Taiwan: Can a perfect storm be averted?

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Abstract

Tsai Ing-wen's election as the leader of the Taiwan authorities in 2016 set off a series of negative interactions across the Taiwan Strait. Donald Trump's election and his efforts to undermine the US "one-China policy" made things worse. While Taipei felt encouraged to challenge Beijing's red line, Beijing believed it was necessary to exert even more pressure on Taipei. With greater capabilities and under increasing popular pressure, Beijing has taken a more proactive approach to address the perceived challenge of Taiwan independence. The process of vicious interactions between Taipei, Beijing, and Washington resembles the forming of a perfect storm. This paper reviews how this three-way interaction evolved over time, identifies the major factors shaping this situation, and speculates on future developments by analyzing the major factors involved. It argues that while a perfect storm is indeed taking shape, it is still possible to avert it. For this to happen, however, the three sides need to take a rational and pragmatic approach to managing their demands and desires.

Keywords Perfect storm · The 92 consensus · Military conflict · International space

1 Introduction

The Taiwan problem has become increasingly salient in recent years. During this period, Taipei has made growing efforts to redefine Taiwan's sovereignty status through political manipulation inside and outside the island. Washington has been trying to shore up Taipei's position by upgrading their relationship to a more official level and by facilitating Taipei's efforts to expand its "international space." In response, Beijing has intensified its diplomatic and military pressure on Taipei to deter the perceived efforts by Taipei and Washington to change Taiwan's sovereign status. As a result, the three sides have seen their interactions caught in a vicious

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spiral, making a military confrontation and even an all-out war an increasingly likely scenario.

What is going on? What are the major factors shaping this development? How will the arrival of the Biden Administration change this trend? Can a perfect storm be averted? These are the questions this paper addresses. It begins with a brief review of recent developments in the Taiwan Strait. Next, it goes over the main factors that have shaped them. Finally, it speculates on what is likely to happen in the Taiwan Strait on the basis of analysis.

2 The making of a perfect storm

There are good reasons to worry about the recent developments in the Taiwan Strait. All indications suggest that Taipei, Washington, and Beijing have been moving toward a military confrontation and even an all-out war.

2.1 DPP's victory: the beginning of negative interactions

The current process of negative interactions started 5 years ago when Tsai Ying-wen won the election and became the leader of the Taiwan authorities. Out of internal political considerations as well as personal preference, Tsai rejected “the 92 consensus” which was agreed upon by the Chinese mainland government and Taiwan authorities in 1992 when the Kuomintang (KMT) was in power. According to “the 92 consensus,” both sides of the Taiwan Strait acknowledge that there is only one China and both the mainland and Taiwan are part of that China. In her inaugural speech, Tsai claimed that she would respect the historical fact that the KMT authorities and the mainland government met in 1992 and value the results of consultation and meetings between the two sides since then. However, she called upon Beijing to face the existence of the “Republic of China” and the belief in the democratic system by people in Taiwan, and to manage relations across the Taiwan Strait on that basis.

Although Tsai did not go as far as clearly stating that Taiwan is an independent sovereign state, from Beijing's perspective, she did take one step backward from her predecessor on the question of Taiwan's sovereign status. Accordingly, Beijing said that Tsai had scored an incomplete in her test on the question of Taiwan's sovereignty status and began to phase in a number of measures to demonstrate its dissatisfaction, including suspension of semi-official contacts between the two sides, restricting unofficial exchanges across the Taiwan Strait, and discouraging mainland tourists from visiting Taiwan. It also began to reverse its previous practice when the KMT was in power of allowing Taiwan representatives to participate in the annual meetings of the World Health Assembly (WHA) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in an observer status. It also started to reconsider requests on the part of some countries which still maintained diplomatic relations with Taipei to switch diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing, requests that Beijing had previously

declined as a friendly gesture to the KMT authorities under Ma Ying-jeou (Drun and Wang 2017, 3).

