



The Collapse of One China

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THE ISSUE

As the One China policy accommodation unravels and China's military attains a credible capability to mount a cross-strait invasion, the United States and its allies should stop hedging and adopt enhanced measures to deter Beijing.

INTRODUCTION

The web of polices and norms that has preserved peace in the Taiwan Strait for four decades is stretched to the breaking point. The Taiwanese people, despite living in a mature democracy, remain trapped in an international accommodation agreed on by the [United States](#), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing, and Taiwan's own previous [authoritarian regime](#). Today, each successive generation in Taiwan finds the notion of political unification with the mainland less appealing.

China's leaders, however, are intent on preserving the [dictatorship](#) of the CCP, which entails asserting control over all of China's claimed territories, including Taiwan. Meanwhile, the current U.S. administration has adopted a foreign policy doctrine of global democratic [renewal](#) amid strategic competition—with China [named](#) as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge.” The shrinking common ground among the three capitals' respective One China policies will soon vanish, incentivizing CCP general secretary Xi Jinping to take action.

In the past, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) did not possess the capabilities to annex Taiwan using military force. Today, Beijing's more modern and capable military

presents, or will soon present, such an [option](#) to Beijing. Testifying to Congress in May 2022, U.S. director of national intelligence Avril Haines [agreed](#) that the threat to Taiwan is “critical, or acute, between now and 2030.”

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In deciding whether to exercise such an option, Xi will weigh the risk of failure and anticipated costs of action. To increase his *risk* perception, Taipei and Washington should urgently [enhance military deterrence](#) with sufficient cost-effective, resilient capabilities to deny, or at least delay, a Chinese invasion force. To raise Xi's *cost* perception, Washington should abandon political hedging and enhance deterrence messages that credibly signal U.S. resolve across diplomatic, military, and economic spheres.

In addition to deterring China, clearer signals of U.S. resolve over Taiwan would reassure allies and partners, some of whom would likely respond by enhancing their own deterrence contributions, creating a virtuous cycle.

Some nascent steps are bearing fruit—but more can and should be done. First, Washington should consistently highlight Beijing’s failure to honor its promise to pursue a peaceful resolution. Second, the American Institute in Taiwan should publicize training and interactions between U.S. service members and their Taiwanese counterparts. Third, President Joe Biden should explicitly authorize the imposition of financial, trade, and immigration restrictions on China in the event of an attack on Taiwan. Finally, the executive branch should consult with Congress to ensure the former has the tools to compete effectively across the spectrum of conflict, including in a crisis.

TAIPEI’S ONE CHINA

At the CCP’s quintennial Party Congress in late 2022, Xi will likely renew his tenure as general secretary of the party, promote many of his loyalists, and retire most of his detractors from within the party. Just as these promotions and retirements will dictate China’s future governance, Taiwan’s January 2024 presidential contest will have major cross-strait implications. Some predict that the election of Vice President Lai Ching-te to succeed President Tsai Ing-wen (both are from the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP) will inflame cross-strait tensions and possibly precipitate a crisis.

But Beijing already refuses to engage with the DPP, portraying Tsai as the leader of an illegitimate separatist [faction](#) controlled by the United States. Following her 2020 reelection, Tsai [stated](#) that even without a formal declaration, “we are an independent country already” and that younger Taiwanese are “pretty used to the idea that we have a separate identity, and we are a country of our own.” The Taiwanese people, practical and pluralistic, widely [support](#) preserving the status quo of neither unification nor formal independence. Lai, if elected, is unlikely to press the issue much further than Tsai.

On the other hand, Taiwan’s unification-leaning opposition Kuomintang (KMT) party could further set back cross-strait relations. Driven off the Chinese mainland by the CCP in 1949, the KMT decamped to Taiwan as the Republic of China’s (ROC) government-in-exile and ruled the island under martial law for four decades. Taiwan transitioned to democracy in the 1990s, and the KMT conducted its first peaceful transfer of power to the DPP in 2000. The KMT returned to power in 2008 until Tsai’s 2016 election as president. To this day, Taiwan retains its ROC constitution and officially claims all of China’s territory as its own, even as each successive

generation of Taiwanese people feels [less connected](#) to the mainland.

