

Chinese Foreign Policy: The Intersection of Ambitions and Geopolitical Reality

*Will the geopolitical reality of the People's Republic of China prevent an
invasion against Taiwan for now?*

Kínai Külpolitika: Az Ambíciók és Geopolitikai Realitások Keresztszete

*Vajon megakadályozhatják-e Kína geopolitikai realitásai a Tajvan elleni
invázióját?*

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II. Introduction

II.1. China? Yes, China!

Pax Americana, after the Cold War a newly crafted world order hinged on this notion, a world dominated by the United States. However, as decades passed a new player in the international arena grew up to the U.S., that is China. The United States' omnipotent nature was not questioned for years whatsoever as it enjoyed the status of global hegemon with a vast spider web like alliance encompassing various parts of the world. It is safe to ask what happened to this world order and more importantly what made China rise to the position it is in today.

The topic of Chinese foreign policy is utmost intriguing as there are currently no experts in the field of International Relations who could predict the trajectory of Chinese foreign policy with an outstanding success rate. More precisely, I will endeavour to assess the possibility of China invading Taiwan based on variables such as military, political, and economic factors. The relevance of the topic is underlined by the numerous research conducted on Chinese ambitions, foreign policy, military, and economic developments. Consequently, the Chinese ascension in every field of statecraft sets out why it is essential to study its foreign policy even though it seems nearly impossible.

Nowadays, with the horrors in Ukraine the notion of war in Europe seemingly came back from its deathbed that was a looming shadow over Europe since 2014. With that, the importance of cross-strait tensions between China and Taiwan made it to the top of political discourse and brought the possibility of a potential World War III. with them. Tension between China and Taiwan should not be treated half-heartedly as the U.S., under the current Biden administration, made clear it backs Taiwan, while it is one of the sources of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping to reunify mainland China with Taiwan. One of the keys to decipher the Chinese enigma of foreign policy ambitions relies in the assessment of cross-strait relations that provides with the prospect of giving a clear picture of China's geopolitical standing through the assessment of its capabilities. All in all, the relevance of Chinese foreign policy assessment lies in China's current global standing, its capabilities and active participation and ambition in shaping the world order as we know it.

II.2. Structure

The structure of the paper will follow quite a simple logic. I will assess the topic of the Chinese geopolitical reality through the question of rejuvenation with Taiwan along three main areas which are of political, economic, and military nature, all of them separated into foreign and domestic sub-chapters. This structure of simplicity serves the aim of providing with a set of variables and arguments clearly separated, with that facilitating a clearer environment for assessment with regards to Chinese ambitions and their limits with regards to Taiwan. The three key areas of observation will serve as the backbone and body of the paper in anticipation of providing with sufficient information for a meaningful conclusion and outlook for future possibility of an actual Chinese invasion vis-à-vis Taiwan.

II.3. Research Methodology

In general, I will use qualitative research that will synthesize the already existing academic literature's conclusions interwoven with my findings. Mostly, I will follow rationalism as the essay will be generally structured on deductive reasoning by building up general statements about Chinese foreign policy through arguments then concluding the findings. I may attempt to invoke inductive reasoning at the economic section of the thesis regarding both foreign and domestic sub-sections.

The research approach would aim to be descriptive with a strategy of descriptive analysis, as the use of operationalisation is not quite possible due to the notion of invasion being rather easy to define on its own, yet various forms of invasion will be considered throughout the analysis to unravel China's strategic considerations. Consequently, the main actors of the paper are going to be the Chinese state, the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, the Taiwanese state, and the United States.

The nature of the data will mostly consist of actual foreign policy strategies, actions, and accomplishments of China for which the paper will lie mostly on academic papers complemented by communiqués and statements from both Beijing and Washington. Counterweighing the restrictive information flow of China, the U.S. assessment of Chinese ambitions in forms of academic essays and high level bi- and multilateral meetings will serve as a crucial part of synthesising the findings. Concerning military capabilities, the realm of numbers will be of great value while lining up the actual potential of the main actors, with China in the spotlight, whereby the amount of deterrence, preventing or ensuring an invasion, hinges on the actual amounts of weapons and tools of war that are inherently set in numbers.

The relationship between the main economic, military and political variables will be underlined by the conclusion that aims to tie them together when concluding the assessment of an invasion on behalf of China towards Taiwan to answer, “*whether the geopolitical reality of China will prevent an invasion against Taiwan for now?*”. With that, let us adjourn to how the issue of Taiwan got onto the agenda in the first place.

II.4. Taiwan Getting on the Dragon’s Plate

“Ilha Formosa” or in English “beautiful island”. It was the island of Taiwan before it was Taiwan, named by a Dutch explorer Jan Huygen van Linschoten. Then a Dutch created post on the southwest perimeter of the island called Tayouwan meaning “terrace bay”, seemingly sealed the official name Taiwan for centuries to come. The Dutch were driven off the island by Chinese pirates in 1662 only to be defeated down the line by the Manchurian, taking control of the island (Djuyandi, Sudirman and Sumadinata, 2022, p.595). The island then became part of the Qing dynasty (1644/6-1911) that, on the mainland, exerted power over modern day Xinjian, Mongolia, Tibet and even South Siberia, that eventually fell due to arrival of European invaders along with internal conflicts (Matura, 2020, p.75). Consequently, it was the French that meant the end for Qing rule on the island from 1884 eventually losing the island. It was in 1895 after the end of the Sino-Japanese war that Taiwan fell to the Japanese under the Treaty of Shimonoseki. After World War II the nationalists, the Kuomintang took over (Djuyandi, Sudirman and Sumadinata, 2022, p.595).

The birth of communist rule in China and the communist party was partly a result of outside “counselling” on behalf of the Soviet Union. The nationalist forces of the Kuomintang were in fierce rivalry with the communists of China. After the Japanese invasion of Manchuria was pacified by Soviet help the ground for immense development was set for the communist forces by Soviet training and Japanese equipment. Consequently, it led to the eventual “expulsion” of Kuomintang forces as the communist soldiers were better trained and financial support ran dry as news of U.S. money embezzling by Chiang Kai-shek spread. The People’s Republic of China was proclaimed on 1 October 1949, that is today’s mainland China. On the other hand, the expelled Kuomintang forces found safe heaven on the island of Taiwan, carrying on the Republic of China established on 1 January 1912 (Chai, 1999, p.59).

In 1950 amid the atrocities of the Korean war, following the issue of the Taiwan question, former President Harry Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet, consisting of eight destroyers and an aircraft carrier along with more vassals, to protect Taiwan from alleged Chinese attacks (Djuyandi, Sudirman and Sumadinata, 2022, p.596). However, Maoist China

back then had no means whatsoever to challenge the US might even at its shores. After the retreat of the Kuomintang, both Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo, ruled Taiwan with an iron fist not offering opposition parties a heart-warming welcome while seeking to return to the mainland. This stance was changed by the Taiwanese born politician Lee Teng-Hui who stepped on the path of democratisation setting the venue for cross-strait tension to come (Chai, 1999, p.60-61).

Fast forward to the contemporary setting, there is China, an economic and slowly military colossus led by the ambitious Xi Jinping, there is a militarily insignificant but democratically strong Taiwan with growing Taiwanese identity, and there is the U.S. that is bound by its declared support for democracies and its already tangibly strong and deep trade relations with China signalled by the failed decoupling process. This leads us to the beginning of the assessment of a possible invasion.

III. Assessing the Possibility of Invasion

III.1. Political Considerations

III.1.1. Domestic Politics

After the end of Deng Xiaoping's era, it was questionable what course future leaderships would take in supporting nationalism that naturally meant repercussions for future wars and the ambition for reunification. As nationalism is deeply embedded in the communist Chinese society as the century of humiliations is still vivid as its part of the party rhetoric, it is fascinating to see how Xi Jinping exploits this (Whiting, 1995, p.295).

In terms of Chinese nationalism, it was mainly institutionalised and used by the party to enhance its legitimacy, while regarding foreign policy it was designed for the acquisition of great power status (Bhattacharya, 2007, p.1). As put forward by Whiting, there are mainly three variations of nationalism, there is affirmative nationalism that puts 'the people' in the context of referring to their country and culture with pride and accomplishment, while assertive nationalism adds an outside source of fear and target, that challenges 'our' values. What is more, in terms of functionality through party communication, affirmative nationalism targets the virtue of people without much foreign policy consequences. However, aggressive nationalism fuels hatred and feeds the fear of existential threat, hence mobilizing the masses. Assertive nationalism walks a fine line between the two categories showing characteristics of both previous models (Whiting, 1995, p. 295-296) that is seemingly being used in contemporary China under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

Xi's life could very well be seen as ruined by the earlier Maoist communism and the cultural revolution that basically sent him in exile. However, Wikileaks put out an American diplomatic document with a source close to the Xi family saying that after the cultural revolution those "princelings" the future of communism bathed in Western products and culture but one of them was different, one of them who could have been the most disillusioned seemed to were the most disciplined and dedicated to communist China, it was Xi Jinping (Redder than Red, 2022, n.p.). Quite possibly Xi wanted to get hold of the party, the only institution having the power to stop the atrocities of the cultural revolution ruining the life of young ambitious people from happening ever again, that could explain, in part, his authoritarian character.

