



CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS: A CONFLICT IN SLOW MOTION?

Mats Engman & Larissa Stüinkel

- *Cross-Strait relations have rarely been a simple zero-sum game but appear progressively fragile as Beijing stokes fears about wanting to resolve the Taiwan issue*
- *As China becomes increasingly assertive, the current state of affairs begs the question as to whether Washington's once successful "strategic ambiguity" is still feasible*
- *Nevertheless, conflating the mainland's capabilities with intentions risks overstating the threat that the PLA potentially poses which may inadvertently lower the threshold for miscalculations*

Introduction

It was a hazy grey first of July in Beijing when Xi Jinping delivered his long-awaited centennial speech, which was expectedly infused with determination. Addressing the "Taiwan¹ question" and "China's complete reunification," according to Xi, remain "an unshakeable commitment" for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He concluded with a call for strength, stating that "no one should underestimate the resolve, the will, and the ability of the Chinese people to defend their national sovereignty."² The challenge to resolve the Taiwan issue has gained ever more traction since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) first came to power under Chen Shui-bian in 2000.³ With the global pandemic creating new opportunities for international cooperation

and Taiwan becoming a role model in effectively mitigating the effects of Covid-19 domestically, the DPP under President Tsai Ing-wen has been able to shore up considerable support. Meanwhile, Beijing's relations with the international community have grown more strained. The G7, following an in-person meeting in Cornwall, issued an unusually succinct statement, calling out Beijing over human rights abuses, the crackdown in Hong Kong, and the increasingly tense Cross-Strait environment.⁴

In what seemed to underscore the G7 leaders' worries, this June, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) with the largest contingent of aircraft yet recorded.⁵ The Republic of China's (RoC) defense forces responded by sending warning

messages via radio which, perhaps unsurprisingly, were ignored by the PLA pilots. Meanwhile, the new Biden administration continues to double down on its security commitments to Taipei in Washington. Traveling on a military plane rather than in an unmarked private jet,⁶ several U.S. lawmakers paid a visit to the island this summer, further drawing Beijing's ire.⁷ Earlier this year, Taipei's well-connected lobbyists in the United States were seen as potentially benefitting from a change in regulations issued by the U.S. Department of State.⁸ Under the new guidelines, American officials will be allowed to meet their Taiwanese counterparts both at the Taiwanese representative offices and in U.S. government buildings, sending a clear message that Washington is gravitating towards Taiwan's greater inclusion in international affairs.

That the tide is changing, of course, has not gone unnoticed in Taipei, and the Tsai government has continuously warned that Beijing's growing pressure to unify with the island could trigger a boots-on-the-ground military confrontation.⁹ Meanwhile, Tsai appears ever more unfazed by the mainland's threatening messages. In fact, Beijing's menacing stance seems to have emboldened her to rally international support and to draw attention to Taiwan's precarious security situation.¹⁰ With all eyes on the Taiwan Strait, the question will be whether tensions might escalate in the short term, or the threat perception is in fact overstated, with current developments resembling a new iteration of the late 1990s cross-strait crisis.

Against the backdrop of increased cross-strait tensions, it might be tempting to conclude that Taiwan's days as a self-governing territory are numbered. Yet, cross-strait relations have rarely been a simple zero-sum game. The present geopolitical situation has been shaped by Beijing's strategic calculations vis-à-vis Taiwan and recent adjustments in American policy that have been influential for Taipei's security environment. In both American and Taiwanese hallways of power, China's improved military capabilities have stoked fears about a possible end to Taiwanese sovereignty driven, first and foremost, by Xi's ambition to recast China as a world

power. Nonetheless, conflating the PLA's capabilities with intentions risks overstating the threat that the PLA potentially poses, and by extension, lowers the threshold for miscalculations and incidents.¹¹

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Beijing's Chill Wind

The aim to unify Taiwan with the mainland has long been a prevalent motif in Chinese politics. With Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012, he swiftly made it one of the key features of his administration that achieving the “Chinese Dream” – the reinvigoration and modernization of Chinese society – cannot be complete without unification.¹² Speaking at an event marking the 40th anniversary of a reconciliatory statement by the Chinese government to Taipei in 1979, Xi doubled down on his pledge, stating that “unification [is] an inevitable requirement for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people.”¹³ Taipei responded before the dust could settle, with president Tsai vowing that the self-governing island would never “accept one country, two systems.”¹⁴