However, instead of accommodating Beijing's demand to return to the 92 consensus, Taipei chose to ignore it and continued its uncompromising rhetoric. At the same time, it tried to enlist help from Washington to shore up its position. The unexpected election of Donald Trump presented Taipei with a golden opportunity to do so. The billionaire demagogue had little knowledge of the complexities of the Taiwan problem and was surrounded by some unorthodox advisors who either have close ties with Taipei or harbor hostility against China. Probably under the latter's influence, the president-elect decided to take a phone call from Tsai, an unprecedented move by any US president-elect since normalization of relations between China and the US in 1979. Moreover, to the surprise of many, in an interview with the Fox News TV station, president-elect Trump said that in the absence of progress in trade talks with China, he did not see any reason for the US to stick to the "one-China policy"—the policy that previous US administrations had adhered to in a careful calibration of US interests (Global Times 2016; Bohan and Brunnstrom 2016).

2.2 The Trump–Tsai phone call

Taipei's success in securing the phone call between Tsai and president-elect Trump hardened Beijing's negative view of Tsai. In its eyes, Taipei's move was nothing less than a serious attempt to invite foreigners to interfere in China's internal affairs. Although President Trump later said that he would adhere to the US one-China policy after he assumed office in his phone call with President Xi Jinping (Xinhuanet 2017), Beijing felt Taipei was the culprit for the phone call and Trump's challenge to the US one-China policy.

Beginning from April 11, 2017, Beijing's official TV station China Central Television (CCTV) began to use the term "*Zhongguo Taipei dui*" (the team from China's Taipei) to label Taiwan's sports team as opposed to the term "*Zhonghua Taipei dui*" (the team from Chinese Taipei) as it had called it in the past (Guancha.cn 2017). In doing so, Beijing tried to stress the point that Taiwan is part of China rather than an independent sovereign entity. Earlier, at Beijing's request, the International Civil Aviation Organization changed the way it referred to Taiwan from "Taipei, TW" to "Taipei, CN" on its website, again to stress the point that Taiwan belongs to China.

In a show of defiance, in an interview with Reuters on April 27, 2017, Tsai repeated her rejection of the 92 consensus. In addition, she said that she did not rule out the possibility of making another phone call to President Trump. She also expressed the hope of purchasing F-35 fighter planes from the US. She sounded very provocative when she urged President Xi to act like a leader (Yoon and Wu 2017). Although Trump did not venture another phone call with Tsai, his government did claim that it would welcome Taipei's participation in the World Health Organization as an observer.

Seeing that Tsai had little willingness to accept the 92 consensus and noting her efforts to enlist US help to her cause, Beijing stepped up its pressure on Taipei. First,

it rejected the possibility of allowing Taipei to participate in the WHA meetings as an observer. As Mr. Zhang Zhijun, the head of Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office, put it, because of Taipei's rejection of the 92 consensus, the condition for Taiwan's participation in the WHA meetings no longer existed (Lin 2017). Second, Beijing began to send military aircraft to fly around the Taiwan island. This practice was sustained and increased over time. Finally, in addition to putting political and military pressure on Taipei, Beijing also tried to undercut Taipei by reaching out to Taiwanese residents. On May 16, Beijing announced it would put 31 measures to benefit Taiwanese residents fully in place soon (Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council 2018).

For a time, it appeared that Beijing's efforts were paying off. The WHA did not invite Taipei to participate as an observer in its annual meeting. On June 13, the Panamanian Government declared that it would switch diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing. It became the second country to do so since Tsai took office, causing strong political reactions in the island. These developments, coupled with various internal problems in Taiwan, contributed to a decline in Tsai's popular rating. According to a TVBS survey, the rate of public satisfaction with Tsai's authorities reached a historical low of 21%, while the rate of dissatisfaction rose to 63% (TVBS Poll Center 2017).

This trend raised serious concern on the part of Washington. It began to increase efforts to shore up Taipei. In addition to publicly supporting Taiwan's participation in the WHA annual meeting, Washington announced that it had approved a new package of arms sales to Taiwan, the first since Trump came into office. On December 12, President Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, an amendment of which calls for closer military relations with Taipei and urges the Administration to assess the possibility of allowing US warships to dock in Taiwan's port. This provoked a strong reaction from Beijing. Li Kexin, Minister Counselor of Chinese Embassy in Washington, said that Taiwan is Chinese territory. Therefore, if the US wants to send warships to Taiwan, it needs Beijing's approval. If the US navy forces its way to dock in a Taiwan harbor, Beijing would have no alternative but to take over Taiwan by force (Deutsche Welle 2017).