The policy on Taiwan is a fine and long procedure every time a decision gets on the table in the domestic setting. The process involves structures of the government, military, legislation and finally the party with the highest level of leadership. For the Chinese Communist Party, unification under its Marxist ideology, is merely inevitable historically, that was adopted by Xi Jinping as well (Harrison, 2019, p.13-14). In Beijing's playbook, actions are not part of negotiations but are means for unification validated under its historical inevitable theory of unifying mainland China with Taiwan. Additionally, the unification for China is a tool for party legitimacy that set out the crafting of modern China in unity with Taiwan as a given (Harrison, 2019, p.15). To that, the character of Xi Jinping fits perfectly with his visionary leadership building on cold pragmatism. After the 20th National Party Congress Xi assumed his third term in leading China, which was never seen before in Chinese leadership, that enabled Xi to effectively be leader for life, with that further tightening his grip on Chinese domestic institutions resulting in the possibility of a bolder Xi Jinping vis-à-vis Taiwan. Furthermore, this Maoist grip, that buried Mao in a constant state of fear of the U.S. attacking China to clear communism was enshrined in ideology. That is the very same illness of Xi's way of domestic rule as he virtually aims at securitising every inch of Chinese public policy and if his perceived direct threat of U.S. gets into the system of the CCP then it could function in a manner that sets out next to the inevitability of historic unity with Taiwan the inevitability of war (Rudd, 2022, n.p.).

According to Cai Xia, this grip on power, this unprecedented endure in heading China will not only result in a bolder Xi but could eventually corner the Chinese leader to take such injudicious decisions as to invade Taiwan, as party competition at 'home' and within the party itself will get uglier (Xia, 2022, n.p.). A supposed invasion of Taiwan, upon success, would get Xi into the history books for sure as the great unifier of China that is quite tempting since acts

of such nature, while at the same time under pressure from the party, usually propose the leaving behind of a great heritage. In addition, Xi's bolder picture, in terms of domestic views, is underlined by the denouncing of Deng Xiaoping's wisdom - saying that China should hide its strength and wait for its turn - by favouring policy that challenges the United States on the South China Sea along with a more aggressive stance towards Taiwan. As his power becomes literally unlimited in terms of domestic dominance, he will not hesitate, even despite the dispiriting labyrinth of communist bureaucracy to make such decisions that could lead to the increasing risk of forceful attempts at historic (re)unification with the island of Taiwan (Xia, 2022, n.p.).

It was already established that however good were the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, that were followed diligently by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi turned them down, yet that is not quite the full picture. Xi is building domestic politics that translates into foreign policy eventually by mixing the reformist Deng's ideas, while discarding them on the surface, with a more and more defined turning back to omnipotent party grip on society that resembles Maoist communism more. As Kevin Rudd reasoned, Xi's way of organising statecraft can be translated into politics dominated by Leninism, economy dominated by Marxism and foreign policy based on right-wing nationalism. This is quite the mix, whereby it is not the policies that make the ideology but the other way around (Rudd, 2022, n.p.). This can be translated into the situation of Taiwan as historical inevitability is being placed above policymaking (Harrison, 2019, p.13-14), and therefore Xi's every step of policy making vis-à-vis Taiwan is legitimate under domestic power structure and Chinese nationalism in quest for glorious rejuvenation, whereby the goal of unity remains in every scenario. It implies, that there is not quite a decision regarding Taiwan, on behalf of Xi, even in spite of the delicate decision-making environment, that could eventually be labelled as wrong, well at least according to domestic party ideology.

Additionally, the hypothetical accusation of Xi being only theoretical in terms of his views and policy goals is simply not true as his boldness has direct effect on cross-strait relations. Xi's character stems from the atrocities of Maoist domestic rule that manifested in Xi's firm grip of power, that eventually led to him being able to turn his visions slowly into operations and policies, that are directly conceivable on his stance vis-à-vis Taiwan with the clear armament on the South China Sea and the neighbouring region (Rudd, 2022, n.p.). With that we are slowly stepping into foreign policy matters, although not a part of this section, it is essential to mention examples such as armament on the South China Sea as these are originating from Xi's domestic shift.

While Deng Xiaoping was rather focusing on how he could maximise China's participation in the international world order that was headed by the United States, Xi is seemingly turning the tides, as his every political move is directed rather at the (re)crafting of the world order in which China's position is at least in level with that of the U.S. (Rudd, 2022, n.p.). The world order, as put previously was viewed different by Deng and Xi. The global system of governance produced by the treaty of Westphalia represented a balance of power, which was eventually turned over by great power competition hence deemed unfit for its purpose by the Chinese. In that China envisions itself as an actor not going away soon, while stating that the Chinese way of life is inherently incompatible to that of the West's, that is further underlined by the fact that Xi Jinping described Karl Marx as one of the greatest thinkers to ever live (Pottinger, Johnson and Feith, 2022), n.p.). Xi's description of Marx is bluntly putting down the ideological foundations for a Cold War like great power rivalry, only with a change of guards by the two comrades while the venue for a strong bipolar world is set, yet again. This bipolarity is inherently set in Xi Jinping's thinking and reasoning that is based on historical and dialectical materialism.

Historical materialism puts China forward and deeper in the international order by calculating with an expected demise of Western capitalism, from which logic domestic political considerations and policies are stemming from. Moreover, Xi's invoking of dialectical materialism ups the ante in terms of domestic polarisation and scapegoating as his goals inevitably benefit China and are in constant struggle with 'Western' NGOs, parts of the private sector and the United States (Rudd, 2022, n.p.). Taiwan comes into play here for the reason that Xi could anytime direct the suspicion of existential threat to the U.S. or 'separatist' groups in China with that providing for himself legitimacy for virtually everything, among which a possible partial or full-scale invasion is surely there.

In addition, it is essential to mention that the restructuring of the party elite as its for sure in the domestic tools of Xi Jinping, that again has implications when we consider the domestic political considerations for an invasion against Taiwan. During the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party Hu Jintao was 'escorted' out of the Great Hall of the People to his biggest surprise. After the 'incident' reasons for removal were given in the form of Hu Jintao's alleged illness that astonished the former premier as well. However, all doubts were dissipated when Xi Jinping removed three former loyalists of Hu Jintao and replaced them with his own protégés with loyalists, military, and security personnel as it clearly stated the political nature of Hu Jintao's removal. He did not stop there, Xi elected Zhang Youxia as Vice

Chairman of the Central Military Commission, who was already past retirement age but fought together with Xi's father in the civil war. As for the other vice chair Xi elected He Weidong, who has plenty experience when it comes to military scenarios, among which counts the conducting of military drills as response to the August visit of U.S House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Pottinger, Johnson and Feith, 2022, n.p.).

Beijing's and more like Xi Jinping's ideology sets policy goals, such as reunification with Taiwan, concealed by historical inevitability legitimised by his own grip on power that at the same time feeds it (Harrison, 2019, p.15). The Chinese Communist Party makes sure policies made home are part of the Chinese communist social contract whereby every step of Xi restores the Middle Kingdom position of China in a zero-sum game with U.S. hegemony, therefore Xi cannot be deemed wrong or criticised. In the meantime, critics within the party elite are less and less of a challenge as he fills up institutions with his own loyalists (Pottinger, Johnson and Feith, 2022, n.p.) ready to act on orders hence further strengthening his position. With the finished assessment of the domestic political environment concerning invasion let us move on to political considerations with regards to foreign policy.

III.1.2. Foreign Policy

Current policymakers in Taiwan view the issue of Chinese invasion as something that has been delayed by 5-15 years as the war in Ukraine is on a trajectory of escalation, hence supposedly acting as a sobering breeze for Beijing (Sacks, 2022a, n.p.). However strong that warning breeze from Ukraine might be, Beijing's policy is set in stone that is underpinned by the speech of Foreign Minister Wang Yi in New York during the 77th United Nations General Assembly summit. Wang Yi stated that the status quo is that Taiwan is not a country now, it never was, and it is less likely to become than ever, and that despite the Taiwan question there is but one China, that is supported by legal evidence and history as well. Furthermore, he stated that the UN resolution 2758 adopted in 1971 solved the official representation of China once and for all confirming Taiwan as an integral part of China that leaves no room for two Chinas or a China and a Taiwan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022, n.p.).

