

Public Diplomacy Arguments and Taiwan

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Abstract

Taiwan has been threatened by the People's Republic of China since the communists came to power in 1949. Although it has counted on military assistance from the United States to deter its more powerful neighbor, the United States has not signed a formal treaty pledging to defend the island. In fact, the relationship between the United States and Taiwan is by intention both ambiguous and complex. This paper explores the public diplomacy arguments and symbolic gestures that define this relationship and considers Taiwan's use of soft power given the size differential in the two entities' military forces and economies. The paper discusses the specific cases of the COVID pandemic, competition for cutting edge silicon chips, the war in Ukraine, and heightened tensions between the United States and China.

Keywords: China, COVID-19, Public Diplomacy Arguments, Silicon Shield, Taiwan, Ukraine War, United States

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This paper examines the public statements, military actions, and media narratives that have shaped the relations between the United States, Taiwan, and China to discover how arguments both enact and repudiate strategic ambiguity and deter an invasion by China. Joseph Nye (1990) argued that nations enjoy both hard and soft power, and that diplomacy entails attempts to maximize and take advantage of both in the pursuit of national interests. Although the United States and China can flex their military and economic strength to showcase their hard power, Taiwan must rely primarily on its soft power. This is especially the case today since Taiwan has formal diplomatic relations with only 12 of the 193 United Nations member states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Nye held that diplomacy was not confined to the symbolic actions of government ministers, it was also a product of arguments advanced in mediated public conversations, in networks of scholarly and commercial exchange, and in everyday interactions among citizens. Each of these communicative acts come to constitute the substantive arguments of foreign policy. They also give form to history, shape the understanding of the current moment, and create and contrast alternative futures (Hollihan, 2021; Riley & Hollihan, 2012).

We engage public diplomacy arguments to assess their assumptions, underlying ideologies, and strategic maneuvers as they emerge in English-language global media narratives created for both domestic and international audiences. This analytical framework is user-centric and posits that mediated foreign policy, especially when conducted between rivals, does not follow traditional strategic communication tenets, and instead requires both clarity and strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 2006). Citizens in all nations should hope that their leaders will skillfully determine the demands of the situation and select communication strategies that maximize their strategic objectives while also maintaining peace.

Taiwan's Recent History

When Mao Tse Tung's army closed in on him in 1949, General Chiang Kai-Shek, who commanded the Nationalist forces of the Republic of China, evacuated his capital in Nanjing and created a government in exile in Taiwan. He took with him many loyalists who had served the regime and the remnants of his military forces. The arrival of the Nationalists did not please the Taiwanese population who had endured decades of Japanese occupation and did not want to be swept up in the violence that had overtaken the mainland (Pakula, 2009, pp. 596).

After Mao sought aid from Moscow, conservatives in the United States attacked President Harry Truman's administration for having "lost" China (Newman, 1975). Although Truman was not personally fond of Chiang Kai-Shek, the political pressures were such that he continued to offer military support for the nationalists in Taiwan. Once Mao sent troops into the Korean conflict to protect the regime in Pyongyang, the die was cast, and the United States committed itself to supporting Taiwan. Indeed, "The U.S. worked hard to keep the Nationalists on the Security Council because they represented the seventh and deciding vote

on the resolution to commit U.N. forces to the defense of South Korea” (“What Was Truman’s China Policy?”, 1988).

Taiwan was not always a welcome ally. Chiang Kai-Shek’s administration was “plagued with corruption, mass violence, and totalitarian rule” (Shattuck, 2017). His troops brutally suppressed, murdered, and imprisoned political dissidents in Taiwan who were seen as a threat to his rule in a period known as the “White Terror”. Chiang imposed a harsh martial law which remained in effect until 1987 (Shattuck, 2017). Despite Chiang’s brutal dictatorship, the United States continued to recognize the exiled Republic of China (ROC) as the legitimate government of China, and Taiwan held the China seat on the Security Council and in the General Assembly of the United Nations. This remained the case until President Richard Nixon and Secretary Henry Kissinger visited Beijing and met with Mao and Premier Chou En-Lai. Nixon sought to establish diplomatic relations with China. The main sticking issue in these conversations was the status of Taiwan. On October 26, 1972, Kissinger came up with the language on Taiwan that was acceptable both to the United States and to the PRC: “The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Straits maintain there is but one China. The United States Government does not challenge that position” (MacMillan, 2008, pp. 214). With this compromised language, the United States agreed to no longer recognize the ROC as the legitimate government of China, and actions were put in motion that would eventually deny Taiwan membership in the United Nations. Yet even as relations thawed between Washington and Beijing, Taiwan continued to enjoy strong support in Washington. As a result, almost from the beginning, the U.S. government sought to obfuscate any agreements that made it appear that it had abandoned Taiwan. In 1979, the U.S. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) that:

Declares it to be the policy of the United States to preserve and promote extensive, close, and friendly commercial, cultural, and other relations between the people of the United States and the people on Taiwan, as well as the people on the China mainland and all other people of the Western Pacific area. Declares that peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern. States that the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means and that any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes is considered a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States . . . the United States shall provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character and shall maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan (H.R. 2479, 1979-1980, paragraph 1).