Since the 2014 Sunflower Movement protesting the then-KMT government’s cross-strait economic engagement policies, the party has failed to address the waning popularity of its unification-leaning policy platform. While the KMT remains competitive in local elections, the party has not reckoned with its decisive losses in Taiwan’s 2016 and 2020 national elections. To appease its shrinking political base of *waishengren* (those who immigrated from the mainland to Taiwan around 1949) and its donor base of *taishang* (Taiwanese businesspeople whose fortunes are entwined with the mainland), the KMT continues to cling to the [1992 Consensus](#)—an agreement whereby Beijing “respect[ed] and accept[ed]” (while disagreeing with) Taipei’s interpretation of One China as the Republic of China, headquartered in Taipei.

Since 1992, the cross-strait balance of power (economic, military, and diplomatic) has swung ominously in China’s favor, and Beijing’s position on the 1992 Consensus has shifted with it. Beijing no longer acknowledges “respective formulations of One China.” Instead, its One China *principle* now seeks to delegitimize Taiwan’s elected government in all fora worldwide.

True to the electorate, Tsai has not affirmed the 1992 Consensus—and Beijing has refused to engage Taipei in dialogue since 2016. As a result, the two sides of the strait have only grown further apart. Nonetheless, the KMT has persevered in maintaining the 1992 Consensus, arguing that it serves as a basis for cross-strait dialogue.

In addition to this cross-strait policy conundrum, the KMT must also reckon with widespread Taiwanese loathing of Beijing’s governance record, especially in Hong Kong. Since Hong Kong’s 1997 return to China from British colonial rule, Beijing has governed Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region under its “One Country Two Systems” framework, originally proposed as a model for Taiwan.

On January 2, 2019, Xi Jinping reiterated Beijing’s [call for unification](#) with Taiwan under this framework, based on its One China principle and the 1992 Consensus. But the Taiwanese people overwhelmingly reject the One Country Two Systems model and largely deny the [1992 Consensus](#), as reflected by the decisive 2020 DPP election victories. Hong Kong’s hastening loss of autonomy and civil liberties since then has only sharpened these sentiments in Taiwan.

Thus, the KMT faces a dilemma. A significant and growing majority of Taiwanese people do not want political union

with the mainland—certainly not if [imposed](#) on them. Following its 2020 electoral defeat, the KMT rejected the One Country Two Systems framework but continues to assert the 1992 Consensus. As 2024 approaches, growing repression in Hong Kong and shifting demographics in Taiwan may finally convince the KMT to modify or relinquish the last planks of its unification platform. If not, the party risks falling into irrelevancy and Taiwan’s democracy risks losing its loyal opposition.

BEIJING’S ONE CHINA

If the KMT chooses self-preservation and shifts its cross-strait policy platform to reflect Taiwan’s mainstream views, Xi Jinping will face his own dilemma. Beijing will find it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain its fictional narrative of a Taiwanese population yearning to rejoin the Chinese motherland. And if the KMT does not forsake the 1992 Consensus, its waning political relevance will similarly beset Beijing, albeit in chronic rather than acute fashion. A cross-strait policy formulation that can satisfy the needs of both the CCP and KMT may no longer exist.

For autocratic leaders such as Xi, perception is key to legitimacy. Without a credible pro-unification touchstone on Taiwan, Xi will feel more aggrieved and may abandon Beijing’s stated policy of peaceful unification, especially as he has argued that the Taiwan “problem” should not be [passed down](#) to future generations. Xi knows he cannot ignore the trends in Taiwan indefinitely; top CCP officials have begun [signaling](#) a possible Taiwan policy shift at the 2022 Party Congress, though details remain unclear.

The U.S. One China policy has long held that a final resolution must be peaceful and according to the wishes of the people. In [China’s version](#), however, “promoting peaceful unification while not giving up the use of force are like two sides of the same coin.” In other words, Beijing intends to use its growing military power to coerce a result to its own liking. As much as Beijing would prefer to avoid open conflict, Taiwanese popular sentiment increasingly shows the limits and often counterproductivity of China’s nonviolent approach, increasing the incentive to resort to more heavy-handed means.

Unlike with Hong Kong, Xi cannot effect control over Taiwan through quasi-legal maneuvers and co-option of law enforcement. However, Beijing could make its first move in an act of coercive lawfare by invoking its 2005 Anti-Secession Law, which [states](#) that when “possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and

other necessary measures to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Presumably, Xi would then accelerate and amplify his narrative case for the use of force, taking a page from Vladimir Putin’s playbook. But to succeed where Putin has failed, Xi needs a military that is up to the task.