In the pursuit of understanding great power calculus regarding Taiwan, mainly that of the U.S. and the People's Republic of China, the strategic assessment of the South China Sea is inevitable and essential. China potentially has the upper hand in the South China Sea due to its decades long development scheme aimed at controlling the region. China has been building artificial islands to expand its power projection capabilities, though in that regard Beijing's

efforts for claiming exclusive economic zones around them had been rendered by international courts unlawful (Poling, 2022, n.p.). This endeavour of China has been heard loud and clear by Taiwan in anticipating a Beijing more coercive than ever, as in August 2022 the island announced a whopping increase of 14% in its defence spending, setting historical record (Sacks, 2022a, n.p.). It is highly unlikely that Taiwan alone could defend itself against the PRC, that is where the United States steps into the ring. As for underlining the Cold War like circumstances, the U.S. wants to preserve a world order whereby its position and interests are intact, yet the Chinese see an opening and momentum provided by the alleged hypocrisy and neglect on behalf of the U.S. Still, none of the two powers would like to bring back the Cold War, yet the chance for a huge conflict is a looming shadow over international relations that is starting to take shape and could slowly be seen as necessary by both sides as to iron out the international wrinkles caused by great power rivalry. Eventually resulting in a downward spiral of mutual security increases bringing protracted struggle (Weiss, 2022, n.p.).

As early as 2018 then commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phil Davidson testified before the U.S. Senate that China was already able to control the South China Sea in virtually every case scenario other than all-out war. That combined with the hegemonic pride of the U.S. resulting in non-admittance foreshadowed an even bigger advantage for the Chinese (Poling, 2022, n.p.).

The August 2022 visit of former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi along with other delegations from Congress set the venue for increased military exercises by the PRC showing off its ability to isolate Taiwan anytime it wishes so. Currently the stance of Beijing, is best described by the notion of diplomacy of violence, according to which Beijing aims to use a wider scale of coercive measures with that creating such circumstances whereby, Taiwan could compel, and international commitment, mainly that of the U.S., towards Taiwan could be tested without having to wage a full-scale invasion (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.2). This could ultimately result in countries on the South China Sea like the Philippines and Singapore, questioning the benefits of siding with Washington, which could potentially lead the allies of the U.S. not providing access to U.S. vassals to sail on the South China Sea. That would serve the goal of Beijing according to which, by playing the long game, the allies of Washington will side with Beijing instead as they see the potential end of great power contest without the initiation of an all-out war (Poling, 2022, n.p.).

The main forms of the 'invasion' by Beijing could have many forms, one of which manifesting in political warfare campaign that is fit for the information age aimed at the

destabilisation of Taiwanese democratic institutions while trying to shift Taiwanese public opinion to support reintegration with the mainland (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.3-4). Although the Taiwanese public currently does not anticipate large scale direct use of force from Beijing (Sacks, 2022a, n.p.), invasion even ‘only’ by use of actual force has many more intricate variations.

The next alternative could be nuclear blackmail. A nuclear weapon test from Beijing, perhaps amid fabricated crises, could provide with a war like atmosphere without the need for immense ground forces while also targeting Taiwan with public opinion and information warfare operations leading the public into the misbelief that the West is pulling Taiwan into a bloody and potentially nuclear warfare that could eventually make Taiwan comply with the demands of Beijing as both the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party could eventually side with Beijing out of necessity (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.6). However, should China use its nuclear capabilities, due to potential and alleged U.S. escalation, the technological advancement of U.S. nuclear capabilities is currently so far ahead the Chinese that the amount of sheer destruction the U.S. could cause in China as an answer should deter Beijing from making a conflict nuclear (Cote, 2022, p.70).

In addition, there could also be a quarantine. It would essentially mean isolating Taiwan as a way for testing the willingness of the West while gaining potentially the upper hand for a quick escalation leading to a military intervention. The isolation itself would, and could include naval blockade, air zone restrictions, communication disruption and disinformation campaigns to polarise public opinion (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.8). This idea of the surrounding territory of Taiwan virtually consumed by the Dragon is not a far-fetched one as all ships and vassals heading to Taiwan would then be escorted to the nearest port or customs control facility of the PRC, all that ensured by the army of vassals and the coast guard and maritime militia of the PRC. This could as well be triggered by the U.S. armament of Taiwan by potentially shipping missiles to the island that would to some extent legitimise the initiation of a quarantine by Beijing (Blackwill and Zelikow, 2021, p.35-36).

Additionally, increasing Chinese coercion on the South China Sea would make countries in the region comply due to their livelihood in fishing potentially put at stake as the China Coast Guard Militia would make their lives miserable and especially burdensome, after which these countries would more or less surely take the deal whatever China puts in front of them eventually resulting in the erosion of U.S. alliances and presence in the region as even the Filipino leadership could side with China as the prices of U.S. alliance would yield less return

than the amount of issues it would result in vis-à-vis China by its existence in the first place (Poling, 2022, n.p.).

Counter measures by Washington in the case of a Chinese quarantine of Taiwan could be various. Supporting Taiwan in that case by ensuring shipping by U.S. vassals, and by armed conflict, if need be, then it could prove to be problematical due to the number of PRC vassals and faster supply lines enabled reaction time of Beijing. Therefore, a counter quarantine or blockade could more efficiently and safely disrupt the plan of Xi Jinping as shipping into mainland China would become especially difficult due its maritime geography. Potential points for strangling the economy of the mainland would be the Malacca Strait or between the Lombok and Makassar straits for traffic through the Indonesian islands. Yet one of the biggest shortcomings of a counterblockade could be the blocking of trade for the much of Asia's biggest players such as Japan or South Korea (Blackwill and Zelikow, 2021, p.36-37). Still, connecting to coercion, another alternative by Beijing could come in the form of exclusion zones. This option is beyond the quarantine one while adding periodical disruption of maritime and air traffic heading to Taiwan (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p.126), for which Xi has his tools i.e. the Chinese Coast Guard and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia. This way, subtly, Beijing could assert its coercive might without much conflict with the West while increasingly showing Taiwan it is wise to side with the mainland (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.10).

Another way of changing Taiwan's calculus is by occupying the surrounding islands. The islands China could occupy inching closer to Taiwan could be the Taiping Island, that is in the Spratly Island group between South Vietnam and the Philippines. Second, China could invade the Pratas Islands between Hong Kong and the Luzon Strait. Thirdly, there is the Penghu Islands also known as Pescadores, which is closer to Southern Taiwan. Also, there is the Kinmen that is in comfortable distance to Xiamen in mainland China and the Matsu Islands that is closer to Fuzhou, being still in mainland China, both easier to control for Beijing given their vicinity to the mainland. It is now the Pratas Islands that is actively defended by Taiwan, hence the most beckoning for Beijing signalled by the frequent overflights of Chinese fighters (Blackwill and Zelikow, 2021, p.31-33). However, on the Spratly Island chain there is already considerable Chinese military presence, that in theory could be destroyed by the U.S. but it could end up being too costly as the closest military air force bases are located in Okinawa and Guam being around 1500 nautical miles from the Spratly island chain, therefore, for the actual and effective defence of Taiwan the U.S. would need to be able to acquire a forward-base

posture as it was during the Cold War in Western Europe, that translates into the First Island Chain in the case of Taiwan (Cote, 2022, p.70).

Other than that, China has four bigger military bases on the South China Sea that would ensure the quick control of the airspace should push come to shove, possibly rendering the U.S. unable to guard its vassals. The cherry on the top is if we consider the sheer size of the Spratlys, whereby we can see that Pearl Harbour could fit into the lagoon of the second largest Chinese military base in the region while Mischief Reef being the largest equalling to the size of the I-495 Beltway around Washington D.C. These sizes foreshadow, that if military conflict comes, the neutralisation of the Spratlys alone would draw immense resources from the defence of Taiwan (Poling, 2022, n.p.).

Beijing could also resort to an air and missile campaign (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p.127) that would be highly similar to that of NATO's missile campaign in Kosovo and Serbia in 1999. This would also be aimed at the pressuring of the Taiwanese domestic politics for changing course. Cyberwarfare and electronic attacks would be paired with missile targeting of key infrastructural objectives of strategic purpose such as the air force of Taiwan along with command-and-control facilities on the island. All that in the end could lead to Taiwanese politicians accepting Beijing's demands (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.13), as Taiwan does not at this moment possess enough air force defence and military strength in general to deter Beijing whatsoever (Blackwill and Zelikow, 2021, p.40). It could also be stated that the U.S. military would be able to provide defence for Taiwan, yet it could not protect it fully from attacks or ballistic missiles let alone airstrikes, while at the same time commitment for the defence of the island shall be well thought out as even coercive quarantines and blockades have the tendency to escalate swiftly, which is especially worrying given the fact that China is a nuclear power even though the U.S. enjoys technological primacy on that front (Cote, 2022, p.66-67).

