in “The Boiling Moat” are only of the crudest kind: Xi Jinping is compared to Hitler; the People’s Liberation Army is called “China’s *Wehrmacht*”; and the inevitable example of Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler, in 1938, is invoked as a warning against complacency.

Politics, too, is reduced to sloganeering about defending democracy in “counter-authoritarian partnerships.” In the concluding chapter, the book’s two European contributors write, “You cannot declare yourself neutral when it comes to the front line of freedom—in Donbass or in the Taiwan strait.” These are fine fighting words, echoing a statement by the former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen: “The rallying cry for all democracies must be one for all, and all for one.”

She can be heard uttering these words in “Invisible Nation,” a documentary by Vanessa Hope, which presents an uncomplicated case for defending Taiwan’s democracy. The film offers a short history, pitting the admirable Taiwanese (and Americans) against the menacing Chinese. This take isn’t exactly wrong, but “Invisible Nation” has the air of a campaign movie for the independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party, now in power in Taiwan.

History, of course, is never uncomplicated. A concern for democracy and freedom was not always the reason for defending Taiwan. President Eisenhower went to the brink of nuclear war with China in 1954,

after Mao attacked Quemoy (Kinmen) and Matsu, two minuscule islands off the mainland which formally belonged to the Republic of China, when it was under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's brutal military dictatorship.

The question of Taiwan is, in fact, fraught with bad history, which muddles our understanding of what is at stake in East Asia. As Sulmaan Wasif Khan observes in his rich and thoughtful book "The Struggle for Taiwan" (Basic), a "historian watching the situation from afar could not help being struck by the odd mix of mendacity, amnesia, and half-truths on display." Start with China's claim that Taiwan was always part of China, a cornerstone of Xi's nationalism. In fact, for most of its history, Taiwan, or Formosa, as it was once called, was no more a part of the Chinese nation than, say, Gibraltar was a part of Britain. Until the seventeenth century, when the Dutch ruled the island as a colony, hardly any Chinese people lived there. The original inhabitants, whose descendants now make up a small minority in Taiwan, were Austronesian tribes who ruled themselves in a number of chiefdoms.

Then the Dutch brought in tens of thousands of people from China to till the land. In 1662, the Dutch were ousted by a half-Japanese, half-Chinese swashbuckler named Zheng Chenggong, also known as Koxinga, whose exploits are still celebrated in a famous Kabuki play. Koxinga was a loyalist to the deposed Ming dynasty. He hoped to stage a rebellion from Taiwan against the Qing rulers, who were not Chinese but Manchus. Koxinga briefly established an independent kingdom on the island, but it was overthrown by the Manchus in 1683. Taiwan then became part of the Qing Empire.

After the Qing lost a war with Japan, in 1895, Taiwan became a Japanese colony. To demonstrate to the Western nations that Japan could also be a great imperial power, the Japanese presented Taiwan as a model colony: more modern, more industrialized, more technologically advanced than any part of the Qing Empire. Some of the grand Belle

Époque architecture of the Japanese colonial period—government buildings, law courts, universities, museums—can still be seen in Taipei and other cities.

When Japan's Asian empire was dissolved, in 1945, the fate of Taiwan remained open. President Roosevelt, at the Cairo Conference of 1943, had promised to hand over Taiwan to Chiang Kai-shek, who ruled parts of China that weren't occupied by the Japanese. Still, Roosevelt could have made a different choice. As late as July, 1949, just months before the defeat of Chiang's Nationalists (ChiNats) in the civil war with Mao Zedong's Communists (ChiComs), George Kennan advocated "the establishment of a provisional international or U.S. regime which would invoke the principle of self-determination for the islanders." This prospect, if it ever really existed, ended when the Generalissimo ("the Gimo," to the Americans) retreated to Taiwan after the Communist victory, with more than a million of his troops and loyalists. When I first travelled to Taiwan, in the nineteen-eighties, many taxi-drivers in Taipei had once been soldiers in Chiang's army. There were statues of the Gimo in front of schools and public buildings; maps of China illustrated the official goal of reconquering the mainland.