The act also reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to the preservation of human rights of the people of Taiwan (H.R. 2479, 1979-1980). The act was not, however, an explicit treaty agreement to defend the island. The actual language in the act is ambiguous and gives significant authority to the Executive Branch to determine what arms might be made available to Taiwan and how the United States would respond to a Chinese attack. Bush (2009, paragraph 7) argues that “most of the TRA language is rendered as statements of policy rather than law, and so lacks binding force. For example, the TRA only states a U.S. policy of having the capacity to resist coercion against Taiwan, not an explicit commitment to use those capabilities. The only thing that a U.S. administration must do in a crisis is report to Congress.”

Since the United States no longer had formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, it no longer had an embassy. The TRA established the American Institute in Taiwan to act as a quasi-embassy and facilitate direct day-to-day diplomatic affairs. Taiwan similarly created the Coordination Council for North American Affairs, later renamed the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office, to conduct its diplomatic affairs in the United States (Bush, 2009). Today Taiwan’s senior diplomat in the United States, Bi-khim Hsiao, is “among the most influential foreign ambassadors in Washington, but she technically is not an ambassador” (Crowley, 2023). Hsiao is reported to have almost daily conversations with senior Biden administration officials and has close relationships with congressional leaders representing both political parties. Former National Security advisor under President Trump, John Bolton, declared that “Taiwan has one of the most effective diplomatic representations in Washington of any country” (cited by Crowley, 2023).

The United States-Taiwan relationship was further changed by time, events, and skillful Taiwanese diplomacy. First, they utilized their growing immigrant profile as a significant number of Taiwanese now live in the United States. Although it is difficult to determine Taiwanese identity, the Pew Research Center indicated that in 2019 the number could be as high as 697,000 people (Passel, 2021). This Taiwanese diaspora naturally advocates on behalf of their homeland. Second, and importantly, Taiwan transitioned to a democracy. The first free and fair legislative elections occurred in 1992; and the first fully democratic presidential election was held in 1996 (Shattuck, 2017). The one-party rule of Chiang’s former party the Kuomintang (KMT) was finally ended when the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came to power. Today, the DPP controls both the executive and legislative branches of government (Political System, N.D.). Taiwan’s successful transition from a dictatorship to a democracy naturally drew it closer to the United States. Third, Taiwan is now an important trading partner, and it dominates the manufacturing of badly needed advanced semiconductor silicon chips.

An example of the close relationship between the U.S. and Taiwan was the visit to Taipei by then Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in 2022. China has long protested any actions that acknowledge Taiwan as a legitimate political entity (Crowley, 2023). Pelosi’s visit, and especially her meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen, provoked an immediate response. China characterized the visit as U.S. intervention in its internal

sovereignty. In response, it reaffirmed its willingness to use military force to regain control over Taiwan. Although it has often threatened Taiwan by violating its airspace, it dramatically increased the number and intensity of the fighter-jet flights, risking an accidental encounter that might escalate to an all-out war (“China Reaffirms Threat”, 2022).

If Beijing thought its escalation of threats would cause the U.S. to back down, it was mistaken. President Biden confirmed on national television that the United States would defend Taiwan if China launched an “unprecedented attack” (Ruwitch, 2022). The statement marked the third time since 2021 that Biden had suggested the United States was abandoning the “strategic ambiguity” in its foreign policy toward Taiwan, even though a follow up statement from a White House spokesperson muddied the waters, “The president has said this before... He also made clear then that our Taiwan policy hasn't changed. That remains true” (Ruwitch, 2022).

Taiwan also enjoys support in the U.S. Congress. In response to China’s escalation of threats, the U.S. Senate passed the Taiwan Policy Act which would provide Taiwan almost \$4.5 billion in security assistance over the next four years and designate Taiwan as a “Major Non-NATO Ally” (The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022). The new Act would also expand the provision of arms to Taiwan from being in a “defensive manner” to “arms conducive to deterring acts of aggression by the People’s Liberation Army” (The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022). Although the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 has not yet become law, increasing hostility toward China may have made its passage more likely. Hostility toward the Chinese Communist Party may be the only issue in Washington on which both Republicans and Democrats agree. A recent Pew survey reported that 90 percent of Americans held negative views of China (“American’s unfavorable views”, 2022).

Taiwan’s Public Diplomacy as a Counterpart to China

Taiwan exists as a political entity due to the rise of the Communist regime in China, and Taiwan’s evolution from dictatorship to democracy assures that Taiwan will be seen in contrast to China. It is thus not surprising that Taiwan’s diplomacy is shaped as a response, often a rebuke, to that of China. As Beijing escalated its threats against Taiwan, and strategically shifted to its “wolf warrior approach to foreign policy,” it has nudged the United States and Taiwan closer together. This is a product both of China’s increasingly aggressive global posturing and of Taiwan’s skillful public diplomacy argumentation (Crowley, 2023).