Following years of spending increases, technology assimilation, and organizational restructuring, the PLA is now expanding and refining its ability and capacity to project power through the increasing scale and sophistication of exercises on China’s periphery, including near Taiwan. [PLA spokespersons](#) and other [CCP mouthpieces](#) have likewise become more assertive in their diplomacy and rhetoric, often leveraging these offshore exercises for coercive [signaling](#).

Most U.S. experts agree that China’s investments in military modernization over the past three decades have been transformative and that the PLA is “[quickly approaching an invasion capability](#),” if not already there. Having personally ordered and overseen the acceleration of military reforms over the past decade, Xi is likely also gaining confidence in his forces—lowering his perceived risk of failure if he chooses to invade.

Beijing’s increasingly credible operational capability arguably represents the most fundamental change in the cross-strait dynamic in more than four decades. It imparts more leverage to Xi than his predecessors enjoyed—one of whom suffered the ignominy of failing to bend Taiwan to China’s political will during the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. Beijing keenly understands that without a credible invasion threat, China cannot coerce Taiwan into submission.

WASHINGTON’S ONE CHINA

Despite China’s military reforms and buildup across the strait, Taipei and Washington neglected to maintain a credible military deterrence posture. Taipei resisted the necessary force structure changes to effectively counter the evolving PLA threat. And for two decades following the 1996 crisis, guided by academic advisers and intelligence analysts, U.S. policy on China reflected the United States’ post-Cold War [overconfidence](#) even as the cross-strait military balance steadily shifted in Beijing’s favor. China’s 2001 World Trade Organization accession and the September 11 attacks played significant roles as well, as Washington attempted to cultivate Beijing as a partner in globalization and counterterrorism. To this day, U.S. officials make overtures to [cooperation](#), often overlooking the long-standing pattern of China’s [transactional approach](#) to foreign relations.

For years, Washington [delayed and omitted](#) hard security initiatives and other deterrence actions for Taiwan in pursuit of “constructive engagement” with [Beijing](#). In hindsight, numerous U.S.-China dialogues led to Beijing’s deflections and underwhelming promises on human rights, intellectual property, industrial overcapacity, state subsidies, cyber theft, proliferation, counterterrorism, pollution, and militarization in the South China Sea. These agreements remain overwhelmingly unfulfilled or inconsequential to this day. U.S. engagement policies instead fueled rapid growth in China’s industrial and technology sectors, enabling PLA modernization.

By favoring U.S.-China engagement over U.S.-Taiwan security cooperation for more than two decades, Washington mortgaged its own future security, falling ever deeper into a deterrence deficit. Perversely, “avoiding provocation” in past years has dramatically increased the likelihood and danger of major conflict today.

Since 2019, Washington and Taipei have belatedly initiated measures that will help make up lost ground. The United States is assisting Taiwan in the acquisition and fielding of combat-credible capabilities to counter a PLA assault, including large numbers of road-mobile anti-ship and shoulder-fired anti-air and anti-tank missiles. To be successful, Taiwan’s military leadership needs to commit to a realistic defense plan with sufficient survivable capabilities focused on denying, or at least delaying, a PLA lodgment (i.e., control of an air- or seaport enabling follow-on troops to flow into Taiwan).

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In addition to rectifying operational deficiencies, Washington has openly crossed some of Beijing’s long-perceived security-related redlines—with no direct consequences—including the permanent deployment of U.S. [Marine Security Guards](#) in Taipei, the export of advanced fighter jets and [offensive weapons](#), and the revelation of U.S. [special operators](#) training counterparts in Taiwan. During the Trump administration, the vice president and cabinet secretaries routinely and openly voiced support for Taiwan and condemned China’s aggression—a practice that the Biden administration has sustained.

In 2020, U.S. national security advisor Robert O’Brien declassified and released President Reagan’s 1982 [Six Assurances](#) to Taipei, effectively invalidating President Clinton’s 1998 [Three No’s](#) statement in Shanghai, an unreciprocated concession of the U.S.-China constructive engagement period. (While Kissinger had [discussed](#) the Three No’s in his first private bilateral discussions with Beijing in 1971, Clinton went further by articulating them as U.S. policy.) Biden invited Taiwan’s ambassador-equivalent to attend his inauguration ceremony and has explicitly kept the Six Assurances as a pillar of his [One China Policy](#). Despite a long-standing policy of ambiguity regarding U.S. intervention, Biden has indicated [at least three times](#) that the United States is committed to militarily defending [Taiwan](#), revealing his own instincts as commander in chief. (In all cases, U.S. officials later clarified that these did not indicate a policy change.)