In the meantime, the Trump Administration also dispatched more US naval vessels to the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate its determination to intervene militarily if necessary. According to Lindsay Maizland of the Council of Foreign Affairs in New York, in the past nine months leading up to March 2019, US ships had sailed through the Taiwan Strait six times. During the Obama administration, such passages occurred only one to three times per year (Maizland 2019).

With this US backing, Taipei continued to show its defiance to Beijing. On September 26, Lai Ching-te, the head of Taipei's executive body, said that he is a “*Zhu-zhang taiwan duli de zhengzhi gongzuo zhe*” (political worker advocating Taiwan independence). On September 27, he further claimed that Taiwan is an independent sovereign state. Not surprisingly, Lai's remarks led to a strong rebuke from Beijing (Huanqiu.com 2017).

On March 1, Chiu Chui-cheng, spokesperson of Taipei's Mainland Affairs Council, declared that the 31 measures to benefit Taiwanese residents Beijing had proposed were political manipulations for united front purposes. Therefore, he called

on Taiwanese residents to be on guard against them. On March 15, Lai Ching-te further claimed that Taiwan is already an independent sovereign state and does not need another declaration. Instead, he asserted, what Taiwan needs to do is to defend its sovereignty and its values (South China Morning Post 2019). The next day, President Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act, which calls on the US to upgrade its official relations with Taipei at all levels, thereby constituting a serious violation of its commitment in the three communiques between China and the US.

In response to provocations from Taipei and Washington, Beijing reiterated its determination to defend China's territorial integrity and vowed to take whatever means necessary to foil any attempt to separate Taiwan from China. On March 16, Liu Jieyi, the head of the Taiwan Affairs Office of Beijing, called Lai Ching-te a separatist and stated that the military exercises in the Taiwan Strait are part of China's efforts to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Huanqiu.com 2018a). Subsequently, Beijing stepped up its efforts to restrict Taiwan's international presence as an independent political entity. On June 14, China's Civil Aviation Administration demanded that all foreign commercial airline companies make necessary changes in their websites and advertisements regarding their references to Taiwan, forbidding references that might in any way suggest that the latter is an independent sovereign entity.

As Taiwan's economy remained sluggish and cross-strait tension rose, Tsai's popularity continued to slide. According to a poll by the Taiwan Competitiveness Forum released on September 4, 59.3% of the people polled said that they were dissatisfied with Tsai's performance and only 29.2% were satisfied. At the same time, 72.4% believed that Tsai should adjust policies toward the mainland so as to improve the chance for Taiwan to participate in international activities (Huanqiu.com 2018b).

2.3 Taipei's manipulation of the Hong Kong demonstrations

It was at this time, however, that protests in Hong Kong erupted and gained increasing international attention over time. Seeing this as a golden opportunity to change her political fortunes at home, Tsai began to exploit the Hong Kong protests to her political advantage. On June 13, she issued a statement on Hong Kong claiming that the democratic protests in Hong Kong not only made Taiwanese cherish their existing democratic system and way of life even more, but also made it clear to them that the "one country, two systems" model was not viable. She also directed her Secretary General to receive some organizers of the Hong Kong demonstrations to show her support ("Office of the President Republic of China" 2019). In her speech on October 10, Tsai even said that China's "one country, two systems" proposal for Taiwan would "pose a serious challenge to regional stability and peace." "The overwhelming consensus among Taiwan's 23 million people is our rejection of 'one country, two systems,' regardless of party affiliation or political position," she said. Although her actions made Beijing frustrated and upset, she did get what she wanted, that is, a huge boost to her popular support in Taiwan (Shao 2019).

In the meantime, Washington stepped up its efforts to support Taiwan. On August 13, President Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year

2019. The Act included many clauses related to Taiwan. Among other things, it called on the Administration to help strengthen Taiwan's military preparation. On October 4, Vice President Mike Pence delivered a speech in which he lashed out at China on many issues and held up Taiwan's Democracy as a better path for Chinese people. He also said the US stands with the protesters in Hong Kong despite the protests becoming violent (Alper and Spetalnick 2019).