Public diplomacy includes communicative acts intended to inform, engage, and influence overseas publics to advance national strategic goals (Rawnsley, 2020). China’s diplomacy champions its role as a trading partner and advocate of globalization and economic integration (Albert, 2018). In the west, however, many see Beijing’s diplomacy as boastful, coercive, and threatening, not just toward Taiwan or the United States, but also toward other nations around the world (Hanson, Currey, and Beattie, 2020). Chinese government officials may believe that “America’s power in the international system is declining relative to China’s” (Hass, 2021),

which has led to “Beijing’s new, more truculent posture [that] is rooted in an exaggerated sense of China’s rise in global power and serious domestic political insecurity” (Christensen, 2021).

In contrast, Taiwan’s diplomacy characterizes the island “as a democracy, as a force for good, and as a true partner of the United States” (Crowley, 2023). Taiwan emphasizes that it is a democratic nation of well-educated and generous citizens with a vibrant economy, a rich culture and history, and a beautiful tourist destination with an amazing and diverse cuisine (Drun, 2022; Mandl, 2021). This diplomatic narrative is central to an advocacy campaign that is directed toward the U.S. and other governments, media outlets, academics, business interests, and foreign publics (for a more detailed discussion of public diplomacy advocacy, see Cull, 2019). Taiwan’s gentler form of diplomacy emphasizes annual celebrations of Taiwan National Day and invitations extended to important guests to come to enjoy food, drink, and conviviality as they celebrate the emergence of Taiwan’s vibrant democracy (Crowley, 2023; Mandl, 2021).

Three recent events present a unique opportunity and context for Taiwan to develop its public diplomacy efforts to enhance its relations with the United States and its allies. They also provide a strong contrast between China and Taiwan.

The COVID Pandemic

On December 31, 2019, the PRC notified the World Health Organization (WHO) about cases of a new type of pneumonia that had surfaced at a fish and game market in Wuhan. On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak a public health emergency. On February 11, 2020, the new virus was named SARS-CoV-2 and the disease was called COVID-19 (WHO.int). China was already reporting thousands of cases when the virus claimed its first death in the United States on February 20. Within another month, the disease was declared a global pandemic, with the greatest number of cases occurring in Europe (Moore, N.D.).

From the beginning, China was blamed for the virus. U.S. President Trump referred to COVID as the “China virus,” despite criticisms that doing so would lead to anti-Asian discrimination and even violence. Another White House official called it the “Kung Flu” (Rogers, Jakes, & Swanson, 2020). The criticism of the Chinese government for its handling of the virus went well beyond Trump, however, as scientists debated its origins. Was it deliberately or accidentally leaked from an infectious disease laboratory in Wuhan? Or did it originate from zoonotic transfer, leaping from one animal to another before infecting a human being in the under-regulated Wuhan wet market filled with caged rare animals sold for food (Lytras *et al.*, 2021)? The Chinese were less than fully forthcoming about the origin of the virus, its seriousness, or the number of cases and fatalities that they experienced (Stolberg & Mueller, 2023; Pollard & Tham, 2023). Perhaps the biggest stain on Chinese public diplomacy was the story of Dr. Li Wenliang, a physician who was among the first to treat patients suffering from the new disease. Yet, when he attempted to report it to authorities so

others could take steps to slow the spread of infections, he was reprimanded and threatened with arrest for causing a panic. Dr. Li himself became infected and succumbed to the virus, thus emerging as a hero in China and as evidence of a cover-up elsewhere around the world (Xiao *et al.*, 2022).

China's lack of transparency became an overt attempt at misdirection when Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry shared an unfounded conspiracy theory that the United States created the virus. He Tweeted: "It might be U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! U.S. owe us an explanation!" (Rogers, Jakes, & Swanson, 2020). When the WHO sent an international team of virologists and other scientists to Wuhan to study the origin of the virus, they were denied full access to the data. Ultimately, the United States and thirteen other nations including the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Korea, issued a joint statement expressing concerns over the team's limited access to "complete, original data, and samples." The European Union expressed the same complaints but in softer language (Gan, 2021).

The negative media coverage of China's COVID policies continued as Xi Jinping announced his "Zero COVID" policy which included locking 26 million people in Shanghai in their apartments to halt the spread of the disease. Soon additional lockdowns occurred in cities across China ("26 Million People", 2022). Media accounts reported that many were denied the opportunity to leave their apartments to seek medical care for other conditions, in rare cases leading to deaths from other causes (Yuan, 2022). There were also reports of shortages of food, children being separated from their parents, and other forms of abuse rendered to citizens by local officials (Kanthor, 2022). The policy slowed the economy as it closed workplaces and sparked a global supply chain crisis, diminishing respect for China as a stable partner in global commerce (Tan, 2022). After ten people under lockdown died when a fire broke out in their high-rise apartment building where the exits had been sealed to prevent them from leaving due to the quarantine, intense protests broke out in cities across the country (Feng, 2022). Anxious that the protests might quickly grow out of control, Xi Jinping abruptly reversed course and abandoned the Zero COVID policy, without a plan in place to treat the millions of people who quickly became infected, many of whom remained unvaccinated or who had been protected only with an inferior Chinese vaccine that was not very effective against the new COVID variants (Buckley, Stevenson, & Bradsher, 2022).