Shortly after assuming office, Biden [opined](#) that Xi “doesn’t have a democratic . . . bone in his body” and predicted “extreme [U.S.-China] competition.” Describing a global struggle between democracy and autocracy, Biden [believes](#) that the world is “in the midst of an historic and fundamental debate about [its] future direction.” Freedom House ranks Taiwan as Asia’s second-freest country and the seventh-freest in the world. By inviting Taiwan to participate in his December 2021 inaugural Summit for Democracy, Biden sent a signal to China and the world: the Taiwanese people must be allowed to choose their own path.

That same week, the top Indo-Pacific policy officials at the State and Defense Departments articulated the [geostrategic case](#) that Taiwan is “critical to the defense of vital U.S. interests” in recorded testimony to the U.S. Congress. Between the U.S. administration’s rhetoric and the CCP’s [innate anxiety](#) over “hostile Western forces,” Beijing views U.S. attempts to reassure as insincere. China’s ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang, expressed this plainly (while misstating the U.S. position and other historical facts) in a May 2022 [editorial](#) published the same day U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken [asserted](#) that Beijing’s “words and actions are deeply destabilizing” and “threaten the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait.”

The very next day, in his remarks commissioning new U.S. military officers, Biden relayed what Xi had said on a call: “Democracies cannot be sustained in the 21st century. Autocracies will run the world.” Biden [told](#) the U.S. officers flatly that Xi was wrong and they would be the “representatives and defenders of our democracy.”

COMPREHENSIVE DETERRENCE

In January 2022, Qin [warned](#) “if the Taiwanese authorities, emboldened by the United States, keep going down the road for independence, it most likely will involve China and the United States, the two big countries, in a military conflict.” Two weeks later, in its updated Indo-Pacific Strategy, the White House [responded](#) by committing “to ensure an environment in which Taiwan’s future is determined peacefully in accordance with the wishes and best interests of Taiwan’s people.”

Barring a major policy shift in one of the three capitals, their respective policies and politics are crowding out mutually acceptable alternatives or concessions—potentially leaving open only one path to resolution for Beijing: the use of force. Washington would be wise to accept that an autocratic China is firmly committed to annexing a democratic Taiwan. The United States and its allies should shift away from a hedging strategy, which often compromises deterrence to preserve political space for a quixotic negotiated resolution.

Instead, the United States should lead allies in adopting a comprehensive deterrence strategy. In addition to urgently fielding relevant military capabilities to increase Beijing’s perceived risk, Washington and its allies should also take steps to raise Beijing’s perceived costs—expecting and accepting that such steps might engender diplomatic tantrums, saber rattling, and other forms of retaliation and brinksmanship from Beijing.

In the wake of the recent U.S. overtures related to Taiwan’s security, the response among allies has been positive. In 2020, following approvals for \$12 billion in U.S. arms sales to Taiwan by the Trump administration, a French firm [signed a contract](#) to upgrade Taiwan’s 30-year-old Lafayette frigates, despite a 1994 Sino-French agreement that had halted French security assistance to Taiwan. In 2021 and again in 2022, U.S. leader and minister level joint statements with Japan, Korea, and the G7 [called for peace and stability](#) in the Taiwan Strait—occasioning rote complaints from Beijing.

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In July 2021, Japan’s deputy prime minister [said the quiet part out loud](#): that Japan would join the United States in defending Taiwan in a contingency. And then in October, the UK defense minister [warned China](#) to cease its destabilizing and provocative military activities toward Taiwan. The following month, Australia’s defense minister [indicated](#) that Canberra would also join a U.S.-led coalition to defend Taiwan in a conflict. These allied expressions of solidarity elicited predictable rebukes from China’s messaging apparatus—precisely *because* they enhance cross-strait deterrence by forcing Beijing to consider greater risks and costs for its potential aggression.

During her January 2022 confirmation hearing, U.S. assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs Celeste Wallander [told Congress](#) that the U.S. response to Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea “was too slow and too incremental. And it’s confirmed by the lessons that I learned, and that I believe others in the national security community learned.” The editorial board of the *Washington Post* [put it more succinctly](#), saying “when past U.S. policy has failed in Ukraine, it was often because, fearing to provoke Mr. Putin, it did not do enough to deter him.”