Additionally, there is also the possibility of an actual invasion against Taiwan, yet the method for that is not self-explanatory as it could be conducted by an all-out amphibious assault or an airborne assault along with special operations attacking key infrastructure both military and civil while making way for the ground forces (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.14; Blackwill and Zelikow, 2021, p.38). Currently it is more plausible for Beijing to seek the alternatives to full-scale invasion such as air, maritime, cyber and space attacks. This mix of threats with military operations kept at a minimum could very well make Taiwan comply with whatever the PRC desires. Even if a war could be avoided the sheer tension and differences in

terms of goals would surely pose immense risks for future escalation and policy related issues between the PRC, Taiwan, and the US (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.1).

The problem is that if the United States would endeavour to contain Beijing's coercive efforts it would certainly need new strategies and innovations for the use of its weapons arsenal, which if started could cross some serious lines that would eventually be translated as escalatory steps for Beijing (Cote, 2022, p.70). All in all, what the general sentiment should dictate is that maintaining communication and dialogue between the main adversaries is of utmost importance and priority as military threat without diplomatic relations could very well escalate into catastrophe (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.1), while at the same time the U.S. should be extremely cautious about making security commitments for defending Taiwan from Chinese coercion as it could happen that upon challenged, those commitments would be broken quickly (Cote, 2022, p.70). But what about economics? What role could it play and how the current state of globalisation signalled by the failed decoupling attempt translates into any potential economic series of incentives or deterring factors for China?

III.2. Economics

III.2.1. The Domestic Cost of Aggression

Going back to the late 1970s, China was one of the poorest countries with an economy lagging behind, that are not the credentials of a key player in international relations and economy that China had become. The policy of reform and opening up has been retained and nourished from Deng Xiaoping through Xi Jinping with changes and modifications where necessary to the adaption of contemporary challenges. In 2013 Xi Jinping announced the goal of reaching the status of a developed country, plans of massive infrastructural developments, the Belt and Road Initiatives and many more projects facilitating regional integration and economic growth (Lo, 2022, p.32). Furthermore, the one child policy has been stretched to a 2-3 child policy in a rush to tackle the issue of ageing society and eventually about 800 million Chinese were lifted from poverty along with circa 200 million Chinese having ascended to middle class status (Wen, 2022, p.86-87). This economic model, as we can see, made possible some incredible results, but that is not without its own caveats.

Albert Hirschman stated, foreshadowing the issues with the Chinese growth model, that rapid growth is always imbalanced and even if it addresses the shortcomings of the then existing economy, it will bring about atrocities of its own, which if not handled properly or at all due to the social and political embeddedness of the new economic model, then all manners of depravity could unfold hitting the domestic economy (Pettis, 2022, n.p.). From 2010-2019 the average GDP growth rate of the Chinese economy was 7.7% that was coming down from the astoundingly high 10.4% in the first decades (Hu et al., 2021, p.971). However, the high investment model led economic growth was not only a good thing, it was more than welcome after the Sino-Japanese war, Maoism and the civil war as the issue of investment deficiency had to be addressed (Pettis, 2022, n.p.).

Before the 20th Party Congress, official data revealed that the economy is more than likely to face historical underperformance (Nordin, 2023, p.4), but what is the underlying reasons for an underperforming economy and declining GDP growth in China? The official blueprint for the Chinese economic growth was to invest huge chunks of its GDP. To get the capital for the investment, which is shared between the government, business actors and households, capital consumption of households had to be restricted creating savings based on the logic what is not consumed would be saved. However, it is hard to directly control every household so pushing disproportionate share of the GDP to the government and business actors

was the Chinese way as consumption declined and savings grew resulting in a 50% share of domestic savings in the GDP by the late 1990s (Pettis, 2022, n.p.).

This fiddling around with the GDP and consumption related capital relocation could be done so in part due to the intertwined nature of the Chinese Communist Party and the economy. This was best put forward by Steve Tsang, Director of SOAS China Institute, who suggested a party-state realism framework, in which the domestic legitimacy of the CCP is reliant on stable economic growth (Lo, 2022, p.34-35).

Still, the problem is that the high investment levels for decades created a huge burden resulting in Chinese debt reaching 280% of its GDP, as debt was channelled into non-productive investments meaning that the given project's cost of labour and resources employed exceeded its economic benefits. In such an environment, with unfathomable amount of capital injected into infrastructural projects and real estate, speculators, counting on the indefinite rise in prices, drove up the price of real estate with that creating a false demand resulting in ghost towns (Pettis, 2022, n.p.). Although the false demand was there, Xi Jinping tried to cool down speculators while addressing the real estate bubble by implementing the policy of no speculation in housing along with a pilot property tax ensuring price stability for years (Wen, 2022, p.87). Eventually the infrastructure related investments and the real estate sector drove GDP growth so much that is now virtually inseparable from politics and domestic economic performance. The biggest issue still is, however, that actual investment rates relative to the Chinese GDP had been hovering around 40-50%, putting it into context, even developing countries in their economic skyrocketing phase invest around 20-30% of their GDP (Pettis, 2022, n.p.), and one could logically assume that China, by today's standards is not anymore in its initial skyrocketing years as this huge domestic economic burden if dialled back on could result in severe growth downturn.

According to Wang Wen, predictions about China's decline might as well be made about its collapse as scholars and policymakers remain relatively high due to the ability of the Chinese economy defeating such claims against it from time to time. Furthermore, according to the author one of the gravest misjudgements by many scholars is when their claims are based on declining GDP solely without considering the increasing Chinese GDP base. As for illustration, the observable seemingly low 6% GDP growth of China in 2019 is roughly equal to that of the Chinese GDP in 1996 (Wen, 2022, p.84-89).

But how the state and characteristics of domestic Chinese economy relate to the situation with Taiwan and cross-strait relations? First, one of the key variables is the already mentioned party-state realism framework of Steve Tsang as it helps in understanding the foreign policy operative framework of Beijing as well. According to this, the key interests of the Chinese in order are state security (that is the survival of the party), national sovereignty, territorial integrity then a stable economy. This foreshadows the highlighted importance of rejuvenation even coming before the economy ensuring capital for military development amid economic hardships as well (Lo, 2022, p.34).

In 2020 alone China spent roughly 250 billion USD on the development of the People's Liberation Army and has been increasing its military budget year to year (Djuyandi, Sudirman and Sumadinata, 2022, p.601-608; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p.147-149). In an era of recession and economic decline Xi Jinping has to make conscious decisions about capital allocation. After the 20th Party Congress Xi stated the favouring of security of economic development therefore it is safe to assume sustained capital support for the military (Lin and Wuthnow, 2022, n.p.), which is underlined by the previous party-state realism order of importance.

In addition, we must address the elephant in the room, that is the pandemic. It could be seen during the zero-Covid policy in China that previous economic growth led party legitimacy can be shifted towards legitimacy based on pandemic management ensuring low numbers of infection. However, it must be stated for the record, that this policy of Beijing left its mark on the economy as a full-scale lockdown on Shanghai reduced national GDP by about 4% (Lo, 2022, p.35). Although the reaction of 'The People' must be addressed especially in the Chinese setting. The zero-Covid policy harsh rules and lockdown led to wide scale public dissatisfaction for which the climax was the biggest non-state-sanctioned anti-lockdown protest after a fire in Xinjiang broke out killing 10 citizens as due to the lockdowns firefighters were unable to assist the threatened. Shortly thereafter, Beijing decided to leave behind its Draconian zero-Covid policy (Nordin, 2023, p.1-4). It shows the uncanny ability of 'The People' even in a restrictive top-down authoritarian communist environment, but how is this connecting to Taiwan?

After the end of zero-Covid, party legitimacy could shift its base from the previous pandemic management and performative legitimacy onto nationalist legitimacy that could and would once again put the Taiwan issue on the front page by the increasing voice of the regime-produced nationalist groups urging the party to take action on Taiwan, that, given the strength of the people's will in the zero-Covid case, could very well manifest in aggression against

Taiwan. Therefore, the domestic cost of invasion could more likely be translated as the domestic cost of economic decline, that would amplify the higher rank of territorial integrity as the Chinese economy could reach its peak or at least temporarily halt in terms of economic growth, with that shifting focus on rejuvenation (Lo, 2022, p.34-35).