Mao did not pay much attention to Taiwan until Chiang turned it into a fortified base for his dream of ruling China once again. Meanwhile, the six million original inhabitants of Taiwan, most of whom had never been to China, did not take kindly to being subjected to Chiang's harsh military junta. A rebellion in February, 1947, resulted in roughly twenty-five thousand Taiwanese dead and years of repression, known as the "white terror," which led to the imprisonment of tens of thousands of people and the deaths of thousands of others.

President Eisenhower's decision to come to Chiang's rescue in the nineteen-fifties, when Mao started shelling Matsu and Quemoy, had nothing to do with defending democracy (even though the Republic of China was still known as Free China) and everything to do with getting tough on Communism. This was more an attitude than a well-thought-

out policy, and Chiang, like many other anti-Communist strongmen around the world, knew how to exploit it in order to get what he wanted from the Americans.

Tensions between the “native Taiwanese,” or *benshengren*, most of whom were of Chinese origin, and Chiang’s mainlanders, or *waishengren*, who lorded over them, continued to simmer for decades. Political rebels and dissidents were almost always *benshengren*. At the same time, Chiang’s dream of toppling the “Communist bandits” in China never faded. I recall seeing old men in wheelchairs being pushed through the corridors of the parliament building in Taipei, acting as the official representatives of Chinese provinces they would never see again.

Chiang was still alive when, in 1972, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had meetings with the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, and then signed a communiqué in Shanghai stating that there was only one China and that Taiwan was a part of it. This in itself would not have bothered Chiang (who died three years later); he agreed that there was only one China. There would be no more talk of ChiNats and ChiComs; they were all Chinese now. The people who disagreed were *benshengren* dissidents who longed for independence. This aspiration did not sit well with Zhou, with Chiang, or, indeed, with Kissinger. As Khan writes, “Taiwan’s fate was irrelevant to Kissinger. This was about a rapprochement with China. The suppression of the Taiwan independence movement, Zhou agreed, could be left to Chiang Kai-shek. The much maligned generalissimo would be helping the PRC by making sure that Taiwanese independence did not make headway.”

In the course of the nineteen-eighties—a *modus vivendi* with China having been reached, and Deng Xiaoping opening the country for business—getting tough on Communism receded as a priority for Washington. Once useful anti-Communist strongmen became dispensable. In 1986, Ferdinand Marcos was driven into exile in Hawaii. The South Korean junta was pressed to accept democratic elections in

1987. And President Chiang Ching-kuo, the Generalissimo's son, ended martial law in the same year. He even allowed a new opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party, to take part in elections.

The first democratically elected President of Taiwan, Lee Teng-hui, was a member not of the D.P.P. but of Chiang's Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (the K.M.T.). He was, however, native-born, and spoke Taiwanese (Hokkien Chinese), the language that most of his compatriots spoke, and he was more comfortable with Japanese, a legacy of his colonial education, than with Mandarin. Lee gave the official goal of unification a new twist: Taiwan would join China, yes, but only once China became a democracy. He also saw himself as a unifying figure in Taiwan, the leader who would overcome the tensions between the natives and the mainlander interlopers.

One might have assumed that the United States, having promoted itself as a champion of freedom and democracy, would have been delighted with this turn of events. In fact, it complicated U.S. policy toward China. Now that the Taiwanese could freely express their views and vote, it became clear that few people outside conservative factions of the K.M.T. had any desire to be part of mainland China. Taiwanese democracy promoted a Taiwanese national identity that was separate from mainland China. (I attended rallies for Tsai Ing-wen's D.P.P. during the elections in 2020, when huge crowds chanted, "We are Taiwanese! We are Taiwanese!")

This identity was cultural and historical as well as political. The Taiwanese language was now taught at schools, as was Taiwanese history. Taiwanese writers and artists, a bit like Catalan nationalists in Spain, emphasized the unique values of their native arts and culture, sometimes to a tiresome degree. There was a boom in movies about Taiwanese history and the peculiarities of Taiwanese life. More and more, citizens began to identify as Taiwanese, rather than as Chinese. D.P.P. politicians ran for office vaunting their native-Taiwanese credentials. And even the younger politicians in the K.M.T., which never



officially let go of its identification with China, are comfortable speaking Taiwanese. By the time Chen Shui-bian was elected as the first D.P.P. President of Taiwan, in 2000, the busts of Chiang Kai-shek and the maps of China had begun to disappear. Meanwhile, China was becoming Taiwan's largest trading partner, confusing their relations even further.

