

# TAIWAN'S PERILOUS FUTURES: *Chinese Nationalism, the 2020 Presidential Elections, and U.S.-China Tensions Spell Trouble for Cross-strait Relations*

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*The Taiwan Strait is heating up, as Mainland Chinese netizens, generals, and politicians increasingly talk about 'forceful' rather than 'peaceful' reunification. While Xi Jinping and Chinese nationalists desperately desire Taiwan's reunification, Trump's isolationist "America First" rhetoric has only encouraged reckless Chinese thinking about forcing reunification, and the Taiwanese remain largely passive, unable to confront an overwhelming threat. Wishful thinking in Beijing, Taipei, and Washington is increasing the odds of miscalculation. The 2020 presidential elections in Taiwan and the United States, and the ongoing U.S.-China trade war, furthermore, bode ill for peace in the Taiwan Strait.*

**Keywords:** Taiwan Strait, Forceful Reunification, Chinese Nationalism, U.S.-China Relations, Xi Jinping.

## **Los futuros peligrosos de Taiwán:**

**El nacionalismo chino, las elecciones presidenciales de 2020 y las tensiones entre Estados Unidos y China causan problemas para las relaciones a través del Estrecho**

*El Estrecho de Taiwán se está calentando, ya que los internautas, los generales y los políticos de China continental hablan cada vez más de la reunificación 'enérgica' en lugar de 'pacífica'. Mientras Xi Jinping y los nacionalistas chinos desean*

*desesperadamente la reunificación de Taiwán, la retórica aislacionista de Trump “América Primero” solo ha alentado el pensamiento imprudente de los chinos sobre forzar la reunificación, y los taiwaneses permanecen pasivos, incapaces de enfrentar una amenaza abrumadora. Las ilusiones en Beijing, Taipei y Washington están aumentando las probabilidades de error de cálculo. Las elecciones presidenciales en los Estados Unidos y Taiwán en 2020, y la profundización de la guerra comercial entre Estados Unidos y China, además, son un mal augurio para la paz en el estrecho de Taiwán.*

**Palabras clave:** Estrecho de Taiwán, Reunificación forzosa, Nacionalismo chino, Relaciones entre Estados Unidos y China, Xi Jinping.

台湾危机四伏的未来：  
中国民族主义、2020年总统大选和美中紧张局势为两岸关系招来麻烦

随着中国大陆网民、将军和政客越来越多地谈论通过“武力”手段而不是“和平”手段进行统一，台湾海峡正在升温。当习近平和中国民族主义者迫切希望统一台湾，而特朗普孤立主义的“美国第一”论调助长了不计后果的那部分中国人思考武力统一，台湾人总体上则保持被动，无法对抗压倒性的威胁。北京、台北和华盛顿方面各自的打算都正在增加错误估计的可能性。2020年台湾和美国的总统大选，以及正在进行的美中贸易战，将进一步为台湾海峡的和平预示噩兆。

**关键词:** 台湾海峡, 武力统一, 中国民族主义, 美中关系, 习近平。

*“Gentlemanly first, martial later.”*

Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

“We do not forsake the use of force,” Chinese President Xi Jinping warned on January 2, 2019. “China must be, and will be reunified” (Xi 2019). While Xi mainly spoke of the “peaceful reunification” of Taiwan, the tone and context of his speech suggested a final warning shot. Positioning himself as the gentleman who advocated peace, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen is cast as the villain obstructing peace—and, as such, is the person responsible for a subsequent conflict.

At the onset of “Reform and Opening” four decades ago, “peaceful reunification” became the mantra of official Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) policy toward Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. With Hong Kong and Macau “peacefully reunified” in 1997 and 1999, respectively, Mainland Chinese expectations that Taiwan would follow suit have been building for two decades now. These expectations redoubled a decade ago, as the Beijing Olympics and the Global Financial Crisis increased Chinese self-confidence and assertiveness in international affairs.

But the last three years have witnessed Mainland Chinese losing patience with “peaceful reunification.” With Tsai Ing-wen’s election to the Taiwanese presidency in 2016, and especially after her reelection in January 2020, “forceful reunification” is ascendant. Beijing views Tsai’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as radically pro-independence, and has been tightening the noose around Taiwan. For instance, China has limited Taiwan’s “international space” by forcing it out of international organizations. After Tsai was sworn into office, China prevented Taiwan from participating in international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) even under the name “Chinese Taipei.” International airlines have likewise been pressured to replace “Taiwan” with descriptions such as “Taiwan, Province of China.”