Confronted with perceived provocations from Taipei and Washington, Beijing increased its diplomatic efforts to persuade the remaining countries with diplomatic ties with Taipei to switch to Beijing. On September 21, Beijing announced that it established diplomatic relations with the Solomon Islands (People.cn 2019a). On September 28, Beijing reestablished diplomatic relations with Kiribati (People.cn 2019b). Meanwhile, Beijing stepped up preparations for a possible military takeover of Taiwan. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA) 2019 report to Congress on Chinese military power: "The PLA continues to prepare for contingencies in the Taiwan Strait to deter and, if necessary, compel Taiwan to abandon moves toward independence." The DIA even argued that "The PLA also is likely preparing for a contingency to unify Taiwan with the mainland by force, while simultaneously deterring, delaying, or denying any third-party intervention on Taiwan's behalf" (Peck 2019).

Echoing the US assessment, Taipei publicly claimed that the chance of war with the mainland was increasing. On January 14, 2020, in an interview with the BBC, Tsai Ing-wen claimed that she could not exclude the possibility of war. She also argued that the cost of military invasion of Taiwan would be huge and Taiwan had been preparing for any possible consequences (Sudwort 2020). In the meantime, she sent her deputy Lai Ching-te to visit the US in a high-profile effort to enlist US help.

For various reasons, the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic failed to provide an impetus for China–US collaboration to fight the pandemic. Instead, it led to further deterioration of relations between the two countries. Confronted with the outbreak of the epidemic in Wuhan, China took drastic measures to contain it despite initial hesitation and confusion. It dismissed some local officials, imposed a lockdown on the city of Wuhan and its 17 million residents, sent more than 40,000 medical staff and huge quantities of medical supplies to help Wuhan to deal with the crisis, built two large temporary hospitals, and adopted the strictest social distancing policies in history nationwide.

It is estimated that China's efforts earned the world weeks to get prepared (Begley 2020). However, the US was still caught ill-prepared nonetheless. Instead of trying to fix the problem at home, the Trump Administration blamed China for it. It even called COVID-19 the "China virus" and demanded that China compensate for US losses (Rogers et al. 2020). Chinese reaction was predictable: anger and fury.

As relations between Beijing and Washington declined, Taipei and Washington increased their coordinated efforts to demonize China and promote Taiwan's international status. On March 18, Taipei and the American Institute in Taiwan-Taipei Main Office (AIT/T) issued a joint statement on the Taiwan–U.S. Anti-epidemic Partnership. The statement intentionally highlighted the China origin of the virus and vowed to collaborate to fight it. Taipei touted this statement as a great success in Taipei–Washington collaboration (Lin 2020a). Taipei and Washington also used the pandemic to promote Taiwan's so-called international space. On March 31, the

two sides held a telephone conference discussing how to enlarge Taiwan's international participation, especially Taiwan's participation in the WHO in an observer status. Meanwhile, President Trump signed into law the Taipei Act, which urged the Administration to expand enhance official ties with Taipei and support Taipei's efforts to expand its international space.

Beijing condemned the Taipei–Washington joint statement, pointing out that this constituted an attempt by Taipei to use the pandemic as an excuse to promote Taiwan independence. It also alleged that Taipei's efforts to bring the US into confrontation with Chinese mainland would lead to hostilities in the Taiwan Strait (People.cn 2020a, b). On March 27, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress condemned Washington for signing the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (Taipei) Act of 2019 (Taipei Act of 2019). It stated that the Act seriously violated the three communiques between China and the US as well as international law and principles. It constituted gross interference in China's internal affairs and sent the wrong message to the Taiwan separatists. The Chinese legislature expressed that it strongly opposed this behavior (The National People's Congress of the PRC 2020).

Despite Beijing's protests, Washington continued to challenge China's position. On April 25, an anti-submarine aircraft of the US Navy appeared near the southern part of Taiwan. According to press reports, this represented the 12th flight of US military aircraft near Taiwan (Huanqiu.com 2020a).

On May 20, Tsai delivered an inaugural speech as the leader of the new administration in Taipei. In the speech, she repeated her rejection of the "one country, two system" principle for unification and indicated that she would initiate political reforms and a constitutional amendment process. US Secretary of State Pompeo issued a public statement congratulating Tsai's assuming office. Some other US officials also sent their congratulations to Tsai. Beijing regarded this as a serious offense and condemned Washington for violating its previous commitment to deal with Taipei on a non-official basis. Beijing again vowed to use whatever means necessary to defend China's territorial sovereignty (Huanqiu.com 2020b).