From Washington's perspective, Taiwanese democracy became something of an irritant. Chiang Kai-shek, though headstrong and manipulative, had been easier to deal with than were democratically elected politicians whose flirtation with the idea of independence provoked belligerent Chinese reactions and complicated U.S.-China relations. Washington felt that it had both to defend democratic Taiwan and to reassure Beijing that Taiwanese independence would continue to be resisted. This "drove America crazy," Khan writes. Washington "would affirm the 'one China' principle, then twist itself into knots explaining how its tilt toward Taiwan was consistent with that affirmation." A frustrated President Clinton once exclaimed, "I hate our China policy! I wish I was running against our China policy." As Khan observes, "In a way, he and every president since Nixon had been doing just that."

Trying to keep Beijing onside by asserting that Taiwan is part of China while also defending a democratically elected government that believes otherwise doesn't make for a coherent policy. Nor would the U.S. have any treaty obligation to defend Taiwan if China actually invaded. The official position is still to leave the Chinese guessing about the U.S. response. Yet President Biden stated, in a 2021 television interview with George Stephanopoulos, that the U.S. would indeed come to Taiwan's rescue in a war, in the same way it would if Japan or a nato member were under attack.

Biden probably wouldn't have said this if China itself had not changed radically in the past decade. Under China's relatively pragmatic leaders in the nineteen-nineties, the chances of a military conflict over Taiwan

were slight. But Xi's hostile nationalism, aimed at a complete restoration of the borders of the Qing Empire, by force if need be, is a greater threat to the status quo than Mao's shelling of Matsu and Quemoy was.

Whereas Taiwan could still be treated as an annoyance by Kissinger and Nixon, or even by Clinton, the United States now feels compelled to show it can be tough on China and risk war to defend Taiwan. This is, of course, no more a carefully considered position than "anti-Communism" was. When prominent U.S. politicians provoke Beijing with well-publicized visits to Taiwan, their only purpose is to show the American public that they can be tough on China.

Once again, Taiwan has become a pawn in a clash between Great Powers. The stakes are higher than ever. But to keep East Asia safe from a terrible war is not just a military problem. Khan is surely right to question how getting tough will alter Chinese conduct. A show of force is supposed to deter China from aggression. "But what if deterrence failed?" Khan writes. "Being deterred, after all, was a choice; China could choose not to be. What if the show of force backed China into a corner from which it felt it had no option but to lash out?"

Avoiding a violent conflict will take a great deal of diplomatic finesse, guided by a profound knowledge of local history and politics. This makes one wonder whom Pottinger is trying to convince. Is his main intended audience Taiwanese, Japanese, or American? He mentions, as a hindrance to deterrence, the "1930s-style isolationism that has infected pockets of the political discourse in America and Europe." One can only assume that this is aimed at his former White House boss.

The Japanese press now talks a great deal about the question of *moshitora*—*moshi* means "if," and *tora* is short for *Torampu* (Trump). What if Trump came back? The ex-President's attitudes toward China are even less coherent than those of his predecessors. He has delighted in insulting China ("Chinese virus," "Kung Flu"); he also started a trade war with China and has promised to slap sixty-per-cent tariffs on all Chinese imports. But his withdrawal, in

2017, from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which sets the rules for trade in the Pacific Rim, has weakened America's influence in the region, and strengthened China's.

If America's old Taiwan policies were often muddled, Trump's attitudes are so fickle that one can't predict what he will do. "Depending on his mood," as Khan writes, "he might have been as willing to provide Taiwan with nuclear weapons as to sell it to China for a trade deal." With a President like that in charge, no amount of jassms and himars is likely to keep East Asia, or, indeed, the rest of the world, safe. ♦

Published in the print edition of the July 1, 2024, issue, with the headline "The Taiwan Tangle."

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