Reports of massive numbers of cases and overwhelmed crematoria dominated the news in the west ("Bodies Pile Up", 2023), so China essentially stopped reporting the number of cases and deaths from COVID, narrowed how COVID deaths were classified, and ended its COVID testing program (Dyer, 2023). Reports nonetheless suggested that China faced a major surge in the disease and that 1.7 million people could die of COVID by the end of April 2023. Chinese citizens were also reported to be suffering when pharmacies ran out of drugs to treat colds and influenza. In social media posts doctors reported that 80% of hospital staff became infected (Dyer, 2023).

If the COVID pandemic represented an unmitigated public diplomacy disaster for China, it created significant opportunities for Taiwan. First, Taiwan achieved great success in controlling infections in the early days of the COVID crisis. Many Taiwan residents travel back and forth to the mainland for business, tourism, or to visit family. Because the COVID outbreak surfaced as Lunar New Year celebrations were ending, Taiwan prepared for a surge of “approximately 500,000 travelers anticipated to return from Chinese New Year celebrations on January 25, 2020, shortly after the Chinese Government locked down Wuhan on January 23. Experts initially predicted this migration would result in millions of infections” (Chien, Bey, & Koenig, 2020). Because Taiwan had developed an extensive public health infrastructure following the 2003 SARS epidemic, it was well prepared to respond to COVID-19. Despite the predictions to the contrary, Taiwan managed to limit the number of infections even as the disease quickly spread around the world. Taiwan achieved this success through a public campaign to persuade people to wear masks, socially distance, and attend to handwashing without having to close businesses, schools, transportation, or restaurants (Chien, Bey, & Koenig, 2020).

Throughout 2020, the first year of the pandemic, Taiwan was hailed internationally for its success in controlling infections. Even as COVID raged to over 30 million cases globally, Taiwan reported fewer than 600 confirmed cases and only 7 deaths. Many of the confirmed cases were also reported to have been in people coming in from abroad, thus indicating very low levels of community transmission (Chang, 2020). Although the arrival of the Omicron variant, a far more transmissible form of the disease, led to a sharp spike in the number of COVID cases in the summer of 2022, Taiwan never experienced a significant number of deaths from the disease--it is estimated that approximately 16,000 COVID deaths occurred in Taiwan by February 1, 2023 (Taiwan: Corona Virus, 2023).

The long period of time when Taiwan was almost free of the disease that was ravaging other nations gave Taiwan an opportunity to actively shape a media diplomacy effort demanding that it be admitted to the WHO and other relevant medical and scientific organizations. As Yang (2020) argued:

“The Taiwan Model” has not only been featured in dozens of media outlets around the world, the Taiwanese government has also been busy sharing Taiwan’s experiences with other countries. In many ways, Taiwan’s response to the pandemic has helped raise its global visibility tremendously.

Amidst the growing interest in Taiwan’s COVID19 preventative measures, governments from democratic countries have also amplified their calls for Taiwan’s inclusion into the WHO.

An example is the following statement by an Australian diplomat: “The challenge of COVID-19 demands a determined, global response. The WHO must therefore maintain a close working relationship with all health authorities . . . We support Taiwan’s participation as an observer or guest, consistent with our one-China policy” (Yang, 2020).

Taiwanese diplomats directly reached out to academics around the world (including us personally) to encourage them to write letters, articles, opinion essays, etc., that advocated for Taiwan's participation in WHO pandemic programs. Chiaoning Su argued: "Through its success in combating the pandemic, Taiwan allows the world to become familiar with Taiwan, become empathetic with Taiwan's situations and support Taiwan to join the WHO" (Yang, 2020).

The efforts to participate in the WHO constituted just a small part of Taiwan's pandemic diplomacy. As Horton (2021) argued, "In contrast to Xi's China, Taiwan under President Tsai Ing-wen has been on a global charm offensive since the outbreak of COVID-19. Last year as China was selling masks to other countries -- many subsequently found to be defective -- Taiwan ramped up production and donated millions of masks to nations around the world." The pandemic thus highlighted the differences between a closed China and an open Taiwan. While China was highly secretive and developed an authoritarian approach to the health crisis, Taiwan emphasized a transparent and generous democratic approach (Horton, 2021). Taiwan's approach to COVID won praise from global health officials. For example, Michael Ryan, the executive director of the World Health Organization's Health Emergencies Program, declared that the authorities in Taiwan "deserve praise, they have mounted a very good public health response in Taiwan, and you can see that in the numbers" (Lo, 2020). China's efforts to block Taiwan's participation in the United Nations and in related global health organizations, began to appear both mean spirited and counterproductive to global well-being given China's failures to prevent the virus from escaping its borders and its lack of transparency (Lo, 2020).