Another factor to bear in mind when assessing domestic economic factors with relation to the Taiwan question, is energy. China's growth led to the largest increase in oil consumption, then natural gas consumption followed closely by coal consumption (Wang et al., 2022, p.1). This is especially worrying for China as in case of an invasion against Taiwan could assert a large disruption in vital supply chains with regards to energy import that could translate to global terms shortly after (Djuyandi, Sudirman and Sumadinata, 2022, p.608). After the end of the restrictive measures oil demand skyrocketed, which cannot be met solely from Chinese supply due to China's dependence on foreign oil exceeding 70% of domestic supply (Wang et al., 2022, p.9-10), underlying economic threats for Beijing.

As a means to dodge these economic threats stemming from energy security policymakers shall tailor policies around regional differences highlighted by the pandemic, as even Covid policies were implemented in accordance with socioeconomic factors and varying levels of development in regions (Ergenc, 2023, n.p.), while satisfying particularly energy hungry regions such as the Yangtze River Delta Region. Furthermore, to ensure energy security, as a means for curbing domestic economic threats with regards to energy in a war scenario over Taiwan, the utilization of old industrial (Jilin, Liaoning) and energy rich regions (Xinjiang, inner Mongolia) could be of key importance (Want et al., 2022, p.10).

For China the economic cost of invasion would result in degrading domestic economic conditions as one of the many reasons could be energy supply chain issues or turbulences with regards to semiconductor value chains (Vest, Kratz and Goujon, 2022, n.p.). There are already tangible technological blockades from Washington as China put science and technology in the spotlight as these are the main productive forces (Wen, 2022, p.87). Moreover, China exports ICT goods in the largest volumes worldwide and it is the Mecca for producing automotive goods as well. Upon waging a war, the losing of access to Taiwanese semiconductors would be a real threat as this shock could quickly translate to the manufacturing sector then the overall economy. At the same time domestic investors would put their money elsewhere eventually rendering the Chinese leadership unable to fully control its exchange rate resulting in a declining domestic economy whereby a weaker RMB could mean less imports from other

countries (Vest, Kratz and Goujon, 2022, n.p.). let us move on, bearing in mind the main vulnerabilities and state of the Chinese economy.

III.2.2. Global Economic Embeddedness

The economic backlash of a Chinese invasion against Taiwan could be manyfold than that of the current Russo-Ukrainian war as the Chinese economy is 10, the Taiwanese economy is 4 times bigger than that of Russia's and Ukraine's respectively, while the US interconnectedness with the Chinese and Taiwanese economy is, again, volumes larger (McDaniel and Zhong, 2022, p. 1). Taiwan in 2021 alone, to assess what is at stake, exported and imported about 922 billion USD worth of goods and services and even if we calculate with a blockade against Taiwan still 565 billion USD of value-added trade would be at exposure. Furthermore, looking at chip manufacturing under a blockade scenario, about 1.6 trillion USD worth of trade would be lost as Taiwan produces 70% of smartphone chips and 30-35% of automotive industry used chips (Vest, Kratz and Goujon, 2022, n.p.).

Before an actual invasion or attack, due to the Chinese decision-making environment with regards to information outflow, the details of a possible attack would be largely unknown, so firms and business actors in the region could play a wait and see approach while putting pressure on the Renminbi's exchange rate. This approach is legitimate under the tremendous costs of rerouting supply chains and pulling huge capital out of China if things go south (Blanchette and DiPippo, 2022, p.3). Rerouting costs of the shipping lanes through the Malacca straits could range from anywhere between 279 million USD (through Indonesia) and 2.82 billion USD (through Australia) per month with delays, while disrupting US trade too with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and China too (McDaniel and Zhong, 2022, p.8).

As soon as an offensive happens by China, commercial shipping would stop, supply chains would collapse, digital flow disrupted through submarine cables, and financial markets would likely panic (Blanchette and DiPippo, 2022, p.3; McDaniel and Zhong, 2022, p.1), as investors would likely liquidate their holdings which were, as of 2022, worth more than 1 trillion USD in Chinese onshore bonds and equities, out of which roughly 755 billion USD worth of offshore Chinese equities were listed in the United States (Vest, Kratz and Goujon, 2022, n.p.). Furthermore, this scenario could very well create a much harsher global environment than it was in 2008 (Blanchette and DiPippo, 2022, p.3), as would likely cut back or stop altogether its overseas lending and financing activities under currency pressures, that is worth around 100 billion USD. In addition, in anticipation of sanctions against China, the capital provided by banks for trade facilitating – around 6.5-8 trillion USD – could quickly

vanish and causing further trade disruption worth of 270 billion USD between China and the rest of the world (Vest, Kratz and Goujon, 2022, n.p.).

Furthermore, the US, should things go south, could impose energy blockade and financial sanctions. Mostly the provinces nearest the Taiwan Strait would suffer the most, which are Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang accounting for 22 % of the Chinese GDP (Blanchette and DiPippo, 2022, p.4). There was a key example, when the “kill the chicken to scare the monkey” strategy was used against Banco Delta Asia, to demonstrate US might by financial sanctions, and shortly the Chinese reacted by passing the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law to pressure foreign firms not to take part in US sanctions (Jeong, 2022, p.71). These could be catastrophic for Beijing as 83% of China’s oil import is conducted on sea while 77% of it goes through the Malacca Strait, making it highly vulnerable to US blockade. Yet, it could be dangerous even for the US as this measure could prove to be especially and highly disruptive concerning the global economy. In that case China could adopt measures of high destructiveness such as dumping US treasury securities, stopping the export of rare earth elements or halting cooperation altogether (Wu, 2023, p. 14-15).

Still, Beijing could draw such conclusions, that there is an economic interdependence so big, that similar sanctions to that of the ones against Russia is nearly impossible, as even high gas dependency proved to be an obstacle concerning sanctions (Carlson, 2022, p.4). The US could also push the issue of human rights violations of China in Xinjiang that could result in international sanctions hitting the region’s textile industry, photovoltaic industry, and cotton production, for which China would likely react by imposing countermeasures and sanctions of similar nature probably with less yield on the US (Wu, 2023, p. 15). Still the US arguably would only impose biting sanctions on Beijing, especially the banking sector, if a conflict gets to the level of American military involvement that could offset any US harm coming from the sanctions. US allies would probably sooner or later join the sanctions coalition as the US could and would pressure them to do so. At the end of the day, the US is more important in terms of trade that is supported by numbers as in terms of outward FDI stock, sales of foreign affiliates and banking claims in 2020, 2019 and 2022 respectively the US, on paper too, is a more important economic partner for the EU than China for the EU (Blanchette and DiPippo, 2022, p.5).

The EU described China as a partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival, that changed throughout the years from friends to more like foes (Krause, 2022, p.288). Taiwan is seemingly aligning with the EU as Taiwan joined the sanctions against Russia, although

Taiwanese-Russian trade is about 0.75% of each other's trading volume, so it is more of a symbolic gesture (Hinton and Hoang, 2022, p.2). Still the EU on paper signed up to the One China Principle of the PRC when diplomatic relations were established in 1975, though the EU is a quite complicated entity arguably without a single foreign policy but more like foreign policies (Brown, 2022, p.1001). It is shown in the case of Germany as largely due to the policies of Angela Merkel the trade volume of Germany with China almost become equal to its trade volume with the US and France while other EU countries did not reach that level of trade volume with China (Krause, 2022, p.289).

We can say that the core of the EU's One China Principle is still untouched, at the same time the EU was never fully aligned with it, while seeking economic benefits with China (Brown, 2022, p.1019). In March 2022, due to increasing coercion of Beijing and attempts at reshaping the rules based international order, the Council of the EU sanctioned Chinese officials for human rights violations in Xinjiang while at the same time the EP froze the ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (Brown, 2022, p.1009). Though, it is still quite worrisome that neither the EU's 2022 "Strategic Compass", nor NATO's Strategy mentions Taiwan (Lee and Schreer, 2022, p.164).

But why should the EU act? For Europe, a potential Sino-Russian closer alignment or axis with military support is crucial as it would extend the war in Ukraine and if that is combined with another possible war in East Asia, Europe's security would be threatened further (Krause, 2022, p.288). Europe could significantly contribute to stop technological exports to China, as Beijing is still dependent on those largely as many Chinese companies are dependent on technological export from Germany and Sweden. In addition, key chemicals used for chip production do come from Europe, the US and Japan, a rejuvenation by Beijing's playbook would surely distort current supply chains, hence it's the economic interest of the EU to keep Taiwan's not de jure but practical and current 'sovereignty'. On the contrary Europe's common stance could be shattered by asymmetrically big Chinese dependence on some areas as the 2022 data states 19 out of 30 raw materials considered critical for the EU were imported from China (Lee and Schreer, 2022, p.171-175).