The CCP's centennial show of force in July 2021 merely added to the intensifying rhetorical tug of war between Taiwan and the mainland. For Taipei, Beijing's harsh crackdown on protestors in Hong Kong and the imposition of a sweeping national security law last year have underscored fears that the Chinese government would be equally fierce towards Taiwan. Even the Beijing-leaning Kuomintang (KMT) decried the measures imposed in Hong Kong for invalidating the very principle of “one country, two systems.”¹⁵ Similarly, using the idea of “rejuvenating” the Chinese nation heavy-handedly caused much of the Taiwanese public to resent Beijing. As a result, President Tsai not only managed

to secure reelection in 2020 but led her party to a legislative victory over the KMT.¹⁶

What followed appeared to be a hardening of positions on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Beijing continued in its quest to isolate Taiwan internationally, including successfully blocking Taipei's full participation in the World Health Organization (WHO) amid the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁷ Additionally, Taiwanese officials accused China of meddling in a deal to acquire Covid-19 vaccines from Pfizer.¹⁸ The German company had entered into a cooperation agreement with the Shanghai-based pharmaceutical firm Fosun Pharma to facilitate the vaccine distribution across China in 2020. Supposedly, Taipei tried to circumnavigate their own moratorium on sourcing from Chinese companies by ordering directly from Pfizer in Germany, a move which Fosun Pharma perceived as a violation of the cooperation agreement.¹⁹ Indeed, the pandemic has proven an ideal pretext for the Chinese government to step up the pressure on anyone seen to be meddling in its internal affairs in any way. Conversely, Beijing attempted 'vaccine diplomacy' in countries that continue to recognize Taiwan as the only legitimate China, including several Pacific Islands and Paraguay.^{20 21}

Apart from the more obvious goal of achieving unification based on historical claims, other factors also play into Xi's growing urgency to end the Taiwan question. For one, a demographic shift in Taiwan poses a risk to the carefully articulated historical linkages that the CCP has been advocating for for decades. A younger Taiwanese generation is less inclined to have personal connections to the mainland and has been a driving force behind the DPP's political clout. This sentiment is underscored by a majority of young people characterizing the opposition Kuomintang's (KMT) desire to restore ties with Beijing as out of tune with reality.²² Without sufficient support from the Taiwanese population, Xi might be hard-pressed to act now.

Optimistic reports of successful poverty alleviation and economic growth in the face of the ongoing trade war with the U.S. notwithstanding, a look behind the scenes reveals that the CCP is under pressure

on multiple fronts. Ranging from a projected sharp decline in its workforce to scaled-up international criticism over human rights issues, the CCP is hard-pressed to maintain its legitimacy. Focusing on the Taiwan Strait may serve Xi as a convenient way to redirect attention from other pressing issues.²³

Pivoting from Strategic Ambiguity?

Contributing to a growing uneasiness in cross-strait relations have been a host of new legislation passed by the U.S. Congress. Since recognizing the PRC diplomatically in 1979, Washington has opted for a policy of "strategic ambiguity" in its policy towards Taiwan.²⁴ Despite severing ties with the KMT government that same year, the Carter administration signed the Taiwan Relations Act into law, by which it promised to remain committed to Taiwan's national security.²⁵ Although the act does not oblige Washington to come to Taiwan's defense, the rhetorical uncertainty quickly translated into practical certainty, effectively deterring China from seeking to change the regional status quo through the use of force.

