

Committee: SPECPOL 2

Topic: The question of Taiwan

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Summary

China's claim over self-governed Taiwan has resulted in huge tensions building up not only in the region but also across the wider geopolitical world. Whilst Taiwan is not officially recognised by the UN, with only 11 member states maintaining official diplomatic relations, many others, such as the US, maintain unofficial diplomatic ties. With the threat of a Chinese invasion ever looming over the country, it has taken to buying billions of dollars in weapons from countries such as the US. In fact, the US has even begun to simply donate taxpayer money to Taiwan – beginning with an \$80 million payment in November last year. Despite US efforts, China still refuses to back down, sending record numbers of military aircraft into Taiwan's ADIZ. In this report, for the sake of simplicity, the People's Republic of China will be referred to as China and the Republic of China will be referred to as Taiwan.

Definition of Key Terms

ADIZ – Air Defence Identification Zone – a region of airspace in which aircraft have to identify themselves for reasons related to national security

CCP – Chinese Communist Party – the ruling party in mainland China since the end of the Chinese civil war, currently led by Xi Jinping

China – The People's Republic of China (PRC)

PLA – People's Liberation Army - the armed wing of the CCP

Taiwan – The Republic of China (ROC)

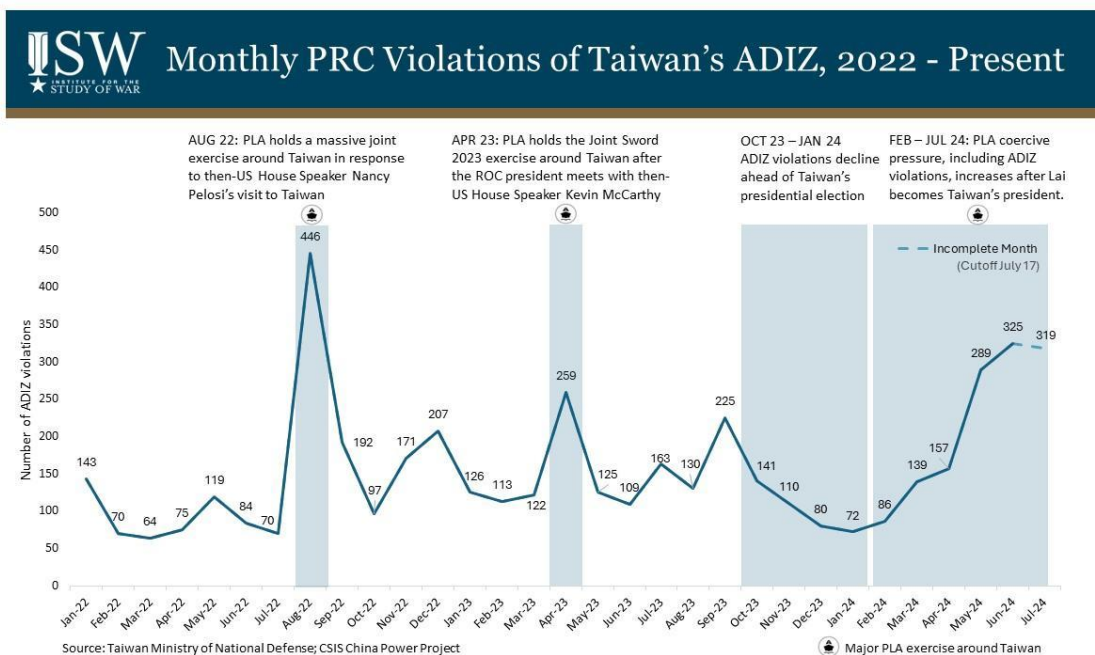
Background Information

The modern Taiwan was founded in 1949 after a Chinese Civil War in which the nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, were defeated by the communists, led by Mao Zedong. The nationalists evacuated to the island of Taiwan, around 110 miles off the Chinese mainland, with Taipei becoming the capital. The country has since then maintained an independent government, transitioning into a democracy with its own economy and political system.

Whilst Taiwan does operate for all intents and purposes as a sovereign nation, it is not recognised as such by all but 11 UN member states. This can in many cases be put down to China's position – it considers Taiwan to be a breakaway province, consistently pursuing a policy of eventual reunification – by force, if necessary. Many nations do not want to risk trade deals with China through agreeing to recognise Taiwan.

Taiwan's lack of recognition has to an extent resulted in its diplomatic isolation – even the UN have refused to recognise it since 1971's resolution 2758. This limits Taiwan's ability to participate in international organisations. Despite this, many countries maintain informal relations and even provide military support to Taiwan, with the US in particular, agreeing not only to sell Taiwan billions of dollars in weapons but even donating some taxpayer money, starting with \$80 million in November 2023.

Reasons for this US support include not only Taiwan's strategic location but also its economic significance as a technology and manufacturing hub. It produces around 90% of the world's semiconductors, meaning that preventing a conflict from breaking out is within the economic interests of most countries. Taiwan's democracy and strong human rights record also garner the support of many Western nations. A military conflict could certainly draw in the US and its allies, and easily escalate into a broader regional or even global confrontation. Unfortunately, with China sending record numbers of military aircraft into Taiwan's ADIZ, and the US continuing to arm Taiwan, many would argue that whether a conflict occurs is only a matter of time.



