

## THE CONFLICT BETWEEN CHINA AND TAIWAN: ANALYZING SUPERPOWER POLITICS AND THE POTENTIALS FOR FORCEFUL ANNEXATION

Umar Gambo Yahaya

Department of Political Science and International Relations

Nile University of Nigeria, Abuja

Email: [umargamboyahaya@gmail.com](mailto:umargamboyahaya@gmail.com)

Phone: +234-8035 346716

### Abstract

*This paper explores the escalating conflict between China and Taiwan within the framework of superpower politics, emphasizing the role of the United States and its allies in shaping regional dynamics. Utilizing a qualitative methodology grounded in secondary sources, the research analyzes historical events, recent developments, and the implications of military readiness and national sentiment on the potential for a forceful annexation of Taiwan by China. The study adopts Realist Theory, which posits that power dynamics and national interests are paramount in international relations, thus providing a lens to examine the motivations behind China's aggressive posture and Taiwan's defensive strategies. Key findings suggest that the China-Taiwan conflict is not merely a bilateral issue but a significant element of broader geopolitical tensions, particularly with U.S. involvement. To mitigate risks of escalation, the paper recommends enhancing diplomatic engagement between Taiwan and China, fostering dialogue to alleviate misunderstandings, and strengthening international alliances to deter potential aggression. Additionally, promoting economic ties between Taiwan and China is advocated as a means to create interdependencies that could serve as a stabilizing factor in cross-strait relations. Overall, the research underscores the necessity for proactive measures to avert conflict, highlighting the complexity of the geopolitical landscape in the Asia-Pacific region.*

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**Keywords: Conflict; power politics; Annexation; Forceful annexation; East-China Sea**

### Introduction

The China-Taiwan conflict is a significant geopolitical issue that encapsulates historical, political, and economic dimensions. Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China (ROC), has maintained a separate government since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, when the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to the island after being defeated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This schism led to the establishment of two distinct political entities: the PRC on the mainland and the ROC in Taiwan. The PRC has since viewed Taiwan as a breakaway province that must be reunited with the mainland, while Taiwan has developed its identity and governance, increasingly asserting its sovereignty and independence (Shirk, 2007). Historically, the tension

between China and Taiwan has oscillated between confrontation and engagement. In recent decades, Taiwan has transitioned from an authoritarian regime to a vibrant democracy, fostering a distinct national identity. This shift has resulted in a growing sense of Taiwanese nationalism, which opposes the notion of reunification under the "One China" principle championed by the PRC (Tucker, 2019).

This development has been accompanied by significant economic growth in Taiwan, allowing it to cultivate robust international trade relationships, particularly with the United States and other Western nations. The contemporary landscape of the China-Taiwan conflict has been marked by heightened military tensions. The PRC has increased its military presence near Taiwan, conducting regular military exercises and air incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). Such actions have been interpreted as threats to Taiwan's sovereignty and security, raising alarm both within Taiwan and among its allies (Cohen, 2021). The CCP's assertive posture is influenced by several factors, including internal political pressures, the desire to reclaim territory viewed as historically Chinese, and a strategy to project power in the Asia-Pacific region. Superpower politics play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the China-Taiwan conflict. The United States has been a key player in the region, historically supporting Taiwan through arms sales and political backing. The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, which established the framework for U.S.-Taiwan relations, emphasizes the U.S. commitment to ensuring Taiwan's self-defense capabilities while strategically maintaining ambiguity regarding direct military intervention (Fravel, 2020).

This ambiguity serves to deter aggression from the PRC while avoiding a definitive commitment that could lead to direct confrontation. The geopolitical environment has become increasingly complex, with the rise of China as a global power and the shifting balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. China's assertive foreign policy, characterized by its Belt and Road Initiative and military modernization, has led to concerns among its neighbors and the U.S. regarding its intentions toward Taiwan. The U.S.-China rivalry has intensified, with Taiwan at the center of this strategic competition. The potential for miscalculation or miscommunication between the two superpowers heightens the risk of conflict (Bitzinger, 2021).