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For the United States, upholding this guiding principle afforded a comfortable space to maneuver diplomatically. Refraining from giving an absolute commitment to defending Taiwan, the act indubitably raised the stakes for Beijing. It also ensured that the risk of escalation was kept to a minimum for as long as both sides remained relatively confident about the other's intentions.²⁶ Nonetheless, events unfolding in recent years have raised questions about the increased potential for "strategic ambiguity" to be misunderstood. Moreover, with China effectively upgrading its military, one could legitimately ask whether this policy approach still embodies an

effective deterrent mechanism. Furthermore, doubts have long persisted among U.S. scholars as to whether Washington should intervene in a Taiwanese contingency at all.²⁷ This is partly due to a change in the military balance in East Asia, primarily with the rise of power projection capabilities of the PLA,²⁸ but also hinges on an apparent reappraisal of the Taiwan strategy in Washington.²⁹

During the Trump presidency, open hostility towards China's trade practices coincided with Congress's approval of arms sales to Taiwan.³⁰ While welcomed in Taipei, these arms deals stoked fears among observers that the rift between Washington and Beijing could further deepen.³¹ Additionally, the U.S. sent a high-ranking delegation to attend Tsai Ing-wen's first presidential inauguration ceremony in Taipei in 2016 – a first for US-Taiwan relations.³² Yet, by far, the most notable visit by a U.S. official occurred only weeks prior to the fateful election that unseated Trump. Alex Azar, then-Secretary of Health and Human Services, embarked on a trip to Taipei, meeting with Tsai and other Taiwanese ministers.³³ And although international travel was disrupted in 2021, Washington sent its well-wishes to Tsai's second inauguration as a pre-recorded video message delivered by then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, the outgoing administration's highly visible diplomacy had been drawing Beijing's ire, resulting in a sharp spike in air and naval space incursions and a flurry of economic sanctions – perhaps most infamously leading to the boycott of Taiwanese pineapples - in the weeks that followed.³⁵

Despite the transition from Trump to Biden and domestic turmoil following the January 6th invasion of the Capitol, Washington's new Taiwan policy largely mirrors the old. However, contrary to his predecessor, President Biden's persistence in taking a head-on approach to Beijing swiftly became a matter of contention in his first few weeks in office. A case in point, at a high-level meeting in Alaska between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Blinken's blunt opening statements resulted in a fiery introductory session during which the Chinese side responded similarly harsh words.³⁶ As one American diplomat noted, the

meeting was a “one-off” and “not the resumption of a particular dialogue mechanism or [...] dialogue process”.³⁷ Instead, both sides were unafraid to “up the ante” and publicly voice mistrust of one another. Yet, the meeting's cutthroat rhetoric spoke to the deep entrenchment of the diplomatic tug-of-war.

For Taipei, the meeting's boldness offered a glimpse into the current precarity of Sino-American relations.³⁸ In many ways, Blinken has been doubling down on Washington's commitments to Taiwan. In rapid succession, several U.S. Congressional delegations made their way to Taipei to express solidarity and once again underscore their commitment to the island's security.³⁹ Amidst allegations that Beijing deliberately blocked vaccine shipments to Taiwan, these delegations heralded a new era of soft power diplomacy by sending over vital vaccine donations.⁴⁰

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These soft power dynamics have become increasingly supplemented with hard power elements in the run-up to and following China's celebration of the CCP centennial. Biden resolutely shored up support among Washington's East Asian allies for its Taiwan rapprochement during his first few months in office. In a statement issued following a bilateral meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in May, both sides, for the first time, made reference to the Taiwan Strait and the need to “preserv[e] peace and stability.”⁴¹ Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and Biden issued a similarly worded statement just one month prior.⁴² With numerous U.S. bases in Japan and South Korea, the United States appears poised to rally its regional allies to prepare for military support should Cross-Strait relations

deteriorate further. This maneuvering is likely to have sent a strong diplomatic message to Beijing that Washington has regional support at its disposal to help defend Taiwan.

Soft Power Turning Hard

China's expanding military prowess further underscores the growing urgency with which the U.S. is proceeding vis-à-vis Taiwan.⁴³ Under Xi, the PLA has since 2015 been undergoing far-reaching reforms to become a "world-class military." Estimated advances over the past few years have raised concerns that the PLA is not only increasingly capable of projecting power abroad but also ever more confident in its abilities, sparking fears of an impending armed cross-strait conflict.⁴⁴ To achieve the status of a "world-class military," official reform roadmaps indicate a focus on modern digital warfare and information dominance, naval supremacy, missile strike capabilities, and amphibious operations. With a strong emphasis on the maritime domain and artificial intelligence capabilities, there appears to be a shift in the strategic value of the PLA Navy (PLAN) and growing confidence among the political leadership needed to succeed in the case of a Taiwan Strait conflict.⁴⁵