Stronger signals of U.S. and allied [resolve earlier](#) arguably could have prevented initiation of the security dilemma that culminated in open warfare in Ukraine. Having underestimated the West’s determination, Putin found himself [having to choose](#) between preserving either his own political legitimacy or Russia’s economic well-being—he predictably chose the former. Given the stakes of a Taiwan Strait scenario, the United States and its allies need to present unambiguous deterrence signals to Xi *before* he sets similar irreversible wheels into motion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to accelerating military [capability enhancements](#) in Taiwan and [the region](#), the administration should take near-term steps to implement Biden’s foreign policy doctrine in regards to the Taiwan Strait. Washington needs to demonstrate that democracies can defend themselves against a [rising tide of authoritarianism](#). Firm U.S. leadership will encourage allies to recognize the stakes and join in deterring or responding to cross-strait aggression. Below are four immediate opportunities to signal resolve to Beijing, Taipei, and key allies and partners.

1. The U.S. State Department should amend its day-to-day policy articulation to match President Biden’s

rhetoric and strategic guidance. During the U.S.-China engagement era, American diplomats and spokespersons were trained to defuse Beijing's rhetorical challenges using staid non-answers (e.g., "we are committed to our One China Policy based on . . ."). In an era of competition, the United States need not appease and should not surrender the narrative.

Washington should turn the tables and [actively demand](#) that Beijing return to its "fundamental policy to strive for a peaceful solution" as agreed in the final U.S.-China Joint Communiqué in 1982. Both privately and publicly, U.S. officials should press Beijing to demonstrate sincerity by abandoning its Anti-Secession Law and reorienting PLA missiles and other offensive forces away from Taiwan. When China fails to heed these calls, U.S. allies and partners would then absorb and possibly even amplify the message that Beijing created this powder keg, not Washington. This in turn would make it more difficult for Xi to justify Chinese aggression to the world.

China [repeats Russia's narrative](#) that the United States caused and perpetuates the war in Ukraine by expanding NATO and arming Nazis. Sowing seeds of justification for future aggression, Beijing [explicitly connects](#) NATO expansion to maturing U.S. partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Xi [parrots](#) Putin's zero-sum concept of "indivisible security" to preemptively shift the blame for Beijing's own violent plans. Washington [cannot afford](#) to cede ground in the "discourse power" contest that will assign responsibility for conflict in the eyes of the world. Just as the United States [concluded](#) that it must "shape the strategic environment around Beijing," rather than changing China through engagement, one of China's principal goals in engaging the [United States](#) and [others](#) in high-level diplomacy is to bend regional and global narratives in its favor.

2. The U.S. military should normalize public messaging regarding U.S.-Taiwan defense cooperation, which takes place under the auspices of the nongovernmental American Institute in Taiwan. Between 2018 and 2019, the Taiwanese armed forces hosted more than [250 U.S. delegations](#) involving thousands of personnel. Beijing, with its [extensive intelligence networks](#), is well aware of these activities—but the broader public, inside and outside of China, remains largely in the dark. This is a missed opportunity.

In addition to building partner capacity, U.S. military engagement aims to deter adversaries *and* reassure allies. The United States actively promotes island defense training engagements with [Japan](#) and the [Philippines](#), two of Taiwan's neighbors who have territorial disputes with China. The U.S. Defense Department publicizes its defensive cyber cooperation with partners such as [Estonia](#) and [Lithuania](#), who, like Taiwan, face continuous state-sponsored cyberattacks from a threatening neighbor. In the case of Taiwan, however, the United States routinely bypasses such opportunities for messaging deterrence and reassurance.

Pro-China media in Taiwan often accuse Washington of unloading second-rate weapons on Taiwan at inflated prices. As Beijing [tells it](#), the United States is "stirring up trouble" to line its own pockets. Despite a U.S. legal obligation under the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) to provide both equipment *and* training ("defense articles and services") proportional to the threat, the Defense Department remains hesitant to promote or even acknowledge its numerous U.S.-funded military exchanges with Taiwan. Public reporting of these activities would blunt anti-U.S. narratives in the region and raise Taiwanese confidence and will to fight.