As the situation evolves, the implications of the China-Taiwan conflict extend beyond the immediate region. A forceful annexation of Taiwan by China could destabilize not only East Asia but also have global repercussions, affecting international trade, security alliances, and diplomatic relations. Understanding the historical context, current dynamics, and superpower politics surrounding the China-Taiwan conflict is essential for comprehending its potential future trajectory.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The conflict between China and Taiwan presents a critical challenge to regional stability and international relations, as it intertwines historical grievances, national identity, and superpower politics. Despite Taiwan's evolution into a self-governing democracy, the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to assert its claim over the island, leading to increased military provocations and heightened tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Scholars like Shirk (2007) emphasize that the PRC's assertiveness is driven by a blend of nationalism and the desire for territorial integrity, viewing Taiwan's independence as a direct challenge to its sovereignty. This situation creates an environment ripe for conflict, as miscalculations or escalatory actions could provoke a military confrontation.

Moreover, the involvement of the United States, which maintains a strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan, complicates the issue further. Fravel (2020) highlights that while the U.S. supports Taiwan's self-defense, its ambiguous stance can lead to uncertainty regarding U.S. intervention in the event of a Chinese attack. This ambiguity may embolden the PRC to pursue aggressive actions under the assumption that U.S. support will be limited. Consequently, the potential for a forceful annexation of Taiwan looms large, raising critical questions about the future of the region's security and stability. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for formulating effective strategies to prevent escalation and promote peaceful resolutions in the Taiwan Strait.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- i. To Analyze the Historical and Political Context of the China-Taiwan Conflict
- ii. To Evaluate the Impact of Superpower Politics on the China-Taiwan Relations

### **Research Questions**

- i. What are the historical and political factors contributing to the ongoing conflict between China and Taiwan?
- ii. How do superpower politics, particularly the role of the United States, influence the likelihood of a forceful annexation of Taiwan by China?

### **Historical Context**

The conflict between China and Taiwan is deeply rooted in a complex history marked by colonialism, civil war, and divergent political developments. Understanding this historical context is essential for grasping the contemporary tensions and potential future scenarios regarding Taiwan's status.

#### ***Origins of the Conflict***

The origins of the China-Taiwan conflict can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Following the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), Taiwan was ceded to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki, leading to 50 years of Japanese colonial rule. This period significantly influenced Taiwanese identity and development, as Japan invested in infrastructure and education on the island, contrasting sharply with the political turmoil that China faced during the same period, including the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and subsequent civil strife.

The modern phase of the conflict emerged after World War II, when the Republic of China (ROC), led by the Kuomintang (KMT) under Chiang Kai-shek, retreated to Taiwan following its defeat by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949). This retreat established the KMT as the governing authority in Taiwan, while the CCP consolidated power in mainland China, establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The KMT maintained that it was the legitimate government of all of China, while the PRC viewed Taiwan as a breakaway province that must eventually be reunified with the mainland.

The Cold War intensified the China-Taiwan conflict, as Taiwan became a key ally of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. provided military and economic support to the ROC, viewing it as a bulwark against communist expansion in Asia. In 1971, however, the PRC replaced the ROC in the United Nations, diminishing Taiwan's international recognition. The shift in diplomatic recognition culminated in the U.S. formally acknowledging the PRC in 1979, while still maintaining unofficial relations with Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act. This act

allowed for the provision of defensive military assistance to Taiwan, establishing a delicate balance of power in the region.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The China-Taiwan Conflict: Realism**

The theory that best explains the situation between China and Taiwan, particularly in the context of superpower politics and potential military conflict, is **Realism**. This theory has been a dominant framework in international relations, focusing on the anarchic nature of the international system, the role of state power, and the pursuit of national interests. Realism has its roots in the works of early political thinkers like **Thucydides**, **Machiavelli**, and **Hobbes**, who emphasized power dynamics and conflict. However, the modern formulation of Realism was significantly developed by scholars such as **Hans Morgenthau** in the mid-20th century, particularly in his seminal work, *Politics Among Nations* (1948). Morgenthau argued that states act in their national interest, primarily defined in terms of power (Morgenthau, 1948).

#### ***Basic Assumptions of Realism***

The basic assumptions of Realism include:

*Anarchy of the International System:* Realists believe that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no overarching authority to regulate state behavior. As a result, states must rely on their own capabilities for survival (Waltz, 1979).