Beijing has also forced other countries to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The Republic of China (ROC) recognizes all United Nations (UN) member states, with the exception of China, but only 15 states now have formal diplomatic relations with the ROC. To add insult to injury, they are mostly tiny islands in the Caribbean and Oceania, such as Saint Lucia and Tuvalu. Kiribati is the most recent of five countries that have severed relations with Taipei in favor of Beijing since Tsai took office. That Beijing disregards the intense resentment that the Taiwanese people express every time Beijing “squeezes” Taiwan’s “international space” suggests that many Mainland Chinese have given up on the idea of peaceful reunification through winning the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese people.

A worrisome wishful thinking in Beijing, Taipei, and Washington today is increasing the odds of conflict. His power now fully consolidated, Xi Jinping seeks a legacy befitting the great emperors of old: reunifying the “Middle Kingdom” and realizing the “China Dream” of national glory. Both political camps in Taipei, meanwhile, may have largely deluded themselves into thinking that China will not attack, and have allowed Taiwan’s armed forces to wither. The Trump administration’s volatile Taiwan and China policies, meanwhile, have eviscerated the stabilizing role that U.S. “dual deterrence” has traditionally played in stabilizing the Taiwan Strait. Trump’s “America First” pontifications have

also contributed to wishful thinking in Beijing that the United States is too isolationist and self-interested to come to Taiwan's defense, should China attack.

Three current events do not bode well for advocates of peace in the Taiwan Strait. The DPP's landslide victory in the 2020 Taiwanese presidential and legislative elections has killed any hope that Mainland Chinese have for "peaceful reunification," emboldening hawks advocating "forceful reunification." Despite the January 2020 signing of a U.S.-China Phase One trade deal, most tariffs remain in place, and the ongoing U.S.-China trade war presents a no-win scenario. If relations with the United States further deteriorate, Chinese nationalists will almost certainly argue that they have little to lose by forcing reunification, as relations with the United States are already bad. But if Trump is forced to back down, Chinese nationalists may be emboldened to use force against Taiwan, reasoning that Trump is a "paper tiger." Finally, the fall 2020 U.S. presidential election does not bode well for Taiwan either. President Trump is widely seen in China as an isolationist who will not intervene if the People's Liberation Army (PLA) takes Taiwan by force. Should Trump win reelection, Chinese hawks may argue that forceful reunification will not meet much opposition. If Trump loses, however, China will confront a Democratic Party that has also hardened on China. Trouble, in short, is brewing in the Taiwan Strait.

### **Taiwan's Reunification and the 'China Dream'**

*The empire, long divided, must unite.*

Luo Guanzhong, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

"We will see . . ." responded the People's Republic of China (PRC) Ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, to a question about the risk of war in the Taiwan Strait on April 4, 2018. "Our goal is to have peaceful reunification," he said. "But we will achieve reunification one way or another" (China News 2018). Ambassador Cui's Chinese Embassy colleague, Li Kexin, was even less diplomatic a few months earlier. "The day that U.S. warships arrive in Kaohsiung [a southern Taiwanese port]," Li said in response to the National Defense Authorization Act that approves U.S. Navy port calls in Taiwan, "is the day that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) *forcefully reunifies* Taiwan" (Cao 2017).

For decades, most Mainland Chinese have believed that time was on their side: As China grew, Taiwan would be *peacefully* drawn back into China's orbit. During the Kuomintang (KMT) party Ma Ying-jeou administration from 2008 to 2016, Beijing offered economic inducements to foster closer cross-strait relations, confident these carrots would lure Taiwan home.

The Sunflower Student Movement of spring 2014, however, suggested limits to whether an economic carrot could bring about peaceful reunification. And with Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP's resounding victories in 2016 and 2020, many Mainland Chinese—from Xi Jinping at the top, to political and military elites in the middle, to mass popular opinion at the bottom—are no longer convinced that the status quo favors them. The "China Dream" of uniting a long-divided empire is now widespread, and talk of "forceful reunification" of Taiwan is on the rise.