All in all, for the US to reduce misperception and misunderstanding resulting in antagonism, all channels of communications must be maintained and nourished so that the economic strategic competition with China can become peaceful, rules-based and managed (Wu, 2023, p.29-30), while the EU could easily be divided and would likely remain cautious as

the Bilateral Investment Agreement with Taiwan was delayed by Ursula von Der Leyen due to Chinese backlash (Lee and Schreer, 2022, p.175).

III.3. Military Considerations

III.3.1. Chinese Military Development

Since late 1990s the People's Liberation Army underwent massive modernisation and capability upgrades. The 2019 white paper on Chinese defence set out goals such as “complete military modernization” by 2035, and state of “world-class” military by about 2049 (Bitzinger and Raska, 2022, p.122). The 2019 strategic revision did not change focus from Taiwan and the United States, but rather underlined Xi Jinping's position as the leader of the PLA while making sure the PLA's commitment is rock solid (Wuthnow and Fravel, 2022, p.14).

Modernisation efforts also put a huge emphasis, by 2027-35 on navy and air force, according to the US Department of Defense in 2020 China surpassed the US navy in sheer number of warships, conventional ballistic missiles, and air-defence systems. Moreover, from 2021, due to the revision process in National Defence Law, the Central Military Commission is enabled to mobilise military and civilian resources for national defence (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p.147). At the same time the number of CMC officials were reduced and Xi put loyalists in their place to facilitate reforms without opposition (Wei, 2022, p.3). With regards to the Central Military Commission Xi retained Miao, Zhang Youxia, and Zhang Shengmin from the previous CMC, and added He Weidong, Li Shangfu, and Liu Zhenli who can easily be regarded as loyalists as He Weidong, vice chair of the CMC, has no experience in the CMC and general Zhang Youxia, who is 72 years old, was elected despite the age of 68 being the official retirement limit (Jash, 2023, p.7).

The political motivation of the 2019 military reform suggests the dynamic between professionalism and party politics is shifting to the latter. Concentrating military decision-making at the top of the elite mountain could very well undermine lower-level decision making in war like scenarios that is quite frequent between commanders and officers. Consequently, Xi is becoming undetachable from the PLA and its potential mistakes, that translates to him being able to almost solely decide on an invasion against Taiwan or to abort that endeavour, both meaning tremendous political exposure (Wuthnow and Fravel, 2022, p.27-28). Although there are many loyalists and fellow comrades to Xi in the CMC, professionalism is present too as Zhang Youxia served during the Sino-Vietnam conflict in 79 and Liu Zhenli who was the former commander of the Eastern Theatre Command (Taiwan and East China Sea) while also

having experience in the Western Theatre Command (relations with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal and Myanmar) as a commander (Jash, 2023, p.7).

The 2019 white paper also described “informationization” as crucial in mainly referring to technology capabilities in command and control areas. To this, the fourth industrial revolution is essential to mention as it mainly covers AI technology, big data, automation, robotics, and quantum computing, that have immense effects on military development. China exploits this technology to make weaponry intelligent as many Chinese decision makers regard AI as one of the keys to surpass the US militarily and leave it behind for good in the strategic competition (Bitzinger and Raska, 2022, p.121-124). China’s emphasis on AI and quantum computing is underlined by the continuous development of chips used in drones and precision strike missiles, that emanates from the 2027 PLA modernisation goals as well (Wei, 2022, p.4). However, China already stated in 2021 officially, that military applications of AI shall never be used to start war or to pursue hegemonic ambitions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021, n.p.).

The making of military equipment “intelligent” involves, as part of modernisation efforts, ballistic missiles fitted with hypersonic glide vehicles, upgraded integrated air and missile defences, and high-altitude drones. Furthermore, there are non-technology related new strategies such as the use of civilian assets for carrying out old types of operations, i.e., the ferrying of troops and equipment in the Taiwan Strait, essential for an invasion (Wuthnow and Fravel, 2022, p.29-30; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p.147).

UAV development has been profound and a key piece of the PLA’s military arsenal. Their development started in the 1950s and by today the PLA is said to be equipped with at least 4 iterations of UAVs, the EA-03 Xianglong, the Attack 1 (Wing Dragon 1), the JWP02 and the BZK-005 UAV. The EA-03 Xianglong is capable of aerial surveillance for 10 hours at the altitude of 18000 meters from 2000 kilometres away, which makes it China’s most advanced reconnaissance system. It is in use by the PLA as these were present at the Dong-Lang conflict. The Attack-1 is equipped with synthetic aperture radar along with laser-guided missiles and GPS-guided bombs and it could also be on mission for 20 hours, although it has not been reported to had been used in any scenario (Li, 2022, p. 106-107).

Regarding raw numbers, China has built up military forces enumerating 965,000 troops, 265,000 navy and 395,000 air force. More precisely China is in the possession of around 750 light armoured vehicles, 5400 tanks, 9834 artillery shells and missile launchers, and about 300

attack helicopters. The main tank types China could deploy include the ZTZ-88, ZTZ-96 and ZTZ-99 enumerating 4000 units, while also having older, T-54 based units around 1400 units (Bartók, 2022, n.p.). The PLA was the most important element of the military machinery of the PRC, mainly due to its role fulfilled in the Tiananmen Square protests, but it has changed from the 90s, with partial downsizing in infrastructure and personnel (Jash, 2023, p.1), to the detriment of the PLA's political influence, which is, make no mistake, still crucial (Bartók, 2018, p.60).

Concerning Chinese nuclear capability, China now has 400 warheads with a building pace that will yield 1000 warheads by 2027. It maintains the nuclear triad in the form of submarines, bombers, and missiles, while the building of at least 300 missile silos is on its way to accommodate equipment. Policy-wise there is a shift towards launch-on-warning, while there is an unofficial debate about changes in the principle of no first use (Stokes, 2023, p.3).

The air force of the PLA, the PLAAF, has a healthy size with regards to personnel and equipment, yet the aircrafts are partly outdated Soviet technology, these are mainly the J-7 and J-8. However, contemporary Chinese aircrafts, in part bought from the Soviets but developed in mainland China, are the J-20 and J-31 that is still in development (Bartók, 2022, n.p.). the air force of the PLA, similar to its navy, was mostly efficient in territorial defence but since the 90s has undergone major development with the addition of several aircraft classes (Bartók, 2018, p.67). Thanks to continuous development, the PLAAF can boast especially high levels of readiness along with adequate logistics support system to sustain operations with success. However, to sustain such operations in a broader and contested network of airfields the PLAAF is still hindered by its supply formations' ability to adjust quickly (Tirk et al., 2023, p.148).

Xi Jinping stressed the importance of the PLA navy many times already, as a key to make China a maritime power and ensure its power projection capabilities on the long haul (Herlevi et al., 2022, p.113). The PLA navy was divided into 3 major fleets in 1949. The North Sea Fleet, centred in Qingdao, the East Fleet, centred in Ningbo, and the South Sea Fleet centred in Zhanjiang (Allen et al., 2023, p.7, Bartók, 2018, p.64). As for an actual invasion, the biggest logistical obstacle is getting the troops from mainland China to Taiwan, for which the 'comfortable' ratio would be 5:1 in favour of the Chinese that means China should line up about 1.5 million troops to make the invasion tangible as Taiwan according to the least positive estimates could line up about 300,000 troops. For the transporting of the PLA, China as of 2022, possessed 8 amphibious military vassals from the Yuzhao-class and one Yushen-class that is capable of transporting helicopters aboard. Still, these transporting means would only enable

China to get 7200 of its troops on the island of Taiwan at once, therefore the use of civilian sea transporting capabilities is crucial (Bartók, 2022, n.p.).

The Chinese navy has become powerful enough to support Beijing's assertive maritime policies, still the question of logistics is there on the long run (Boggess et al, 2023, p.115), as all three branches of the PLA still use separate logistics and equipment engineering institutions (Allen, et al., 2023, p.14). In all that, the US should not downplay and underestimate the PLA, its navy and air force, as it admittedly committed that mistake many times i.e., by underestimating the time for new units to be operational. Although the navy of the PLA, arguably the key for taking Taiwan by force, evolved into the de facto biggest in the world, the issues of logistics and sustainment capabilities remain along with limited sealift and not enough overseas bases, while the number of replenishment ships is still hovering around 10, which is quite low. However, these constraining factors are currently being addressed by Beijing (Boggess et al., 2023, p.129).

III.3.2. A Collision Course with Uncle Sam?