As Hong Kong street protests escalated, Taipei stepped up its support to protesters. On July 1, Taipei established an office in Hong Kong to provide support to protests. In preparation of legislation to support Hong Kong protests, Tsai instructed Taipei's Mainland Affairs Council to set up a special work unit to provide help to Hong Kong residents (Huanqiu.com 2020c).

On August 13, in response to perceived provocations from Washington and Taipei, the spokesperson of the Eastern War Zone of the PLA indicated that the PLA dispatched troops of different services to the Taiwan Strait to conduct real-life military exercises to raise combined operational capabilities. He pointed out that these exercises were necessary actions to defend China's national sovereignty in light of developments in the security situation in the Taiwan Strait (People.cn 2020b).

In a show of support to Taipei, on September 17, the Trump Administration sent Keith Krach, Under Secretary of the State Department, to Taiwan. Krach became the highest ranking official of the State Department to visit Taiwan since the normalization of relations between China and the US in 1979. In Taipei, Krach met

with Tsai Ing-wen and promised to promote a closer partnership between Washington and Taipei (Chang 2020).

On September 22, Ma Xiaoguang, the spokesperson of the Taiwan Affairs Office, stated that the recent US practice of sending senior officials to visit Taiwan seriously violated the one-China principle and the three communiques between the two countries. He also said that it seriously undermined peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Taipei's effort to collaborate with the US would ultimately harm the interests of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait (CCTV 2020). Meanwhile, the PLA conducted real-life military exercises near the Taiwan Strait. In response to Taiwanese media's claim that the PLA military planes crossed the middle line in the Taiwan Strait, on September 21, Wang Wenbin, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and there is no such a thing as the middle line.

Source: McCarthy (2021a)

On October 20, the US House of Representatives and the Senate separately proposed a Taiwan Relations Enhancement Act. The Act requested that the US Government lift restrictions on official exchanges with Taiwan, support Taiwan's participation in international affairs, and sell arms to Taiwan on a regular basis. On October 21, the Trump Administration announced three packages of arms sales to Taiwan. Predictably, Beijing voiced strong condemnation of this announcement.

Toward the end of the Trump Administration, the Taiwan problem increasingly became one of military confrontation. With China–US warships and war planes outmaneuvering each other in close proximity and military aircraft of the Chinese mainland and Taiwan encountering each other with increasing frequency, an accidental military conflict grew increasingly likely. Given the lack of effective crisis management mechanisms in the Taiwan Strait, if any crisis were to occur, a full-scale war may follow.

2.4 Continuation of tension under Biden

On the surface, the arrival of the Biden Administration has not changed the direction of developments in the Taiwan Strait in a meaningful way. Taipei continues to seek

closer relations with Washington to secure its support in defiance of pressure from Beijing. Washington continues to send warships and airplanes to the Taiwan Strait and promote its relationship with Taipei. Beijing continues its military, economic, and political pressure on Taipei and a military takeover of Taiwan should the latter tread on its red line of changing Taiwan's sovereign status. The negative spiral of these interactions in the Taiwan Strait makes a perfect storm increasingly likely. This doomsday scenario led to a recent headline in *The Economist* to claim that Taiwan is "the most dangerous place on Earth" (The Economist 2021).

3 The dynamics of the making of a perfect storm

Why have the interactions between Beijing, Washington, and Taipei evolved in this way? Closer analysis suggests the following factors: (1) Taipei's internal politics; (2) Washington's domestic considerations; (3) Beijing's domestic concerns; (4) the increasing tension between Washington and Beijing; and (5) the changing military balance of power across the Taiwan Strait and between China and the US.

3.1 Taipei's internal politics

In retrospect, the DPP's ascent to power in Taiwan in 2016 kicked off the current round of negative interactions between Beijing, Taipei, and Washington. The party's professed goal is Taiwan independence. Its leader, Tsai Ing-wen, is a whole-hearted supporter of this goal despite the caution she has exercised in pushing to achieve it. This dooms Taipei's relationship with Beijing from the very beginning. Her subsequent efforts to enlist US help to promote Taiwan independence and her public endorsement of Hong Kong demonstrations has further soured this relationship and contributed to the growing likelihood of military confrontation.