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Digital warfare, in particular, is now a priority for the PLA's new warfighting strategies. The practicality and broad-stroke applicability of cyber capabilities cater to Beijing's much-touted "Three Warfare Principle," which spans psychological, legal, and public opinion-oriented methods.⁴⁶ Such "unrestricted warfare and the PLA reverting increasingly to grey zone operations," besides effectively blurring operational boundaries, acts as a force multiplier by improving the PLA's asymmetric advantages vis-à-vis the Taiwanese defense. Efforts to shape public opinion through targeted disinformation campaigns have increased significantly since Tsai was first elected in 2016 and reached a peak in the run-up to the 2020

national elections.⁴⁷ Carried out by China's "United Front" – a spawning web of party-controlled organizations and individuals – these "influence activities abroad," while representing a challenge for Taipei, have thus far born little fruit in convincing the Taiwanese society of the need to unify with the mainland.^{48 49} Combined, these grey zone operations follow the hallmark of the famous Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu who noted that "the skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting."⁵⁰

In parallel, Beijing has been building up its anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities. First and foremost, these are meant to prevent both American and other allied forces from entering Chinese air and maritime space and effectively countering a growing number of Western freedom of navigation exercises. Ranging from stealth fighters, bombers, aircraft carriers, and long-range missiles, the investments in high-tech equipment have, arguably, eroded the technological advantage the U.S. once had over China. A comprehensive web of surveillance systems both on-land and in surrounding waters provide an additional military dominance level, as do payload-equipped satellites. In combination, the Chinese leadership can rely on a sophisticated triangulation system and respond accordingly.⁵¹

Apart from improving defense mechanisms, the PLA has been engaging in provocative incursions into Taiwanese air and maritime space. Throughout 2020, the number of PLA military exercises in and around the island increased significantly, with surveillance aircraft and ships becoming frequent sights. In March and April 2021, several large formations of PLA aircraft entered the Taiwanese Air Defense and Identification Zone (ADIZ). Additionally, the PLA conducted a joint exercise, involving both naval (including the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* and its escort ships) and air assets both east and west of Taiwan.

In October 2020, then-Taiwanese Minister of National Defense Yen De-fa noted during a briefing session that the PLA had conducted a total of 1710 aircraft and 1029 ship sorties.⁵² As of late March 2021, the Taiwanese Ministry of National Defense recorded a total number of 135 incursions, each featuring several PLA aircraft and navy ships at

the same time.⁵³ Most incursions were recorded close to Pratas/Dongsha Island in the South China Sea rather than the Taiwan Strait. For the RoC Air Force (ROCAF), these large-scale penetrations of their defense zones represent an increasingly serious challenge. Not only does the ROCAF have to maintain a year-round readiness posture but is also required to retain a high operational availability of its entire fleet. In effect, this reduced the time available for training exercises and upgrades and results in faster than usual wear-and-tear of costly military equipment.⁵⁴ Coupled with an omnipresent PLA threat, the critical challenge for Taiwan at this stage is a gradual chipping away at its military assets, personnel, and capabilities. This war of attrition effectively reduces Taipei's long-term ability to defend itself against an increasingly assertive Chinese leadership.

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Nevertheless, any military operation against Taiwan would come at a high risk for Beijing. Despite the PLA having gained considerable technical ground, either a failed attack or a performance below expectation would likely be consequential for the CCP leadership. It appears, however, that Beijing is aware of its shortcomings and instead seeks to gradually chip away at Taiwan's sovereignty claims by targeting contested islands in the South China Sea.⁵⁵ Similarly, the small Taiwanese islands of Kinmen (金門) and Matsu (馬祖), which are geographically closer to the mainland, represent an equally ideal target for Beijing, albeit the risk of taking them will be higher given the proximity of Taiwan proper.⁵⁶ All in all, a Chinese attack on Taiwan might not necessarily come in the form of a full-scale attack but is more likely to be a cumulation of small-scale operations, or a constructed blockade, in combination with a

flurry of disinformation campaigns.