Taiwan's public diplomacy efforts characterized the island "as a persecuted but nonetheless gracious international good Samaritan" (Sung, 2020). Taiwan's pragmatic "warm power" diplomacy during the COVID-19 outbreak represents a low-key approach to boosting its international participation while minimizing the burden for its sympathetic international partners and friends. The government of President Tsai Ing-wen's successful management of the COVID-19 crisis has also made a strong case for liberal democracies as the superior form of government for public health crisis governance. This, in turn, has translated into more positive international publicity for Taiwan, as well as greater opportunities to network with other states' relevant agencies and potentials for functional spillover into other forms of cooperation at the governmental level (Sung, 2020).

President Tsai Ing-Wen was directly involved in Taiwan's COVID pandemic diplomacy. In an essay for *Time*, she declared:

Taiwan is an island of resilience. Centuries of hardship have compelled our society to cope, adapt, and survive trying circumstances. We have found ways to persevere through difficult times together as a nation, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no different. Despite the virus's highly infectious nature and our proximity to its source, we have prevented a major outbreak. As of April 14, we have had fewer than 400 confirmed cases (Tsai, 2020).

She further stressed that her nation was willing to help other nations confront the lethal virus:

Taiwan has one of the world's top health care systems, strong research capabilities and transparent information that we actively share with both the public and international bodies. Indeed, Taiwan has effectively managed the containment of the corona-virus within our borders. Yet on a global level, COVID-19 is a humanitarian disaster that requires the joint efforts of all countries. Although Taiwan has been unfairly excluded from the WHO and the U.N., we remain willing and able to utilize our strengths across manufacturing, medicine and technology to work with the world.

Global crises test the fabric of the international community, stretching us at the seams and threatening to tear us apart. Now more than ever, every link in this global network must be accounted for. We must set aside our differences and work together for the benefit of humankind. The fight against COVID-19 will require the collective efforts of people around the world (Tsai, 2020).

While Taiwan would, ultimately fail to completely contain the highly contagious Omicron variant, and many of its citizens would become ill and some would even perish, the government's utilization of public health practices bought it time to develop a vaccine and its pandemic public diplomacy was by any measure highly effective (Lin, 2022). Tsai also indirectly argued that having a great health care system and modern technology is not enough during a pandemic—astute leadership and strategic communication tailored to a multiplicity of stakeholders are also required to tame the chaos of the crisis. Taiwan's skillful deployment of public diplomacy became a virtuous cycle that offered compelling stories of the country's successes across many arenas to enhance the “public dimension” of diplomacy (see Gregory, 2015).

Silicon Shield Diplomacy

Silicon semiconductor chips are critical components of computers, mobile phones, aircraft, motor vehicles, medical devices, and household appliances. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) is the leading producer of advanced semiconductors in the world. As Cronin (2022) argued:

The far-sighted vision of Taiwan's scientific and political leaders in the late 1980s has made the privately owned TSMC the contract fabricator of more than half of the world's semiconductors overall and 92 percent of the most advanced chips. The latter are mostly designed by a half dozen or so leading American semiconductor companies including Apple, Google, Intel, AMD, Qualcomm and Nvidia. No other semiconductor company in the world can match TSMC's

expertise in the fabrication, efficiency, and forward-looking management. A registered Taiwan corporation, its ten largest institutional investors and ten largest mutual fund investors are all American entities.

The TSMC thus knits together a business interdependency that closely binds Taiwan and America's most important digital technology companies (Lee, 2021). Access to these chips is also vital to European nations, Japan, South Korea, and of course China.

With very different consequences, both China and the United States depend on Taiwan's global dominance of semiconductor fabrication for most of the computer chips their companies consume and sell. Chinese semiconductor companies can only produce about 6 percent of chips needed to feed the Asian giant's world-leading consumer electronics industry. China depends on the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) to make up 70 percent of the deficit (Cronin, 2022).

Without the advanced chips the global economy would slow to a halt. A military invasion of Taiwan by China would be even worse. As Zinkula and Epstein (2023) wrote:

Looking at this situation from an economic perspective, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan could mean trillions of dollars in losses and a serious global recession. Taiwan is home to TSMC, the world's biggest chipmaker. Given that no other company makes such advanced chips at such a high volume, a conflict could mean the production of everything from cars to iPhones grinds to a halt.

"If China would invade Taiwan, that would be the biggest impact we've seen to the global economy — possibly ever", [declared] Glenn O'Donnell, the vice president and research director at Forrester . . . "This could be bigger than 1929."

Access to the most advanced chips is critical to U.S. military defense. One study reported that: "If a potential adversary bests the United States in semiconductors over the long term or suddenly cuts off U.S. access to cutting-edge chips entirely, it could gain the upper hand in every domain of warfare" (Shivakumar & Wessner, 2022). Access to the most advanced chips produced in Taiwan is also essential to the development of artificial intelligence capabilities "expected to revolutionize warfare" (Shivakumar & Wessner, 2022).

The competition over Taiwan is thus part of a much broader contest between the United States and China. In the fall of 2022, the Biden administration announced that it would enforce "new limits on the sale of semiconductor technology to China, a step aimed at crippling Beijing's access to critical technologies that are needed for everything from supercomputing to guiding weapons" (Swanson, 2022). The move confirmed China's claim that the United States wants to slow China's rise and thwart its military and economic ambitions. The Biden administration also strongly lobbied U.S. allies not to sell either the chips or to license the technology to develop them to China (Toh, 2022).