3.2 Washington's domestic politics

Donald Trump's election further complicated the interactions between Beijing and Taipei on the one hand and between Beijing and Washington on the other. First, his close policy circle includes some people who are either very pro-Taiwan or intensely opposed to Beijing, such as Randall Schriver, Stephen Yates, Peter Navarro, Mark Stokes, Dan Blumenthal, and Ed Feulner (Copper 2017). These people had a significant influence on his handling of the Taiwan problem.

Second, Trump's decision to take a congratulatory phone call from Tsai when he was the president-elect unleashed the political sentiment in Washington that democratic US should not bow to "authoritarian" Beijing by refusing to take a phone call from the democratically elected leader in Taiwan. This can be seen in numerous endorsements of his action from both the right and the left in Washington, making adherence to the one-China policy more difficult (Fox news 2016; Concha 2016). It also angered Beijing, which believed that Tsai tricked Trump into this as China's

State Councilor Wang Yi suggested (Xinhuanet 2016). This led to a more negative view of Tsai in Beijing.

Third, during his last year in office, out of election concerns, Trump deliberately provoked China on Taiwan through arms sales, upgrading official contacts with Taipei, and dispatching more warships and military aircrafts to the Taiwan Strait. He even allowed his Secretary of State Pompeo to publicly claim that Taiwan has never been part of China (Lin 2020b). As his popularity rating went down, Trump probably wanted to create a mini-crisis in the Taiwan Strait to reverse his political fortunes at home. Such actions, however, only added oil to the fire of the already tense situation in the Taiwan Strait.

3.3 Beijing's domestic politics

Confronted with the provocative actions from Taipei and Washington, Beijing has been under increasing domestic political pressure to take tougher actions to defend China's territorial integrity. The question of Taiwan has been one of the most sensitive issues in China. To almost everyone in China, the island is China's province and a symbol of China's century-long humiliation before 1949. Any effort to split that province away from China constitutes unacceptable insult and offense to the Chinese people and therefore must be countered against. Accordingly, Beijing is willing to accept the cost of war if necessary to prevent anyone from snatching the island province away—no matter whether it is the DPP or Washington.

To a significant extent, China's accelerated military modernization programs in recent decades is a result of the perceived threat posed by the island's increasing independent orientation abetted by anti-China forces in the US. Moreover, as China's defense capabilities grow, more people feel that it is time to think about the possibility of using force to address the problem of Taiwan separatism once and for all. Mr. Wang Hongguang, a retired two-star general of the PLA, for example, is a vocal representative of this way of thinking and has been very popular among netizens (Guancha.cn 2016).

3.4 Increasing tension between Beijing and Washington

Toward the end of the Obama Administration, relations between China and the US began to deteriorate. Many in the US became increasingly disappointed with China's domestic development and international behavior. They began to question the policy of engagement which they had supported, while those who had advocated the policy of containment gained voice.

Donald Trump's election accelerated this trend. He redefined the China–US relationship with the concept of strategic competition and began to adopt a hostile approach to handling relations with China, despite his friendly rhetoric during his early days in office. He launched trade wars against China, dispatched increasing numbers of warships and military aircraft to the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, engaged in a public smear campaign against China, and challenged and undermined the one-China policy that his predecessors had adhered to on Taiwan.

All of these actions by US leaders led to China's strong reactions. As a result, relations between the two countries nosedived and became increasingly confrontational. Against this background, peaceful management of the Taiwan problem became increasingly difficult.

3.5 Changing military balance of power

China's rise has also led to the rapid modernization of its military. This has changed the military balance of power in the Taiwan Strait in a fundamental way.

Source: McCarthy (2021b)

Beijing's increasing military capability would enable it to take over Taiwan by force within a short period of time and also significantly raise the threshold for US military intervention. This development has broad implications for the management of the Taiwan problem. First, it has made Taiwan more dependent on the US for protection. This explains why Taipei has undertaken a more proactive approach in soliciting US help in the past few years. Second, it increased the concern of pro-Taiwan politicians in Washington. This explained why they became more assertive in pressing the US government to do more to help Taiwan. Finally, it has also led to increasing popular pressure on Beijing to do something to contain the perceived threat of Taiwan independence with US endorsement. The net result is increasing tension in the Taiwan Strait.