A Question of Support

Initial comments from the Biden administration indicate that Washington would support Taiwan in the event of a military invasion. Nonetheless, this support is neither definite nor clearly defined. Policymakers still consider “strategic ambiguity” the guiding principle that leaves sufficient wiggle room for the United States to decide to deploy forces. Similarly, Washington might opt to postpone making a definite decision, considering recent pullouts from both Afghanistan and Iraq. In the end, it will likely depend on the Pentagon's assessment of the overall geopolitical situation, operational readiness, and risk to U.S. military personnel and equipment. Simulated war games in both 2018 and 2019 resulted in the U.S. failing decisively to defend Taiwan from a PLA attack. Simulations run in 2020 concluded that if the U.S. were to use a mix of systems that are either under development or not currently part of the procurement plan, there was a higher chance of repelling a full-scale Chinese invasion.⁵⁷ A successful defense operation requires new high-tech equipment that is currently not available to the American military. It will also require several pre-conflict adjustments, including pre-positioning of equipment, investments in remote airfields, and an increase in defense spending for Taiwan.

If the U.S. does decide to intervene on Taiwan's behalf, it remains uncertain to what extent. Without sufficient time to prepare in the event of an attack, American forces would have to rely on immediate, yet possibly insufficient, resources. These would include the rapid deployment of troops stationed in South Korea, Japan, and Guam. The U.S. Air Force has three air wings with competent fighters dedicated to the defense of East Asia, which could provide critical military support in a Taiwanese contingency scenario.⁵⁸ In addition, at least one carrier strike group is permanently deployed in East Asia, while long-range aircraft and bombers would have to be deployed from either Hawaii or the continental U.S.

Although Guam no longer hosts permanently deployed bombers, its strategic geographic location

Kadena Air Base Okinawa, Japan	642
Andersen Air Force Base (Guam) US	2,760
Yokota Air Base (Tokyo) Japan	2,075
Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan	1,445
Osan Air Base, South Korea	1,435
Kunsan Air Base, South Korea	1,299

Figure 1: Flight distance in km between various U.S. military bases and Taipei, Taiwan.⁶⁵

and its forward deployment specialized military infrastructure indicate that the island will likely be a critical defense hub in case of a Taiwan conflict.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, for any military support for Taiwan to be successful, time and distance will play a crucial role for the U.S. Units deployed from Guam's Andersen Air Force Base would have to travel 2,760 kilometers. In contrast, the distance between Kadena Air Base in Okinawa (Japan) would only be 642 kilometers, allowing for a higher operational tempo. Similarly, support from American bases in South Korea would undoubtedly take longer to arrive in Taiwan than for units stationed elsewhere in Japan. Still, it would have a geographical advantage over Guam. Using Clark Air Base is not currently an option due to the perpetually uneasy relations between Philippine President Duterte and Washington. Manila is also still reviewing the terms and conditions of the Visiting Forces Agreement between the two nations.⁶⁰ Without explicit support from the Philippine government, Washington will have fewer options for forward deployment from Southeast Asia at its disposal. However, this could have the potential to make or break the efficacy of U.S. defense for Taiwan.⁶¹

Nevertheless, using these overseas bases in a conflict over Taiwan will likely require host country approval.⁶² ⁶³ The Biden administration has already begun testing the waters earlier this year by seeking to shore up Japanese and South Korean support. The increase in "asset protection operations" between American and Japanese forces during 2020 could signal that Japan is willing to support Washington militarily more actively. One Japanese defense expert noted that "the point is that two forces are

now regularly operating very closely together, and that they will be able to do the same in wartime or under stressed environment. The capability to do so will certainly enhance deterrence against potential aggressive actions against Japan, South Korea, and even Taiwan."⁶⁴

Nonetheless, Japan's ability to step up will face severe domestic hurdles, given the matter's sensitivity. After the meeting with President Biden, both Suga and other high-ranking Japanese officials clarified that it would not send troops but could offer logistical support in the event of a conflict, which does not preclude the use of airbases. Similarly, advances have been made when South Korean President Moon visited the White House in May 2021. However, concrete military support or engagement by Seoul remains equally challenging.