The dream of reunifying Taiwan with Mainland China begins at the very top. President Xi is exceptionally ambitious, and sees Taiwan's reunification as a legacy that would elevate him to the level of Mao Zedong and the great emperors of old. Xi's ambition is reflected in his nickname, "Chairman of Everything." In a 2015 profile for the *New Yorker*, Evan Osnos (2018) concluded that Xi had already emerged as "the most authoritarian leader since Chairman Mao." "He's not afraid of Heaven or Earth," a Beijing insider told Osnos (2018); Xi is "round on the outside and square on the inside; he looks flexible, but inside he is very hard."

Xi's consolidation of power is particularly remarkable given that nearly 40 years of "Reform and Opening" had been marked by consistent moves in the *opposite* direction—away from one-man rule and toward collective leadership. Deng Xiaoping and other CCP elites who survived the chaos of the Cultural Revolution resolved never to allow another dictator like Mao to emerge again, so set rigid limits on how long leaders could serve, and sought to institutionalize power sharing and peaceful leadership transitions. From Deng to Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, power was increasingly dispersed, and the Party leadership became more collective.

Xi changed all that. First, he consolidated his power, and then, in 2018, the PRC constitution was amended to remove term limits to his rule. Xi is now widely seen as "Emperor for life." Indeed, Xi's portrait can now be seen everywhere: from government compounds to schools,

street billboards, restaurants, shops, and even in many people's homes. Xi's portrait, moreover, is usually paired with Mao's. The symbolism is crystal clear: Xi wants to be seen as Mao's equal. Mao is widely revered in China today as a nationalist hero, driving the Japanese out of China, unifying China by winning the civil war with the Kuomintang, and establishing the PRC in 1949. To be Mao's equal, therefore, requires something big. Xi's "China Dream" of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is nothing if not big. Xi has aggressively asserted Chinese sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas, and made a massive gamble on his signature "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) to link Eurasia to China via colossal infrastructure investments.

To leave an emperor's highest legacy, however, Xi must reunify the Middle Kingdom. "The only thing that will make him the greatest leader in the Chinese Communist Party's history is to take Taiwan back," Fudan University's Shen Dingli told *Quartz* news. "If he were to achieve China's reunification, who will say he is second to Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping?" (Huang Zheping 2018). Xi's speeches suggest that he agrees. "Achieving China's full reunification," Xi (2017) said in his marathon speech to the 19th CCP National Congress on October 18, 2017, is "essential to realizing national rejuvenation." In other words, without reunifying Taiwan, Xi's signature "China Dream" cannot be fully realized.

Xi's actions suggest not just a desire for reunification, but a willingness to use force. His signature military slogans include, "prepare for war," and "fight a war, win a war." And, in 2017, Xi presided over a military parade with a PLA replica of Taiwan's presidential palace clearly visible in the distance. It was constructed to train for an invasion of Taiwan. Yet, recent PLA preparations for an invasion of Taiwan include much more than parades. In October 2016, PLA aircraft circumnavigated Taiwan. In January 2017, the aircraft carrier Liaoning and its combat ships circumnavigated Taiwan for the first time—and did it a second time a few months later.

Taiwan's 2018 *Report on China's Military Power* claims that "the PLA plans to complete its comprehensive preparation for using military force against Taiwan by 2020" (You 2018). The U.S. Department of Defense (2018) concurs. "The PLA also is likely preparing for a contingency to

unify Taiwan with China by force,” its *Annual Report to Congress* argues, “while simultaneously deterring, delaying, or denying any third-party intervention on Taiwan’s behalf.” So Xi appears both to seek reunification and to be building the capability to do so by force. But does he think he can pull off forceful reunification?

President Xi was enthralled that Putin seized Crimea from the Ukraine with little Western resistance. “Xi has told people that he was impressed by Putin’s seizure of Crimea,” a Beijing insider told Evan Osnos (2018): “He got a large piece of land and resources” and “boosted his poll numbers at home.” Given that the Ukraine is widely recognized as a sovereign country, and Taiwan is not, Putin’s bold and successful gambit likely stoked Xi’s dreams about taking back Taiwan by force. Xi certainly compares himself with, and admires, Putin. In March 2013, he told Putin that, “We are similar in character” (Osnos 2018). And five years later, he called Putin his “best and most intimate friend” (Xi Jinping Study Group 2018).