4 Will the perfect storm take place?

Will the recent developments in the Taiwan Strait lead to a military confrontation and even an all-out war? To answer this question, we need to find out whether the dynamics outlined in the previous passages will continue in the same direction or not. If they do, then military confrontation and even an all-out war is likely. If not,

then there is still a chance for peaceful management of the Taiwan problem in the days to come.

4.1 Taipei's internal politics

On the surface, Taipei's internal politics on cross-strait relations is unlikely to change. Either out of current political considerations or out of personal inclination, Tsai is unlikely to embrace the 92 consensus as Beijing demands. However, in politics nothing is inevitable. Conceivably, the situation may change if one of the two things happens. The first is changing public opinion in Taiwan as the risk of war with the mainland increases. As repeated opinion surveys suggest, most people in Taiwan are rational and do not endorse independence at the risk of war with the Chinese mainland. It is possible that as more people realize that war is a real possibility, they will put enough pressure on the DPP authorities to make the necessary accommodations with Beijing. In that case, it is not entirely inconceivable that the DPP authorities would come up with some kind of wording to define Taiwan's relationship with the mainland in the spirit of the 92 consensus. If that happens, then Beijing may reduce its pressure on Taipei and return to a more peaceful way of handling Taiwan relations.

Another thing that may happen is that the Biden Administration's policy toward Taiwan may revert back to the US one-China policy of the pre-Trump years. After all, the Trumpian approach risks a military confrontation and even war with Beijing, a catastrophe that before Trump successive US administrations had tried to avoid. Specifically, such a move by the Biden Administration would involve reassuring Beijing that it would adhere to the one-China policy, refraining from conducting relations with Taipei at an official level, and pressuring Taipei to refrain from undertaking provocative actions on the question of Taiwan's sovereign status. As military confrontation becomes more likely in the Taiwan Strait, anything is possible if the US still wants to avoid being dragged into a war with China as the previous US administrations did.

4.2 Washington's domestic politics

Until now, politics in Washington appears to suggest the likelihood of continuation of the Trumpian approach to Taiwan. After all, most people on Capitol Hill are endorsing it. The recently announced new US guidelines on official contacts with Taipei shows that the Biden Administration still finds it necessary to retain some aspects of Trump's approach on Taiwan (Brunnstrom 2021).

However, like internal politics in Taiwan, US domestic politics is not static either. As the Trumpian approach on Taiwan makes a war with China increasingly likely, American people may also feel increasingly concerned and demand a change. After all, a war with China is not like a war with Iraq. It would mean much more than economic sacrifice and military personnel loss. Anyone who is sensible enough would question whether risking a war with China to support Taiwan independence

is worthwhile. In this regard, Peter Beinart's recent essay in *The New York Times* may be just the beginning of increasing public concern about the recklessness of this approach to dealing with the Taiwan question (Beinart 2021).

Biden is not Trump, who was both ill-informed on Taiwan and emotional. Therefore, it is probably no accident that his Administration has repeatedly stated that it would adhere to the one-China policy and has refrained from sending senior State and Pentagon officials to visit Taiwan as the Trump Administration did during the latter part of its rule. Even with the new guidelines to govern its officials' contacts with Taipei officials, it tried to emphasize that such contacts do not constitute official relations with Taipei (Brunnstrom 2021). Chances are that the Biden Administration will act more cautiously on Taiwan in the days to come.

4.3 Beijing's domestic politics

As discussed in the previous passages, Beijing's calculus on the Taiwan problem has been shaped by its growing military capabilities and increasing domestic demands for unification. It has also been shaped by Taipei's behavior and the US approach to the Taiwan question. If Taipei's behavior can change in a more conciliatory direction and if the US returns to its traditional one-China policy and acts with greater caution, Beijing is likely to stick to its peaceful unification policy. After all, the cost of a military takeover remains prohibitive. It involves not only the direct cost of a military takeover of the island province, but also the cost of fighting a full-scale war with the US and maybe its allies, and almost inevitable international economic sanctions and a drastic deterioration of China's international environment. Thus, Beijing is unlikely to consider the military option unless it feels cornered by provocations from Taipei and Washington.