Seeking to secure its close relationship with the United States, Taiwan agreed to allow TSMC to build a \$12 billion factory to manufacture the chips in Arizona. Although some worried that the move could undercut Taiwan's silicon shield, President Tsai declared that "In the face of authoritarian expansionism and the challenges of the post-pandemic era, Taiwan seeks to bolster cooperation with the United States in the semiconductor and other high-tech industries. . . This will help build more secure and more resilient supply chains. We look forward to jointly producing democracy chips to safeguard the interests of our democratic partners and create greater prosperity" ("Taiwan President Says", 2022).

The foreign ministry of Taiwan denied that the United States had pressured Taiwan to build the Arizona plant and that claims that the move would weaken Taiwan's silicon shield were fabrications and misinformation originating in Beijing intended to undermine the people of Taiwan's confidence in their government. Foreign Minister Joseph Wu declared that he had "no worry at all", given that it was too complex for other countries to replicate the entire ecosystem of the TSMC (Chung, 2022). The Tsai government also reassured its citizens that TSMC, "which supplies 90 per cent of the world's most advanced chips – will keep most of its production and cutting-edge technologies at home" (Chung, 2022).

President Tsai used formal diplomacy as well as economic investments and media diplomacy to manage Taiwan's relations with its most important ally, the United States. In this instance, however, Tsai's public diplomacy was also directed at domestic audiences in Taiwan. The opposition KMT party criticized Tsai's administration for allowing the new plant in Arizona because it might damage Taiwan's national security and economy (Hioe, 2023). KMT legislators also warned that the new plant would hasten Taiwan's problem of brain drain to America because the Arizona plant would pay higher salaries (Hioe, 2023). TSMC has recently been the subject of heated political discourse in Taiwan. For example, during the local election campaigns in 2022, "the KMT accused the Tsai administration of directing TSMC to build facilities in parts of Taiwan where its support was weak, so as to create job opportunities that would boost the DPP's standing locally" (Hioe, 2023). The KMT frequently criticizes the Tsai administration so that they can "sow distrust about the United States and depict the DPP as uncritically pro-American" (Hioe, 2023). While Taiwan benefited economically for years by maintaining close economic ties with the PRC, it is now difficult for the nation or its business elites to avoid taking sides in the great power contest.

The competition for chips is intense. Access to semiconductors achieved through the development of its own semiconductor industry or through control of TSMC, is essential to Xi's "Chinese Dream," a populist vision of the future in which China becomes a global leader in innovation and the equal of the United States by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC (Cronin, 2022). Meanwhile, a bipartisan group of lawmakers passed the CHIPS Act, which granted \$52 billion to expand chip manufacturing in the United States (Tankersly & Swanson, 2023). The foresight involved in the diplomatic negotiations between Taiwan, the United States and TSMC (a publicly traded company) is an interesting example of Wiseman's (2015) "polylateralism", a complex approach that utilizes, state, non-state, and in this case, global media actors to achieve joint objectives.

War in Ukraine and the Future of Taiwan

Vladimir Putin's invasion of his peaceful neighbor Ukraine was condemned by the United States, the European Union, NATO members, and most other democracies around the world. Even historically neutral Switzerland condemned the invasion and sanctioned Russia. Despite the global enmity toward Putin, China and Russia grew closer together. Xi Jinping held a video conference with Putin in which he promised "to increase strategic cooperation with Russia" (Dana, 2022). Xi's government further declared that China and Russia had a "no limits" friendship. China declined to criticize Moscow's actions and blamed the United States and NATO for provoking the Kremlin and imposing sanctions on Russia. Wang Yi, China's foreign minister told Sergey Lavrov, his Russian counterpart, that Beijing wanted to take relations with Russia to "a higher level" (Buckley & Bradsher, 2022). Although Chinese officials claimed neutrality in the conflict, and have called for peace negotiations, "state media have echoed Russian propaganda and blamed the conflict on the West. Dissenting opinions have been blocked on the Chinese internet, erasing any sign of doubt or controversy" (Yang, 2022, p. A3). In return for Xi's support, Russia agreed to strongly back China regarding Taiwan (Dana, 2022).

From the first days of the war, media coverage linked what was happening in Ukraine with the possibility that a similar invasion could occur in Taiwan. For example, an article in the *Atlantic* titled "Taiwan Prepares to be Invaded," interviewed President Tsai and asked what she had learned from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She replied: "The Western countries, particularly the U.S. are helping Ukraine. What we see from the Ukraine war is Western countries get together to help Ukraine fight ... These people do help others" (Rhodes, 2022, p. 59). Her statement was intended for two audiences. One for her own citizens, that they could expect support from countries around the world as they sought to defend their democracy, and one directed externally, reminding other nations that the fight for Taiwan would be a continuation of the same battle for democratic liberty against strongman authoritarianism that was occurring in Ukraine. Tsai also used this interview to emphasize the importance of national character. "You need to have good leadership," she said, "but more important is the people's determination to defend themselves, and the Ukrainian people showed that" (Rhodes, 2022, p. 59).