Conclusion

For the past two years, Taiwan's increasingly precarious security situation has garnered considerable international attention. Amidst a more assertive and increasingly uncompromising Chinese foreign policy posture, there appears to be a growing risk of an actual military confrontation. This is partly due to a comprehensive military modernization program of the Chinese PLA, which arguably has shifted the balance of military power in East Asia in favor of Beijing. As such, Washington's long-held military supremacy in the region can no longer be taken for granted. An additional factor for a geopolitical shift in power is the ongoing economic tug-of-war on several fronts between the U.S. and China, whose consequences are far from clear. The global Covid-19 pandemic in many ways drove an additional wedge

between the two nations, as did the intensifying focus on the precarity that Taiwan faces as it navigates this geopolitical rivalry. If nothing else, the past year has shone light on the dispute about the sole legitimate ruler of China, dating back to 1949, with a severity likely to have global repercussions should a boots-on-the-ground conflict break out.

Against the backdrop of seemingly hardening stances in Beijing's foreign policy apparatus about the need to resolve the Taiwan question, China will likely seek to broaden its policy tool kit to achieve "complete reunification." Under Xi, the Chinese leadership has poured significant financial and human resources into modernizing the nation's armed forces under the guiding slogan of "national rejuvenation." This, in turn, has resulted in the altering of the military threat perception in cross-strait relations, with the PLA now possessing the necessary, but as of yet insufficient, capabilities to invade Taiwan with reasonable success. An upsurge in incursions into Taiwanese air and naval space and subversive disinformation campaigns targeting the public at large speak to the growing pressure on Taiwan's defense capabilities. At present, there are indications that the PLA will continue using digital technologies and various forms of artificial intelligence to gradually chip away at these already fragile defense mechanisms in the form of a war of attrition. In Beijing's eyes, this would, in turn, pressure the self-governing island to concede to the mainland's sovereignty claims. Moreover, as the Covid-19 pandemic has exemplified, Beijing is well-positioned to use economic and health policy measures for coercion. Consequently, many countries are now scrambling to diversify supply chains, and in some cases, are even considering excluding China altogether to avoid relying exclusively on key Chinese exports, including rare earths and cotton.

For Taiwan's overall security, these changes in foreign policy and hardening stances on China could cut both ways. On the one hand, Taipei has profited from extensive international news and media coverage, with Beijing's aggressive muscle-flexing resulting in a wave of international support for the island. This could raise the stakes for Beijing now that the cost of a military invasion may result in

international condemnation, possible political and economic sanctions, and, in the worst-case scenario, unnecessary bloodshed.

On the other hand, more consistent support risks further offsetting the deterrent characteristics of Washington's "strategic ambiguity." In the wake of increased geopolitical competition, including overly exclusionary economic policies, it will become more challenging to remain ambiguous. This could even become a liability if Beijing were to misinterpret policy measures as violating the "One China" policy and act on a perceived breach. Besides, with China's military capability steadily improving, Beijing has an opening to resort to military force. In this case, Chinese policymakers may either interpret American indecisiveness as to whether it will come to Taiwan's defense as a still reasonable chance to successfully stage an invasion or have reached a level of confidence that its capabilities and tactics will be successful regardless of the potential consequences. ■

Authors - Major General (ret.) Mats Engman, is a Distinguished Military Fellow at ISDP. His expertise lies in security policy, military strategy and crisis management, and his work has a particular focus on developments in East Asia, and the Korean Peninsula.

Ms. Larissa Stünkel is a Junior Research Fellow at ISDP's Stockholm China Center. She holds a Master's Degree in Asian Studies from Lund University, Sweden, and a Bachelor's Degree in International Studies from Leiden University, the Netherlands.

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Endnotes

- 1 The ROC will intermittently be referred to as Taiwan throughout this issue brief. To date China refuses to acknowledge Taiwan as a state and sees it as a renegade province that should be incorporated at any cost. For the purpose of this publication and reflective of the de facto situation, Taiwan will be seen as a separate political entity. Most states adhere to the 'One China policy' which precludes diplomatic relations of a third state with both PRC and RoC. At present only 15 states continue to maintain diplomatic relations with Taipei.
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