Xi is not alone in dreaming about forceful reunification. Other CCP elites and significant segments of Chinese public opinion are losing patience with “peaceful unification” and the status quo in the Taiwan Strait—and embracing the idea of using force. When Chinese political and military elites hold office, their public speeches usually toe the party line, often word for word. Once retired, however, they are more willing to publicly air their true views. Wang Zaixi, former deputy director of the PRC Taiwan Affairs Office, is a case in point. “The possibility for peaceful reunification is gradually dissipating,” he (2017) publicly declared in December 2017. “As our [2005] Anti-Secession Law very clearly states, there are three scenarios that will require [forceful] action against Taiwan. The third is that possibilities for peaceful reunification are exhausted. Today that possibility is slowly and gradually disappearing” (Wang Zaixi 2017). Why? After the 2016 presidential elections, the “KMT is done . . . and pro-unification groups [in Taiwan] are scattered . . . while the young generation has been misguided by the DPP” to favor independence (Global Times 2016). China must, therefore, have resolve, Wang Zaixi (2017) argues, “including the determination to use force.”

Wang Zaixi's pessimistic view has been publicly echoed by retired General Wang Hongguang. "Nowadays Taiwan independence is the mainstream opinion in Taiwan," Wang writes. "They have become irreversibly pro-independence" (Wang Zaixi 2017). To make matters worse, Taiwan's youth increasingly see themselves as Taiwanese and not Chinese. As a result, in a generation, "there will be no one left in Taiwan who considers themselves Chinese" (Global Times 2016). Academic elites agree on the tougher line. "The Mainland's Taiwan policy has shifted from 'preventing independence' to 'pursuing reunification'," writes senior Chinese International Relations scholar Jin Canrong (2017); China is adopting "a more proactive policy of squeezing out any space for 'Taiwan independence'."

These political, military, and academic elites are not alone. Broad segments of Mainland Chinese public opinion no longer view peaceful reunification with Taiwan as possible, and consequently support reunification by force. The CCP may have become a victim of its own propaganda success, as popular nationalists increasingly demand Taiwan's reunification to realize Xi's promised "China Dream" of national revival. Given that nationalism has been central to the CCP's claim to legitimate rule ever since Mao Zedong famously declared that "The Chinese people have stood up!" at the founding of the PRC in 1949, the CCP cannot easily dismiss popular nationalist demands. On nationalist issues such as Taiwan, in other words, Chinese public opinion shapes Chinese foreign policy. "Mainland Chinese public opinion became impatient with Taiwan a long time ago," former director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Institute of Taiwan Studies Zhou Zhihui (2017) wrote. "And the popular cry for 'forceful reunification' has become high-pitched." Zhou (2017) himself, once considered a dove, has turned hawkish against Tsai's "soft independence strategy."

Zhou's assessment of Chinese public opinion on Taiwan is widely shared. "Mainland Chinese will be very happy to see the PLA take action to punish a 'pro-independence Taiwan'," reads a *Global Times* (2018b) editorial. The Chinese people, furthermore, are becoming impatient. "The PLA already has the capability to take Taiwan by force, despite possible U.S. military interference," the *Global Times* (2018a) later claimed that same year. "Since the DPP came back to power [in 2016],

the actions of Taiwan independence groups have made ordinary mainland Chinese lose patience” (Global Times 2018a). In short, Mainland Chinese elites and masses are frustrated that Taiwanese identity is growing while fewer and fewer people consider themselves Chinese, making “peaceful reunification” look less and less likely. “It becomes inevitable that China will use force” (Global Times 2018a).

### **Sleepwalking in Taiwan**

*Attack him where he is unprepared,  
appear where you are not expected.*  
Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

A rising China poses an overwhelming threat to the Taiwanese people. Many Taiwanese believe that there is little they can do about it. According to an April 2018 poll (Chen 2018), more than 40 percent of the Taiwanese people have “no confidence at all” that their military can defend Taiwan. Until 2019, most appear to have also convinced themselves that there was no threat. The 2018 poll also revealed that 65 percent of Taiwanese believed that the PRC would not take military action against Taiwan. A full 23 percent saw an attack as “completely unlikely” and only 6.4 percent felt it was “very likely” that the PLA would attack (Chen 2018).