Major Countries and Organizations Involved

China – Sees Taiwan merely as a rebel province and continues to follow a policy of eventual reunification. Carries out military exercises in the Fujian province (nearest Taiwan) and continues to fly military aircraft through Taiwan’s ADIZ. Also threatens diplomatic action against any country that recognises or trades with Taiwan.

Taiwan – The centre of the dispute. Operates as its own independent country, with its own democracy, economy and military. Still continues to claim the whole of China, despite only control of the island of Taiwan. Only recognised by 11 UN member states - Belize, Eswatini, Guatemala, Haiti, Marshall Islands, Palau, Paraguay, St Lucia, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Tuvalu.

United States – Continues to arm Taiwan with billions of dollars in weapons, despite not officially recognising it. A conflict between China and Taiwan could result in US involvement, in turn resulting in a direct conflict between two nuclear armed powers which could be catastrophic.

Timeline of Events

1945 - Taiwan is placed under Chinese administrative control after Japan surrenders.

1947 - Chinese authorities impose martial law following the violently suppressed February 28 anti-government uprising against the Kuomintang government. Large numbers of protesters demanding free elections are killed.

1949 - The communist victory in the Chinese civil war forces the Kuomintang government to evacuate to Taiwan, along with two million refugees.

1971 – Following Chiang Kai-Shek's refusal of a dual representation deal, the UN recognises communist China as the sole governor of the whole country. The PRC also takes China's UN security council seat.

1979 – Police kill pro-democracy protesters and arrest opposition leaders in what comes to be known as the Kaohsiung incident, drawing international attention to the Kuomintang government's oppressive rule. The US Taiwan relations act also declared US policy on Taiwan – that the two countries would maintain close cultural and commercial relations, but that the US wouldn't necessarily come to Taiwan's aid in the case of an invasion

1987 – Martial law abolished in Taiwan.

1996 – First free elections in Taiwan, won by Lee Teng-Hui, previously Chiang Ching-Kuo's (Chiang Kai-Shek's son) chosen successor. Communist China tries to disrupt the elections with missile tests. The US responds with the biggest display of military might in Asia since the Vietnam war, and the Chinese back down.

2000 – Chen Shui-bian wins Taiwanese presidential elections, ending 50 years of Kuomintang government. He says in his inaugural speech that he will not declare independence as long as China does not attack. China accuses him of being insincere through failing to mention whether he actually considers Taiwan a part of China.

2001 – Taiwan test fires anti-missile defence system bought from the US. China, meanwhile, carries out military exercises simulating an invasion of the island.

2005 – China issues a new law giving Beijing the legal right to use military force should Taipei declare formal independence. This is condemned by Taiwan. Nationalist and communist party leaders meet later that year for the first time since 1949.

2006 – Taiwan scraps its National Unification Council, set up to deal with reunification with the mainland.

2007 – Taiwan's application to join the UN under that name is rejected.

2008 – Chen Yunlin, China's top negotiator on Taiwan, holds talks in Taipei. He is met by protests from pro-independence supporters.

2010 – China suspends military contacts with the US after it approves the sale of air defence missiles to Taiwan. Later that year, Taiwan and China sign a landmark free trade pact seen as the most significant agreement in 60 years of separation.

2013 - Taiwan holds its first live fire drills in five years.

2014 – China and Taiwan hold their first government to government talks since the Chinese civil war at Nanjing.

2020 – Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence releases data showing that China has started sending planes over Taiwan's ADIZ.

2023 – The United States agree to send Taiwan \$80 million of taxpayer money, marking the first time the US have sent money to a country they didn't officially recognise since the Vietnam war. China continues to build up military presence in the area.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 (25 October 1971) - This was the resolution that officially recognised the PRC as representing China at the United Nations, allowing them to take the security council place originally held by the representatives of the ROC.

Taiwan's failed membership bid (21 September 2007) - The UN rejected Taiwan's bid to 'join the UN under the name of Taiwan', citing resolution 2758 as recognising the PRC as the only legitimate representatives of China in the United Nations.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The UN's 1971 resolution – This didn't work as failed to put Taiwan under Chinese control in practice. Therefore, the tension between China and Taiwan still remained.

The building of military presence in the region - Most previous attempts to solve the issue have come not from the UN but from China and the US. When China built up its military presence in the 90s, for example, so did the US, which resulted in China backing down. However, almost 30 years on, US military presence in the region simply isn't enough to deter China.

Diplomatic talks – Diplomatic talks have often been held to attempt to begin to heal relations between the two countries. However, so far these have been unable to alter the Chinese ambition of eventually taking Taiwan, and therefore the tension in the region continues to build.

It is important to note that from Beijing's perspective, the only way the issue of Taiwan could be 'solved' is if it were taken, by force or otherwise. Hence, it could be argued that from the Chinese perspective there has not been a real attempt to solve the issue since the Chinese civil war.

Possible Solutions

Diplomatic talks – Whilst it is difficult to see either side backing down after over 70 years of tensions, diplomatic talks can certainly improve the situation. The pact between China and Taiwan in 2010, which significantly reduced tariffs and commercial barriers between the two sides, proved that progress can be made – and if enough progress can be made to hold off a confrontation, that could in some minds be considered a success.

A peaceful reunification – This would be difficult to pass, as it would conflict with the national interests of most of the western world. However, it is important to note that even Beijing would prefer this to a military confrontation, and if a war in which China takes Taiwan anyway is, at least in the long term, fairly likely, some could argue that this is the most efficient solution.

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