Antony Blinken and Wang Yi met on the margins of the Munich Security Conference on February 18th, where the Secretary called for the respect of US sovereignty, while also underlining the need for dedicated crisis communication channels to avoid major conflict escalation and another Cold War (U.S. Department of State, 2023, n.p.). However, China, in one of its recent communiqués the ministry of foreign affairs depicted the United States as a cruel expansionist power that installs “pro-American puppet regimes” by waging proxy wars (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, n.p.). Even though peaceful management of the US-China relations is key according to Secretary Blinken, there is an undeniable US interest. The traditional drivers of US interest, such as economic, political and security related ones, in the case of Taiwan, pairs with utmost military value that in combination is the main fuel for US strategic thinking (Jie, 2022, p.228).

As early as 2021 by Admiral Phil Davidson, Admiral Michael Gilday, and then Commandant of the Marine Corps General David Berger all stressed the possibility of a Chinese invasion in the next 6 years, while Taiwanese Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng went so far as to voice the possibility of the invasion by 2025 (Gallagher, 2022, p.1). But why should the US be anxious? At the end of the day, even according to China's estimates, the average US military budget still exceeds 700 billion USD (being more than the next 15 countries' combined), the US has around 800 overseas military bases and about 173.000 troops deployed in 159 countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023, n.p.).

The US presence in the Taiwan Strait could make a Chinese invasion impossible due to US nuclear attack submarines, long range anti-ship missiles launched from east of Taiwan along with long range strategic bombers stationed at US basis in the Second Island Chain, that consists of the Marianas (Guam), the western Caroline Islands, western New Guinea, and Japan's Bonin Islands (Cote, 2022, p.65-66). Naval mines could also negatively impact the success of a Chinese military invasion against Taiwan by hindering PLAN sea control and blocking power projection capabilities. One of the examples is the Mk 67 sub-launched mobile mine that can be carried by SSN-760 type submarines (one of those is the USS Annapolis) (Colby, 2023, n.p.). Although Chinese naval posts on the South China Sea could easily halt US vassals, the US-Japanese ports on the Senkaku Island Chain and in Okinawa and Guam could support US vassals to reach the Strait uninterruptedly. China could only aid this liability for its invasion by acquiring a forward base posture by taking the Senkaku Islands (Bartók, 2022, n.p.).

Japan could, and arguably should be a key player for the benefit of the US and Taiwan in the defence against Beijing, due to its likely rear area logistic, medical, and operational support (Berkofsky, 2022, p.17), should Xi see an attack inevitable for reunification (Klingner, 2022, p.7), The least credible scenario is the sending of actual troops by Japan and the US directly to Taiwan, still military drills of such nature are ongoing. It is more likely for Japan – if some its remote territory is violated or attacked – to close off maritime channels to hinder Chinese sea navigation (Bartók, 2022, n.p.). Japan has been developing its military deterrence capabilities, mainly to protect key maritime chokepoints in the Miyako and Tokara Straits, new radar sites, surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missile units, and intelligence-gathering and security units have also been deployed on Yonaguni, Amami, Oshima, Miyako, and Ishigaki Islands. In addition, there is construction of a new airfield on Mage Island, providing possible venue for US training site, carrier practice, and SDF air training. Also, Japan purchased additional F-35s and increased the number of F-15s and E-2D early warning aircraft that is deployed in Okinawa at Naha Air Base (Klingner, 2022, p.7-9).

Going back to our main actors, China, and the US, neither sides could prevent the other's submarines to enter conflicting waters, in which scenario the US nuclear-powered attack submarines could freely wander the waters of the Strait. Sonars are not usable due to shallow waters in the Strait, moreover, Chinese submarines could not escort the amphibious shipping of Chinese forces as they would be exposed. Moreover, US submarines could remain stealthy as there are built in battery-powered unmanned air vehicles that map the targets 10-20 miles

before the submarines, that is key for destroying Chinese amphibious transport while not entering shallow waters and expose themselves (Cote, 2022, p.67).

The US could also use a strategy of denial against Chinese invasion by providing enough means for Taiwan to deter Beijing for good by setting up defence along the first island chain (Colby, 2023, n.p.), that consists of the Kuril Islands, the Japanese Archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and the north-western part of the Philippines, ending around Borneo (Cote, 2022, p.65-66). With regards to the navy still, one of the biggest factors, in case of any aggression will be the navy, whereby one of the key indicators is the battle force missile capability. That way China has a comfortable advantage against Taiwan set in a 9:1 ratio, however this advantage could be diminished by adding 30% of the US navy's capabilities. All the missiles, torpedoes the US could is around 13.000 whereby this number is around 4600 for the Chinese (Bartók, 2022, n.p.).

Regarding US air force, US bombers would be a crucial liability in Chinese amphibious invasion mainly due to the US's new Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM) paired with the bombers' ability to operate from the Second Island chain that is a huge advantage as Chinese power projection capability is greatly reduced by the additional distance between the first and second island chains. This results in LRASM being virtually immune to Chinese interception while about 50 US bombers are equipped with LRASM that poses tremendous threat (Cote, 2022, p.68). Even if there is a successful invasion by Beijing, a scenario could emerge whereby some of the island is controlled by Beijing and the rest by Taipei, but if we consider an even limited Japanese presence or support, combined with US capabilities, an invasion could be deterred likely with success (Bartók, 2022, n.p.).

Still, even with total US commitment, Taiwan could not effectively be defended against Chinese aircraft strikes and conventional ballistic missiles. However, the US could, relying on existing technology, counter Chinese attacks of such nature by using medium to large scale conventional strikes against Chinese targets ashore while bearing in mind the danger of escalation (Cote, 2022, p.66). If China wants to conduct a successful invasion, the strategy for that could be a Pearl Harbour Strategy by inflicting an unanticipated fatal blow against US and Japanese forces on Okinawa, Guam and perhaps Hawaii. Without that, Taiwanese, US, and Japanese capabilities exceed what Beijing could handle let alone surpass them. All in all, if Beijing decides to invade, for a full-blown conflict the much-needed preparatory steps (piling up ammunition, converting commercial ships) could be observed well before an actual invasion could take place. However, if China decides to take the Penghu Islands first, that is of huge

strategic value, then it could remain concealed before the US, something to bear in mind for US strategists (Bartók, 2022, n.p.).

The question of Taiwan is likely to lead the US and China into conflict unless it's managed with utmost wisdom and caution as Chinese trust was always low in the US while the US has been supporting Taiwan in its course of detaching from China (Jie, 2022, p.228). That is underlined by the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 passed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on September 15th providing almost 4.5 billion USD in security assistance for Taiwan while labelling the Island as a "Major Non-NATO Ally" (U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2022, n.p.). This is contrary to what many experts on the field think the US should do. According to them, the US should not depict Taiwan as a strategic US asset of vital importance as Beijing could see this as a US attempt aimed at containing China by "playing the Taiwan card" (Jie, 2022, p.228).

Additionally, for the US, a Chinese rejuvenation, even if through unlikely peaceful means, would almost certainly be an unacceptable outcome, as for the US a Chinese controlled Taiwan influences US security and economic prosperity directly (Colby, 2023, n.p.), despite this, reunification for Beijing is a given both for the CCP and Xi Jinping as the cornerstone of legitimacy and legacy respectively (Jie, 2022, p.229).

IV. Conclusion

In pursuit of assessing the geopolitical reality of China, summing up the findings from domestic developments to military capabilities is crucial. Regarding domestic politics it could be said that Xi Jinping's China uses assertive nationalism building on fear and hatred (Whiting, 1995, p.295-296), that has to be always directed at something and as Xi's domestic way of rule aiming to securitise public policy, by which rejuvenation is an inevitability and party legitimacy (Harrison, 2019, p.15), the perceived threat of the US can get into this system of the CCP whereby a war with the US could become just as inevitable as unity with Taiwan (Rudd, 2022, n.p.). Consequently, rejuvenation with Taiwan is a given under contemporary Chinese statecraft and policy making (Harrison, 2019, p.13-15). To that end, Xi restructured the party elite and the Central Military Commission with loyalists to accommodate his Taiwan policy (Pottinger, Johnson and Feith, 2022, n.p.), while even Wang Yi at the 77th UNGA Summit reaffirmed the public that Taiwan is not a country now and will not ever become one (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022, n.p.).