Defensive avoidance leads different groups of Taiwanese to dismiss the threat of forceful reunification in different ways. Many in the DPP and broader pan-green “pro-independence” camp deceive themselves into thinking that the PRC is too weak to attack, and further console themselves that Beijing knows that the United States and Japan would come to Taiwan’s defense. Meanwhile, many in the KMT and the broader “pro-China” pan-blue camp dismiss the idea that a friendly China would ever attack fellow Han Chinese. Such motivated reasoning allows both sides to rationalize dangerous policies. For instance, both sides have found it politically expedient to first reduce Taiwan’s military service requirement and now eliminate compulsory service altogether. Troop shortages and plummeting morale have increased Taiwan’s reliance on U.S. protection—just as Beijing increasingly questions Trump’s commitment to Taiwan.

The ruling DPP and its supporters tend to argue both (1) that China is too smart to engage in a costly war where the United States and Japan would come to Taiwan's defense, and (2) that the PRC is too weak to attack. "The problems between the two sides of Taiwan Strait will not be solved by military force, but in a peaceful way," President Tsai Ing-wen claimed during a year-end press conference in December 2017 (Zi and Han 2017). Why? "The mainland Chinese leader today is a rational decision maker," Tsai claimed, who would realize the high cost of fighting the United States and Japan (Zi and Han 2017). Motivated reasoning may have blinded Tsai to the plethora of evidence that Xi Jinping is eager to leave a legacy by reunifying China and realizing the "China Dream."

Others in the pan-green camp depict the PRC as too weak to attack. "China has too many domestic problems," pro-DPP professor Fan Shih-Ping argues (ETtoday 2017). Furthermore, "Under China's [past] one-child policy, young people there became even more spoiled than Taiwanese youth." Mainland Chinese youth are self-absorbed and unlikely to "sacrifice their life for forceful reunification with Taiwan" (ETtoday 2017). Underestimating an opponent's resolve to fight is an age-old cause of conflict.

Following President Xi's tough January 2019 speech calling for the reunification of Taiwan, and especially following Beijing's heavy-handed handling of Hong Kong protests later last year, President Tsai and others in the DPP appear to have become more clearheaded about the threat Taiwan faces. In a January 2020 BBC interview, Tsai acknowledged the "possibility of war at any time," and promised to "develop the ability to defend" Taiwan (Sudworth 2020).

Meanwhile, the KMT's rosy view of Beijing continues to preclude the idea that China might use force. Asked in 2018 about the possibility of forceful reunification, former President Ma Ying-jeou responded unequivocally that when the KMT is in power, "there is no problem." The problem is only when the DPP is in power (ETtoday 2018). Other KMT supporters share Ma's view. "When the [ROC] government adopts a conciliatory approach, Taiwan will not face PLA threats, and will benefit from economic development," Zhao Jianmin of Chinese Culture University claimed in November 2018. "By contrast, if [a DPP] government chooses a confrontational strategy, the two sides of the Strait will

be at the edge of war” (Zhou Zhi-hao 2018). Unfortunately, this widespread KMT finger-pointing at the DPP ignores the Mainland Chinese perception that the rise of an exclusively Taiwanese identity and pro-independence sentiment among Taiwan’s youth accelerated during the 2014 Sunflower Movement—during KMT rule. Economic carrots did not work. Another rosy KMT view of Beijing’s thinking is that China’s “peaceful rise” would be interrupted if it uses force to retake Taiwan. “Nowadays Beijing’s top strategy is peaceful rise,” pan-blue journalist Huang Nian (2018) wrote for the *United Daily News*, because “[f]orceful reunification would derail it.”

One result of these rosy views of China’s rational or peaceful nature has been to neglect the ROC military. For instance, during the Cold War, all Taiwanese were required to contribute three years of mandatory military service. Since then, elected officials on both sides of the partisan divide have been constantly trying to please voters with popular policies such as reducing mandatory military service. In 1990, compulsory service was reduced to two years. By 2008, that had been gradually reduced to just one year. And, in 2018, just as Mainland Chinese talk of “forceful reunification” became more widespread on the other side of the Taiwan Strait, mandatory military service was terminated altogether.