The rhetorical challenge Taiwan faces is that it must motivate citizens to train and plan strategies to resist an invasion without causing them to panic or possibly flee their homes. In addition, Taiwan must curry favor with its allies to win their support and assistance without provoking Beijing to invade or blockade the island. The Biden administration similarly must try to better prepare Taiwan while not provoking China. As Rhodes (2022, p. 60) notes, this "requires some guesswork about what lessons China may have drawn from Ukraine. Will Xi see Ukraine's military success as a warning against invading a neighbor that is building up asymmetric capabilities? Or will he decide he has to invade *before* Taiwan is sufficiently armed and trained?"

Much of the media coverage regarding aggression against Taiwan emphasized the risk of an imminent attack. For example, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said China could act to annex Taiwan on a “much faster timeline” (Zinkula & Epstein, 2023).

“Whether its 2030, 2027, 2025, or even this year, experts say it could wreak havoc on the global economy and take a devastating toll on the militaries involved” (Zinkula & Epstein, 2023). Media narratives even framed an attack as inevitable. For example, reporting emphasized that “Chinese President Xi Jinping himself has mandated that China’s military, known as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), be capable of taking Taiwan by 2027, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PLA” (Mitchell, 2023).

Both China and the United States also turned to displays of hard power after the invasion of Ukraine. As mentioned, following Speaker Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, China increased its incursions into Taiwan’s airspace. The United States responded in February 2023, when the Biden administration announced that it would station military equipment and build bases in nine locations in the Philippines. The United States had withdrawn its forces from the Philippines 30 years ago, so the shift was dramatic (Apostol, 2023). Media reports framed the action as an attempt by Washington:

[...] to reaffirm its influence in the region amid a broader effort to counter Chinese aggression, reinforcing partnerships with strategic allies and bolstering relations that have soured in recent years. Fears have also grown over a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the island democracy that China claims as its territory. Among the five treaty allies that the United States has in Asia, the Philippines and Japan are the most geographically close to Taiwan, with the Philippines’ northernmost, inhabited island of Itbayat just 93 miles away (Wee, 2023).

After Pelosi’s visit, China conducted military exercises in the Bashi Channel, the waterway separating Taiwan and the Philippines. The exercises made it apparent that if there was a war over Taiwan, “the battle space will encompass the Philippines” (Wee, 2023).

In this case, military strategy, formal diplomacy, and public diplomacy are intertwined. “The Philippines is also strategically important because of what lies beneath the surface of the ocean. The waters just off the west coast that abut the South China Sea — where China has turned a series of sand mounds into military bases — are flush with undergrowth, making it ideal for stealth submarine movement” (Wee, 2023).

The Chinese Foreign Ministry protested the move into the Philippines arguing that “US actions escalate regional tension and undermine regional peace and stability” (Wingfield-Hayes, 2023). Western governments and media sources countered that it is China who destabilized the region through its expansive claims in the South China sea, its decision to build islands and militarize them when it had promised not to do so, and its escalation of threats against Taiwan (Wingfield-Hayes, 2023; Apostol, 2023; Wee, 2023).

The escalation toward hard power diplomacy continued when a Chinese spy balloon was discovered over U.S. territory. While the balloon may have yielded significant intelligence, in much of the world it was a public diplomacy failure. First, China insisted that it was merely a weather balloon that had drifted off course. Then in a change of strategy, they admitted that the balloon had violated U.S. airspace and expressed regrets for the incursion. Then, after Secretary of State Anthony Blinken cancelled his trip to Beijing where he was to meet with senior Chinese officials, they accused the U.S. of overreacting to the violation of its sovereignty. When Biden ordered the balloon shot out of the sky over the Atlantic Ocean, after it had crossed from Alaska, over Canada, and down across the United States, China called the shooting “a violation of international practice” and threatened retaliations (Seligman & Stein, 2023). Finally, China demanded the return of the debris (Balloon Latest, 2023).

News reports soon surfaced that China had flown spy balloons over the United States during the Trump administration, and a spy balloon was currently over Latin America (Cooper & Wong, 2023). The inconsistency of China’s messaging demonstrated the weakness of its position since this was a clear violation of U.S. sovereign air space and precisely the kind of violation that China loudly protests when the United State flies over or sails too close to the disputed islands in the South China Sea (Sanger, 2023). U.S. media reports cited the incident as a miscalculation, an “unforced error,” and as a failure of command and control (Sanger, 2023; Buckley, 2023).

The balloon also created internal tensions for China. The shooting down of the balloon prompted ultranationalists on social media platforms such as Weibo to call for retribution against the United States. Xi does not want to appear weak and Chinese state-owned media outlets have frequently stoked such sentiments. At the same time, experts argued that the Chinese, coming out of their COVID crisis, and facing a slowing economy, wanted to reduce tensions with the United States if only to buy time. Hence, they had extended the invitation for the visit that Secretary Blinken cancelled (Wang & Dong, 2023). China’s censors quickly scrubbed the aggressive posts from social media outlets while allowing humorous posts about the balloon to flourish as a strategic communication decision to diffuse the tension by making light of the situation on social media and squash calls for hard power responses. These included memes that the balloon was merely a failed attempt to wish Americans a happy Lantern Festival—a Chinese holiday that was celebrated in the past week, or that the balloon represented a giant glutinous rice ball, a food eaten during the Lunar New Year celebrations (Wang & Dong, 2023).