Moving over to foreign policy, one of the fundamental sources of conflict is that the US wants to preserve a world order that maintains its position and interest, but the Chinese claim to see an opening stemming from US hypocrisy that provides them momentum (Weiss, 2022, n.p.), which could concentrate in the Taiwan issue resulting in a downward spiral and zero-sum game with the US. In 2018 China was already and admittedly dominant on the South China Sea (Poling, 2022, n.p.), that allows for various scenarios in the eve of a conflict and attempts of forced reunification. Consequently, forms of aggression could be manifold as it could include a political warfare campaign, quarantine and occupation of the surrounding islands, air and missile campaign and even the possibility of a full-scale invasion (Jensen, Bogart and McCabe, 2022, p.1-14; U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, 126-127). In all that the US should be cautious about making security commitments for defending Taiwan as upon challenged, those commitments could be broken quickly (Cote, 2022, p.70). Still, President Joe Biden seems to leave behind strategic ambiguity and commit more to defend Taiwan if push comes to shove (Eder, 2023, p.4).

What are the economic limits of Chinese ambitions and how economics influences the geopolitical reality of China? The originally high investment led economic growth model ensured continuously great economic growth even if it was falling (Hu et al., 2021, p.971), that could at the same time address investment deficiency (Pettis, 2022, n.p.). Still the issues of this model were foreseeable calling for attention in the future. The interconnectedness of the CCP and the economy, that puts forward party legitimacy based on stable economic growth (Lo, 2022, p.34-35), enabled the pushing of huge portions of the GDP to government and business actors to break down consumption thus accumulating savings (Pettis, 2022, n.p.). Even the quick shift from zero-Covid policy to its abolishing is intriguing to see how fast the party responded to the people's will (Nordin, 2023, p.1-4), therefore the domestic cost of economic decline could amplify nationalist territorialism shifting focus on Taiwan thus pressuring the CCP (Lo, 2022, p.34-35). This is underlined by the firm US non-support of lockdown protests as China would have been more than likely to blame everything on the US, that could in turn feed Chinese assertive nationalism (Whiting, 1995, p. 295-296), eventually contributing to a faster unification agenda (Eder, 2023, p.5).

For China upon waging war, therefore likely losing access to Taiwanese semiconductors could swiftly translate to domestic economic decline as the decline in the manufacturing sector could spill over quickly to the whole economy (Vest, Kratz and Goujon, 2022, n.p.). Furthermore, rerouting costs from the Malacca straits, where 77% of Chinese oil import goes

through (Wu, 2023, p. 14-15), would be expensive through Indonesia or Australia while also disrupting the entire region's trade (McDaniel and Zhong, 2022, p.1). Furthermore, commercial shipping would stop, supply chains collapse and financial markets panic (Blanchette and DiPippo, 2022, p.3; McDaniel and Zhong, 2022, p.1), while investors would be trying to pull out their capital that is in the hundreds of billions in USD (Vest, Kratz and Goujon, 2022, n.p.).

As for the EU, it has become evident, that China has become from a partner a competitor and systemic rival (Krause, 2022, p.288), and while the three areas of interaction (human rights, Taiwan, trade) shed light on the fact that even though the EU is interested in upholding the status quo on the South China Sea, it cannot attain a bolder policy shift as its security in a war scenario is not as much threatened as America's although the status quo is still in the economic interest of the EU (Lee and Schreer, 2022, p.171-175). Moreover, within the EU many member states became so intertwined with the Chinese economy and companies that the EU's economic counter efforts for a war over Taiwan could suffer from a bottleneck (Krumbein, 2023, p.23-24).

Current Chinese goals with regards to military development are quite ambitious as the reaching of a "world-class" military is set out by about 2049. Additionally, China puts tremendous effort into AI development as according to the Chinese it is the key to surpass the US and win future conflicts (Bitzinger and Raska, 2022, p.121-124). Connecting to that, making sure there is no opposition to development, Xi Jinping reduced the personnel of the Central Military Commission (Wei, 2022, p.3), and consequently filled up vacancies with his loyalist comrades (Jash, 2023, p.7). Consequently, Xi Jinping as the commander in chief of the PLA has become undetachable from it in terms of both success and failure opening him up to tremendous political exposure while he could practically solemnly decide on whether to invade Taiwan (Wuthnow and Fravel, 2022, p.27-28).

As for the actual invasion, the PRC to get its troops on Taiwanese land should line up about 1.5 million troops of its own to retain the comfortable 5:1 ratio as Taiwan could only assemble a resistance of 300.000. Moreover, the PRC only has capacity to transport 7200 of its troops to the island without using civilian sea transporting capabilities that could therefore become crucial (Bartók, 2022, n.p.). All in all, the Chinese military can now support Beijing's assertive Taiwan policy, still there are logistical problems (Boggess et al, 2023, p.115; Tirk et al., 2023, p.148), as all three branches of the PLA use separate systems. Still, sustainment capabilities, limited sealift and not enough oversea bases are still constraining factors, although

not overlooked as the PRC is currently trying to address all of the above (Boggess et al., 2023, p.129).

US military capabilities are the cornerstone of the reality of Chinese ambitions, especially with regards to Taiwan. A Chinese invasion could be rendered toothless due to US nuclear submarines, long range anti-ship missiles coming from East Taiwan and to top it all off the US stations long range strategic bombers in the Second Island Chain (consisting of the Marianas (Guam), the western Caroline Islands, western New Guinea, and Japan's Bonin Islands) (Cote, 2022, p.65-66). Additionally, US forces stationed in Okinawa and Guam along with US-Japanese naval bases on the Senkaku Islands could provide safe passage for US vassals to reach the strait (Bartók, 2022, n.p.).

Japan would also likely assist the US and Taiwan as it could close off maritime channels to block Chinese sea navigation (Bartók, 2022, n.p.), at the same time Japan has been deploying military deterrence capabilities in the Miyako and Tokara Straits, purchasing F-35 fighters and increasing F-15s deployed in Okinawa (Klinger, 2022, p.7-9). Going back to the US, neither their submarines nor Chinese ones could be blocked to enter the strait, that could swiftly result in, due to US superiority, too much exposure for a Chinese amphibious assault (Cote, 2022, p.67). Even if Beijing successfully invades Taiwan, a scenario whereby a split control of the island by Beijing and Taiwan is very likely. However, if we consider an even limited Japanese assistance combined with US capabilities under current technology, the deterrence of an invasion altogether is feasible (Bartók, 2022, n.p.). Still, it is crucial to mention that Taiwan cannot be fully protected from aircraft strikes and ballistic missiles. In this case the US could only counterattack that brings up the threat of escalation (Cote, 2022, p.66).

A US victory without a Chinese blockade is very unlikely as the nature of the looming conflicts suggests two scenarios. It either comes down to a quick Chinese victory because Taiwan surrenders or the US cannot provide enough assistance, or the US wins the first bigger conflict bringing about months or years of war (Henley, 2023, p.8). Ultimately the inevitability of a fight lies in a conflict of interest whereby the US has been supporting Taiwanese detachment from the mainland (Jie, 2022, p.228), as for the US a PRC controlled Taiwan poses tremendous security and trade threat (Colby, 2023, n.p.), whereas for the PRC and Xi Jinping rejuvenation is a given as the cornerstone of legitimacy and legacy (Jie, 2022, p.229).

The domestic political setting of the PRC enables full and tight control for Xi Jinping, therefore, the paper argues that the domestic political landscape of the PRC does not at all stand

in the way of the CCP's Taiwan policy. Uncannily, if not controlled, domestic nationalism could very well be an uncomfortable facilitator of aggression towards Taiwan that is underpinned by the sudden end of the zero-Covid policy initiated by protests and domestic pressure. Foreign policy wise, it is evident that China will not in the foreseeable future give up its Taiwan policy and plan of rejuvenation as it is part of Xi Jinping's legacy too and at the same time source of legitimacy. Additionally, continuous military development even amid economic downturns and the restructuring of military leadership suggests a preparatory phase aimed at acquiring readiness.

One of the Chinese geopolitical reality's biggest anchors is the very thing that put them on the geopolitical map as the adversary of America, that is mainly economics. Although economics is below rejuvenation on the PRC's agenda, the interconnectedness of the world (and America) and China's economy is likely to make Xi think twice before committing to a point of no return. On the contrary, China's state of development militarily is also part of its geopolitical reality that even now makes them a worthy opponent for the US alone, which combined with the inevitability of rejuvenation could likely result in some sort of aggression in the coming years. To that end, the US has to walk a very fine line, to make sure Taiwan is more or less safe while convincing Beijing that the status quo on the South China Sea is more or less acceptable for America, as the PRC is more than unlikely to make compromises on its Taiwan policy.

All in all, even though China is getting there in terms of acquiring the needed military capabilities, if Beijing was to prepare for a full-blown invasion, its signs could be intercepted way before and if the allies of the US were to support the Taiwan cause either via sanctions or military means Beijing would surely have a hard time selling the probable loss as a victory over Taiwan. Therefore, for now, the paper argues that even though the PRC's political and military structure is designed for rejuvenation, all things considered its current geopolitical reality will likely prevent an invasion in the coming years.

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