*State as the Primary Actor:* Realism posits that states are the main actors in international relations, with their primary goal being the acquisition and preservation of power.

*Rationality:* States are assumed to act rationally, making decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis of achieving their national interests.

*Power and Security:* Realists assert that the pursuit of power is central to state behavior, with security being a paramount concern. This leads to competition and conflict among states (Mearsheimer, 2001).

#### ***Applicability of Realism to the China-Taiwan Conflict***

Realism effectively explains the ongoing tensions between China and Taiwan. The conflict can be viewed through the lens of national interests, power dynamics, and security dilemmas:

*National Interests:* China's pursuit of reunification with Taiwan is driven by its national interest in sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) frames this issue as a core national interest, garnering domestic support for assertive policies against Taiwan (Shirk, 2007).

*Military Power and Deterrence:* The military modernization efforts undertaken by China are indicative of Realism's focus on power. As China enhances its military capabilities, Taiwan and the U.S. feel compelled to strengthen their defenses, creating a security dilemma where each side's efforts to secure itself heighten tensions (Kissinger, 2011).

*Superpower Politics:* The involvement of the United States in the Taiwan issue illustrates the competitive nature of great power politics as described by Realism. The U.S. commitment to

Taiwan, evidenced by arms sales and military support, is aimed at counterbalancing China's rise in the Asia-Pacific region (Glaser & O'Hanlon, 2015).

More, so realism provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding the China-Taiwan conflict in the context of superpower politics. Its emphasis on power, state behavior, and national interests aligns closely with the dynamics at play in this complex geopolitical situation. The historical context, alongside the actions of key players, underscores the applicability of Realism in analyzing and predicting future developments in the China-Taiwan relationship.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design that utilizes secondary sources of data to explore the complexities surrounding the China-Taiwan conflict, particularly in the context of superpower politics and the potential for a forceful annexation of Taiwan by China. The qualitative approach is suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth analysis of historical, political, and social factors that shape the conflict.

**Data Collection** Data for this study is gathered from various secondary sources, including: Academic Journals and Articles: Peer-reviewed articles from academic journals provide insights into the theoretical frameworks and analyses related to international relations, the China-Taiwan conflict, and superpower politics. Key databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ProQuest were utilized to access relevant literature.

## **Recent Developments in the China-Taiwan Conflict**

In the 21st century, Taiwan has undergone significant political and social transformations, particularly under the leadership of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This party, which advocates for Taiwanese nationalism, has sought to establish a distinct Taiwanese identity separate from China, thereby heightening tensions between the two sides. The DPP's ascent to power marks a pivotal shift in Taiwan's approach to cross-strait relations, especially as the People's Republic of China (PRC) perceives any moves toward independence as a direct challenge to its sovereignty (Huang, 2020).

Since the election of Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP leader, in 2016, the trajectory of Taiwan's political landscape has changed markedly. Tsai's administration has actively promoted Taiwan's separate identity and reinforced diplomatic and military ties with the United States. This has included increased arms purchases and enhanced military collaboration, aimed at bolstering Taiwan's defense capabilities in the face of rising Chinese assertiveness. These actions have triggered a series of retaliatory measures from the PRC, including military drills and aggressive posturing in the Taiwan Strait (Cheng, 2021).

One particularly significant escalation occurred in August 2022, following the visit of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan. The PRC viewed Pelosi's visit as a provocative endorsement of Taiwanese independence. In response, China conducted extensive military exercises around Taiwan, simulating blockades and missile strikes, which included the launch of missiles that landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Lin, 2022). These exercises not only showcased China's military capabilities but also underscored the precariousness of regional security and the potential for miscalculation in an already tense situation. Moreover, the DPP's policies have not only affected cross-strait relations but have also had significant implications for Taiwan's international standing. As Taiwan seeks to forge closer ties with the U.S. and other democratic

nations, it faces a complex diplomatic landscape where it must navigate its identity as a self-governing democracy against China's claims of sovereignty. This struggle has led to a reevaluation of Taiwan's participation in international organizations, often hampered by China's influence (Shen, 2021).