Although Taiwan was not directly impacted by this balloon’s surveillance over the United States, both Taiwan and Japan claimed that they had detected previous attempts by China to conduct espionage via balloons (Quinn, 2023). The Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared the Chinese spy balloon “should not be tolerated by the civilized international community,” and that:

Such actions by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government contravene international law, breach the airspace of other countries, and violate their sovereignty . . . The CCP regime should immediately cease conduct of this kind that encroaches on other countries and causes regional instability (Neukam, 2023).

Conclusion

Taiwan represents one of the most intractable and dangerous foreign policy controversies in the world today. Nixon and Kissinger’s vague and ambiguous language about the U.S. commitment and intentions regarding Taiwan was never deeply considered or debated in the United States Congress. Certainly, Beijing attached much more significance to the statement of U.S. interests toward Taiwan than Washington did. Today the United States is much more closely connected to Taiwan than it was fifty years ago, while relations with China are the worst in decades. In deeply polarized America, the only thing our citizens or our elected officials can agree on is opposition to China. The House of Representatives voted unanimously, 419-0 to condemn China for its spy balloon as a “brazen violation of United States sovereignty.” As *The New York Times* reported, “The action appeared to reflect a broader belief that has taken hold among senior law makers in both parties . . . that the rise of China poses too existential a threat to the United States—economically, militarily and otherwise—to be politicized” (Demirjian, 2023).

The Chinese government declined to accept a phone call between the two countries’ top defense officials after the U.S. shot down the balloon. The Pentagon declared this a “new low” in U.S.-China relations (Wadhams, 2023). We thus have a situation where two nuclear powers are moving toward a “hair-trigger” state of wariness and do not have open channels of communication to diffuse the next potential crisis.

The new Speaker of the House of Representatives, Kevin McCarthy, contemplated his own visit to Taiwan but decided instead to invite President Tsai to a meeting in California (Robertson, 2023). In a joint press conference at the Reagan Library McCarthy declared:

I believe our bond is stronger now than at any time or point in my lifetime . . . Today was a bipartisan meeting — Republicans and Democrats united together — in a place that symbolizes the freedom and the commitment and the bond that’s only become stronger with the president with us today (Adragna, 2023).

President Tsai thanked the congressional delegation for attending:

Their presence and unwavering support reassure the people of Taiwan that we are not isolated and we are not alone . . . In the discussion with congressional leaders this morning, I reiterated Taiwan’s commitment to defending the peaceful status quo — where the people of Taiwan may continue to thrive in a free and open society (Adragna, 2023).

The Center for Strategic and International Studies, a U.S. think tank, has been conducting war games on a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. In most scenarios considered, the U.S. and Japan (assuming Japan entered the conflict), repel the Chinese invaders, but at a tremendous cost. Tens of thousands of combatants and civilians would die. Many ships and planes would be lost, and the infrastructure of Taiwan would be devastated. The global economy would be plunged into a deep depression (Zinkula & Epstein, 2023). Even these bleak scenarios, do not describe the human misery that would occur if the conflict escalated to a nuclear exchange.

Takeaways

Given the poor prospects that this conflict will be resolved through negotiations, it is essential that the involved political regimes continue to plot a public diplomacy strategy that manages public opinions, discourages reckless conduct, and preserves the peace. We learn from studying Taiwan that a patient and persistent public diplomacy effort can enable a small nation to stand up to global power. Taiwan's future autonomy seemed very bleak when it was banished from the United Nations and lost the diplomatic recognition of its primary patron, the United States and most other nations around the world. Taiwan could never match China's economic power or potential due to the vast size differential, and under Chiang Kai-Shek, Taiwan was seen as only another authoritarian regime. As it evolved into a democracy, however, it bought itself the time to become recognized as a liberal regime with a healthy respect for human rights, an educated public, and a highly skilled workforce. It invested in key new technologies, mastered sophisticated industries, and boosted its soft power through expertise and the benefits of democracy .

Taiwan showcased the benefits of transparency and playing by the rules of the international order, and it made itself indispensable to that order. Certainly, its situation was advantaged by the strategic importance of its location, but it also wisely knitted itself to the United States, winning the support of liberals and conservatives alike. It also cultivated its relationships with Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the democracies in the Western alliance. China has recently overplayed its hand in the South China Sea, failed to keep its word in Hong Kong, and has grown more openly oppressive at home. China has also communicated a hypersensitivity to criticism in global media, became less transparent in admitting its flaws, and reaffirmed its ties to Putin as Russia has been hit with numerous international sanctions. China's mistakes have also benefited Taiwan, at least in the short term. It of course remains to be seen whether Taiwan's successful public diplomacy effort and this fragile peace can be maintained into the future, but for the sake of the many lives that would be lost in a war, we remain hopeful.

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