Washington reportedly chastised Tsai for publicly [confirming](#) the presence of U.S. military trainers in Taiwan. But Tsai's honest response to a direct question may have contributed favorably to the Australian defense minister [remarking](#) only two weeks later that "it would be inconceivable that we [Australia] wouldn't support the U.S. in an action" to defend Taiwan. Washington's instinct to obscure security cooperation with Taiwan is a relic of a lead-from-behind hedging strategy.

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Under a competitive strategy, the United States should prioritize collective deterrence messaging above sensitivity to Beijing's narrative preferences. There should be neither shame nor fear in building Taiwan's capacity to deter or deny an attack—a mission that serves U.S. and allied vital interests. As it does with

other U.S. agencies' activities, the American Institute in Taiwan should promote military-to-military interactions through statements, press conferences, websites, and social media. With more assertive U.S. leadership on security cooperation with Taiwan, close allies would also increase cooperation themselves, further weighing on Beijing's calculus.

3. Biden should explicitly grant his top aides the authorities needed to sever or disrupt China's technology and energy supplies. Just as the United States maintains a honed military force to promote peace and stability, it should also sharpen its economic tools of deterrence—before the advent of hot conflict, not after, as with Ukraine. In June 2021, Biden broadened the treasury secretary's authority to restrict U.S. portfolio investment in China's military-industrial complex to cover surveillance technology companies contributing to [human rights violations](#). Given the potential threat to global stability and prosperity, Biden should preemptively expand these powers to levy full blocking sanctions against people and organizations that contribute to cross-strait aggression. He should also grant his State and Homeland Security Departments the authority to designate and block U.S. entry of such individuals and their family members. Leading by example, the administration should encourage allies to preemptively develop the legal authorities to impose similar sanctions in response to Chinese aggression. Taken together, these formalized policies would constitute appropriate and proportional responses to Beijing's Anti-Secession Law and other forms of coercion.
4. Biden and Congress should ensure that appropriate authorities exist to counter China across the spectrum of conflict. Under the Taiwan Relations Act, the president is [obligated](#) to consult with Congress on a response to “any threat to the security or the social or economic system” of Taiwan. One could argue that threshold has already been met. Regardless of whether the act is formally invoked, the executive branch should have mechanisms in place for immediate crisis response short of armed conflict, including options for covert and clandestine operations in the space, cyber, and undersea domains. No new actions need be taken unless and until Beijing chooses to act out. But explicitly articulating and delegating these authorities now would necessarily weigh on Xi's cost-benefit analysis.

CONCLUSION

When it was first articulated, the One China compromise allowed Washington and Beijing to shelve the question of Taiwan sovereignty and focus on the common threat emanating from Moscow. After 1991, this truce was extended as the United States and China found new common causes. More recently, divergent views on the [benefits of globalization](#) and [goals of counterterrorism](#) have emerged on either side of the Pacific, and global developments have exposed the impotence of U.S.-China engagement on issues from health security and non-proliferation to climate change and human rights.

Having witnessed the enduring trends of a growing Taiwanese democratic self-identity, a rapidly improving PLA, and a hardening of China's autocracy, Washington and the free world need to acknowledge that the status quo is unstable, if not unsustainable. Over more than 70 years, the regime in Beijing, abetted by U.S. and global passivity, has become more dogmatic about subjugating Taiwan—no amount of affirmative U.S. engagement has or will alter this catechism. As China attains the military capability to effect a forceful takeover of Taiwan, the United States should instead employ all measures to dissuade a cross-strait conflict.

Arguably, U.S. [hesitation](#) to [arm](#) Ukraine and the [lifting of sanctions](#) on Nord Stream 2 sent the exact wrong signals to Putin, leading him to underestimate U.S. and allied resolve. A similar strategic miscue toward Xi could be catastrophic. In addition to mass casualties and displacements within Taiwan, a large-scale cross-strait conflict would induce a major global economic downturn and associated humanitarian crises.

In the opening of his March 2022 State of Union address, President Biden [reflected](#), “Throughout our history, we've learned this lesson: When dictators do not pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos, they keep moving. And the costs, the threats to America and to the world keep rising. . . . American diplomacy matters. American resolve matters.” Speaking a week after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Biden was lamenting that the world had just relearned the lesson. Washington and its allies need to clearly demonstrate their resolve to avoid repeating the lesson yet again in the Taiwan Strait. In addition to urgently fielding effective military capabilities, the United States should strengthen and multilateralize credible strategic signals to comprehensively deter Beijing. ■

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