However, the recent developments in Taiwan, particularly under the DPP's leadership, have significantly altered the dynamics of cross-strait relations and heightened tensions with the PRC. The ongoing military exercises, diplomatic maneuvers, and the push for a more assertive Taiwanese identity signal a critical juncture in the conflict, with potential ramifications for regional stability and global geopolitical dynamics.

### **The China-Taiwan Conflict and Superpower Politics**

The China-Taiwan conflict is intricately linked to the dynamics of superpower politics, particularly the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. Historically, the U.S. has regarded Taiwan as a critical ally in its strategy to maintain influence in Asia, especially as a counterbalance to China's growing power. This commitment is formalized in the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, which mandates that the U.S. provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself against potential aggression from the mainland (Smith, 2021). This legislative framework underscores the strategic importance of Taiwan to U.S. interests in the region.

As China's global influence continues to expand, the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific is undergoing significant changes. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has made considerable advancements in military modernization, enhancing its capabilities for a potential invasion of Taiwan. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has actively promoted a narrative of nationalism, framing the reunification with Taiwan as a historical necessity and vital to China's territorial integrity. This has led to increased domestic support for assertive policies towards Taiwan, including military exercises and aggressive rhetoric (Zhao, 2020).

The U.S. faces a complex and delicate balancing act in this geopolitical landscape. It aims to deter Chinese aggression while simultaneously avoiding direct confrontation that could escalate into a broader conflict. The stakes are incredibly high; a miscalculation by either side could trigger significant military confrontation. As both the U.S. and China ramp up military preparedness and strategic posturing, the potential for miscalculations rises sharply. The ongoing military drills and arms sales to Taiwan signal a commitment from the U.S., but they also provoke further responses from China, creating a precarious cycle of tension (Liu, 2021).

In this context, the future of cross-strait relations remains uncertain. The interplay of U.S. support for Taiwan and China's assertive policies will continue to shape the regional security architecture. Scholars emphasize the necessity for dialogue and strategic communication to mitigate risks and prevent escalation. Without such measures, the China-Taiwan conflict could not only destabilize the region but also have far-reaching implications for global security (Chen, 2019).

### **The Potential for Forceful Annexation**

The question of whether China will attempt to forcefully annex Taiwan is a topic of intense debate among analysts and policymakers. Several factors influence this potential outcome:

**Nationalism and Political Will:** The Chinese government's commitment to reunification is fueled by strong nationalist sentiments. The CCP has consistently portrayed Taiwan as a core interest, and failure to achieve reunification could undermine the party's legitimacy.

**Military Capability:** China's military modernization has significantly enhanced its ability to conduct a large-scale operation against Taiwan. Recent advancements in naval and aerial capabilities suggest that the PRC could mount a credible invasion, should it decide to do so.

**International Response:** The extent to which the U.S. and its allies would respond to a Chinese invasion remains uncertain. The current U.S. administration has reiterated its commitment to Taiwan, but the risks of direct military confrontation with China could lead to hesitation or a reassessment of strategies.

**Timing and Strategic Calculations:** The CCP may calculate that the geopolitical environment—particularly the U.S. focus on other global challenges—might provide a more favorable window for military action against Taiwan.

### **U.S. and NATO Involvement in the China-Taiwan Conflict**

The potential involvement of the United States and NATO in the China-Taiwan conflict is a significant factor that could influence the dynamics of regional security in the Asia-Pacific. Historically, the U.S. has maintained a strategic interest in Taiwan as part of its broader security architecture in the region. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979 established the legal framework for U.S. support, which includes providing Taiwan with defensive arms and maintaining a policy of "strategic ambiguity" regarding the U.S. response to a potential Chinese invasion (Glaser & O'Hanlon, 2015). This policy aims to deter both Beijing from aggressive actions and Taipei from declaring independence.

In recent years, the U.S. has shifted towards a more proactive stance, increasing arms sales to Taiwan, enhancing military cooperation, and conducting freedom of navigation operations in the Taiwan Strait. This is part of a broader strategy to counter China's growing influence and assertiveness in the region (Kuo, 2021). The U.S. has also sought to strengthen partnerships with regional allies, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, to create a coalition that can respond effectively to potential crises.