The shift to a voluntary military has not been well managed. Taiwan’s military today suffers from a desperate shortage of officers, with nearly half of all lieutenant positions unfilled, and a severe lack of ordinary soldiers as well. “While the Ministry of National Defense planned for a voluntary military,” The Control Yuan of ROC (2017) report concludes, “it was not a prudent and careful act. Instead, it was made to accommodate politicians.” The report paints a dire picture: “Currently the shortage of personnel in troops is so acute that a squad doesn’t look like a squad, and a platoon doesn’t look like a platoon” (The Control Yuan of ROC 2017). U.S. officials have already recommended that Taiwan consider restoring conscription.

Lack of preparedness comes not just from a lack of personnel. The Control Yuan of ROC (2017) report also makes the alarming and sweeping claim that “the entire military has no morale.” With the end of the Cold War, and increasing contacts between China and Taiwan, the ROC military has lost conviction about who they fight for and why. “Being

peaceful across Taiwan Strait for long,” the report concludes, “there is a lack of a sense of the potential danger” from China (The Control Yuan of ROC 2017).

While Xi Jinping stood on a warship reviewing the PLA’s largest naval exercise in spring 2017, the Taiwanese military was involved in a recruitment scandal. Many ROC officers were under pressure to help recruit young people, so a pretty young female officer posted a message on Facebook: “I would like to find someone to accompany me, will you?” (Hong 2017). The sexual innuendo of the post aroused public outrage. But reintroducing conscription is not on the table. Just a month later, China’s Liaoning aircraft carrier circumnavigated Taiwan for a second time.

### **Trump Abandons ‘Dual Deterrence’**

For decades, a U.S. policy of “dual deterrence” has helped prevent conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Washington used a combination of carrots and sticks to both reassure and deter both Beijing and Taiwan. Beijing was warned not to attack Taiwan unprovoked, but reassured that Washington would not support Taiwan independence. Taipei was reassured that Washington would come to its defense—as long as it did not provoke Beijing by declaring *de jure* independence. Neither Beijing nor Taipei got what it fully wanted, but both were reassured that their worst-case scenarios would not come to pass either. Washington had to navigate a very fine line between Beijing and Taipei, but this double deal has helped stabilize a status quo of *de facto* independence for Taiwan for decades.

President Donald Trump, however, seeks praise from Beijing, Taipei, and their domestic U.S. supporters, and his Taiwan policy has swung back and forth, in effect, abandoning the fine line of dual deterrence and destabilizing the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan got to Trump’s ego first. On December 2, 2016, President Tsai called Trump directly, congratulating him on his victory. Trump spoke with her for ten minutes. Talk emerged of “revisiting” the “One China” policy that the PRC insists upon, but which many Taiwanese from Tsai’s DPP now oppose. Trump abruptly reversed course in a February 2017 conversation with PRC President Xi Jinping, affirming that the United States would continue to support the

“One China” policy. “Trump lost his first fight with Xi,” Renmin University Professor Shi Yinhong proudly told the *New York Times*, “and he will be looked at as a paper tiger” (Perlez 2017). But the pendulum swung back in 2018. The U.S. Congress passed the Taiwan Travel Act in February, authorizing high-level U.S. officials to visit Taiwan and Taiwanese officials to visit the United States. President Trump then initiated a trade war with China in the Fall. The volatility of Trump’s China and Taiwan policies has left Beijing anything but reassured, increasing the odds of conflict.

Beijing also underestimates Trump’s pugnaciousness. Many Mainland Chinese have convinced themselves that Trump will either bargain Taiwan away, or abandon it in favor of isolationism. But Trump clearly enjoys playing tough, like the authoritarian leaders he admires and associates with. And hardline policies resonate with his far-right Republican base that favors force over diplomacy (Gries 2014).

Trump’s foreign policy team is also quite hawkish on China. Former Trump National Security Advisor John Bolton accepted US\$30,000 from the Taiwan government a quarter of a century ago to write papers advocating Taiwan’s readmission into the UN, and he has been an outspoken Taiwan advocate for decades. Trump trade advisor Peter Navarro (2016) has argued that “America Can’t Dump Taiwan,” as it is a “beacon of democracy.” Should China attack Taiwan, Trump’s closest advisors would doubtless push for a forceful U.S. response. American public opinion, and especially the most conservative Americans who elected Trump, would also likely rally to the aid of “Free Taiwan” should “Red China” be seen as attacking without provocation. In short, should Beijing gamble on forceful reunification, Trump is likely to respond militarily—“America First” notwithstanding.