4.4 Increasing tension between Washington and Beijing

Despite the Biden Administration's tough rhetoric and posture on China during its first 100 days in office, it is still likely that relations between the two countries will stabilize. Analyzing its rhetoric and behavior, one finds that although the Biden Administration has accepted the term strategic competition to define China–US relations as Donald Trump did, it views strategic competition differently from the Trump Administration. First, it does not regard China as an enemy to be undermined or destroyed. Instead, as Secretary of State Blinken recently claimed, it regards China as a competitor in some areas, a potential partner in areas of shared interests, and a rival in areas of irreconcilable conflicts. In his words, the China–US relationship is “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be” (Wadhams 2021). Second, it regards competition in terms of doing things better oneself rather than stopping others from doing things well. To Biden, the US welcomes competition. “There's no reason the blades for wind turbines can't be built in Pittsburgh instead of Beijing,” he said. “No reason why American workers can't lead the world in the production of electric vehicles and batteries” (Cambell

2021). And third, it rejects Trump's practice of the deliberate use of lies and misinformation to attain its goals in this competition (Quinn 2021). Since China and the US share many important interests and stakes, this approach leaves much room for cooperation.

Moreover, Biden's approach to dealing with China involves closer cooperation with its allies. While this is intended to put more pressure on China, it also restrains the Biden Administration from taking more extreme measures against China. This because to obtain cooperation from its allies, the US also needs to take the views of its allies more seriously. Since most US allies have important stakes in their relationship with China, especially economic interests, this means that most of them do not wish to see confrontation between China and the US and therefore they probably would object to US actions which threaten to jeopardize their interests.

Finally, unlike Trump, Biden is less emotional and more rational and pragmatic in managing US foreign relations, including relations between China and the US. It is a fact that as stakeholders of the existing international order, China and the US share many important interests and need to make good use of each other's resources to maintain the international order to advance their respective interests. A rational and pragmatic approach to the management of bilateral ties ultimately will yield efforts to avoid conflicts and promote a stable relationship.

Biden's approach points to a more rational and pragmatic approach to managing relations with China. Whether this can be translated into a stabilization of the relationship depends on China and their future interactions. If the US–China relationship can be stabilized and cooperation takes place, this would help the two sides to manage the Taiwan problem in a more pragmatic way.

4.5 Changing military balance of power

The changing balance of power across the Taiwan Strait and between China and the US in Beijing's favor does not necessarily lead to cross-strait tension and war. Instead, it depends on how the parties view the change and adapt to it. It can be a destabilizing factor—as the interactions between Taipei, Washington, and Beijing documented in the previous passages show. It can also be a stabilizing factor if the perspectives and adaptations of the involved parties change.

Specifically, Beijing's growing military power can make Taipei limit its ambition to seek independence and try to seek some kind of accommodation with Beijing. Beijing's growing military power can also make Washington be more cautious in encouraging Taipei to provoke Beijing and in promoting a peaceful accommodation between Beijing and Taipei to avert military confrontation. Beijing's growing military power can further enhance its belief that time is on its side and encourage it to adhere to its long-standing policy of peaceful unification. If all three parties view the change in the military balance of power from a different perspective and act accordingly, tension in the Taiwan Strait can decrease and peaceful management of the Taiwan problem can be attained.

5 Concluding remarks

The previous analysis suggests that the forming of a perfect storm in the Taiwan Strait is real, but its outbreak is not inevitable. It is real because of the previous development of Taipei's internal politics, Washington's domestic considerations, Beijing's domestic politics, the increasing tension between Washington and Beijing, and the changing military balance of power across the Taiwan Strait.

Together, these factors have converged to make a military confrontation and even an all-out war between China and the US increasingly likely. It is not inevitable because these factors can change, the cost of an all-out war in the Taiwan Strait is prohibitive, and there is still a chance for Taipei, Washington, and Beijing to make policy accommodations. With Biden in office, the new US Administration is poised to act in a more pragmatic and less emotional way than its predecessor. Whether this will at least lead to less negative, if not more positive, interactions between Beijing, Taipei and Washington remains to be seen. Given the huge stakes involved, there is still a chance for the three parties to find a way to manage their differences so as to avoid the catastrophe that appears to be inevitable now.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author is on the editorial board of CISR and declares that there is no competing interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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