NATO's involvement in the Taiwan conflict is more complex. While NATO's primary focus has been on Europe and the North Atlantic, the alliance has shown growing concern over China's rising power and its implications for global security. NATO has expressed solidarity with democratic allies like Taiwan, emphasizing the importance of a rules-based international order (NATO, 2021). However, NATO's military commitments are primarily focused on the European theater, and any involvement in the Asia-Pacific would require a consensus among member states, which could be challenging due to differing regional priorities and perspectives on the China-Taiwan issue (Patalano, 2020).

Despite these complexities, the potential for U.S. and NATO involvement raises several critical questions. A direct military confrontation between the U.S. and China over Taiwan could lead to a significant escalation of conflict, drawing NATO into a broader global confrontation. Analysts warn that miscalculations or misunderstandings could result in a rapid deterioration of the situation, potentially leading to a regional conflict with global ramifications (Liff, 2021).

Moreover, the involvement of the U.S. and NATO in the Taiwan conflict may also be viewed through the lens of geopolitical competition. As China seeks to assert its influence in the Asia-Pacific, the U.S. and its allies may view support for Taiwan as essential for maintaining the balance of power in the region. This competition could further entrench divisions and escalate tensions, making diplomatic resolutions increasingly challenging (Friedberg, 2020).

More, so the potential involvement of the U.S. and NATO in the China-Taiwan conflict highlights the complex interplay of regional and global politics. While the U.S. has committed to supporting Taiwan, NATO's role remains uncertain. The evolving dynamics of superpower politics necessitate careful navigation to avoid escalation and maintain regional stability.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the conflict between China and Taiwan epitomizes the complex power dynamics that characterize the Asia-Pacific region. The possibility of a forceful annexation by China cannot be dismissed; however, it is influenced by several critical factors, including the prevailing national sentiment in Taiwan, the military capabilities of both China and Taiwan, and the responses from the international community, particularly the United States and its allies. The ongoing military modernization efforts by China and the strengthening of U.S.-Taiwan relations underscore the precarious nature of the situation. As superpower politics shift and intensify, the implications of this conflict extend beyond regional boundaries, potentially affecting global stability and security. Therefore, it is imperative that stakeholders engage in diplomatic dialogue and conflict resolution strategies to mitigate tensions and prevent escalation into a broader crisis. Ongoing monitoring and proactive engagement will be essential to navigating this complex geopolitical landscape, ensuring that peace and stability are maintained in a region critical to international relations and economic development.

## Recommendations

- i. ***Enhanced Diplomatic Engagement:*** It is crucial for both Taiwan and China to engage in consistent diplomatic dialogues to address misunderstandings and reduce tensions. Initiatives such as backchannel communications, regular diplomatic exchanges, and multilateral forums can facilitate constructive discussions and foster a better understanding of each side's concerns. Additionally, involving international mediators can help bridge gaps and promote peaceful resolutions.
- ii. ***Strengthening International Alliances:*** The United States and its allies should reinforce their commitment to Taiwan's security while being cautious not to provoke unnecessary escalation. By increasing military cooperation and joint exercises with Taiwan, as well as enhancing defense capabilities, these nations can deter potential aggression from China. Furthermore, strengthening alliances within the Asia-Pacific region, such as with Japan, Australia, and South Korea, can create a united front against any threats to regional stability.
- iii. ***Promoting Economic Ties:*** Economic cooperation between Taiwan, China, and the international community should be encouraged to create interdependencies that can act as a stabilizing factor in cross-strait relations. Initiatives aimed at increasing trade, investment, and cultural exchanges can help build trust and foster peaceful coexistence. Establishing common economic interests may reduce the incentive for military confrontations and promote a collaborative approach to resolving conflicts.

- iv. **Public Awareness and Education:** Raising awareness about the historical context and the current dynamics of the China-Taiwan conflict is vital for both domestic and international audiences. Educational programs, workshops, and public forums can help cultivate a nuanced understanding of the issues at stake. Furthermore, promoting narratives that emphasize the importance of peace, stability, and mutual respect in the region can contribute to a more informed citizenry that supports diplomatic solutions rather than conflict.

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