### Changing Chinese Views of Taiwan Politics

“*Bravo!*” a Chinese netizen cheered online after the pro-China KMT did better than the pro-independence DPP in the November 2018 Taiwanese local elections.<sup>1</sup> “Those who love this country breathed a sigh of

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<sup>1</sup>Wuqing Youzi. 2010. 2018. “Great! Bravo! . . .” *Sina Forum*, November 26. <http://comment5.news.sina.com.cn/comment/skin/default.html?channel=gn&newsid=comoshmutuec3551957&group=0> (accessed November 29, 2018).

relief,” a Sina Weibo user from Sichuan wrote immediately following the DPP’s humiliation.<sup>2</sup> Official China optimistically concurred. “Time and momentum are on our side,” Liu Junchuan (2017) of the Taiwan Affairs Office argued in a CCP newspaper. As China grows, “the idea of peaceful reunification and ‘One Country, Two Systems’ will become more appealing and attractive to the Taiwanese people” (Liu 2017). For such doves, the local elections were vindication that PRC carrots were, indeed, slowly luring Taiwan back to China. Liu urged his hawkish compatriots to be patient.

They did not buy it. Many Mainland Chinese nationalists were disappointed by the results of the 2018 local Taiwanese elections—not relieved. This counterintuitive reaction reveals an alarmingly widespread calculus: Should a weakened DPP lose the presidency in 2020, the window of opportunity for forceful reunification would close. “What a pity,” a netizen from Beijing lamented on Weibo about the DPP’s failure. “We could be further away from the day of reunification.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, disappointment fed a greater sense of urgency among many Chinese nationalists online. “I request that Mainland China issue a timetable for reunification,” an outraged nationalist wrote, offering his real name. “Whether peaceful or forceful, please don’t drag this out again and again. Don’t let our whole generation fail to see the day when we recover Taiwan.”<sup>4</sup> Much of the frustration came from a growing awareness that the DPP and KMT did not differ as much on cross-Strait relations as they had previously been led to believe by CCP propaganda that has long demonized Tsai and the DPP. “Within the Kuomintang, how many actually desire reunification?” a netizen from Sichuan asked on Weibo after

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<sup>2</sup>Mingjing Ru Shuiyue. 2018. “Those Who Love This Country Breathed a Sigh of Relief . . .” *Weibo*, November 24. <https://www.weibo.com/1850145517/H4bMDBK0E?type=comment> (accessed November 29, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>Huaishan Qiaofu. 2018. “What a Pity, We Could Be Further Away from the Day of Reunification.” *Weibo*, November 25. <https://www.weibo.com/1974576991/H4gYticya?type=comment> (accessed November 29, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>Qidanche ke lvxing. 2018. “Using My Real Name, I Request the Mainland China to Issue a Timetable of Reunification . . .” *Weibo*, November 25. <https://www.weibo.com/1974576991/H4gYticya?type=comment> (accessed November 29, 2018).

KMT's victory.<sup>5</sup> "Almost none," another replied.<sup>6</sup> "The DPP explicitly supports independence," wrote a well-known sports blogger. "But the KMT implicitly supports it too."<sup>7</sup>

For many Chinese nationalists, the KMT and Ma Ying-jeou are wolves in sheep's clothing—worse than the DPP because they disguise their true intentions. "The KMT has never said that they want reunification," a white-collar worker from Fuzhou wrote on Weibo. It "drags things out slowly . . . and is the biggest obstacle to China's reunification."<sup>8</sup> In this popular nationalist view, Ma's signature slogan, "No reunification, no independence, and no war," speaks for itself: He played Beijing during his presidency, delaying reunification. Because China cannot count on the KMT, it must reunify Taiwan itself. "The KMT is not reliable, and the DPP sucks," read one Weibo tweet after Taiwan's November 2018 elections. "If we want to take our island back, we have to use force."<sup>9</sup>

### Taiwan's 'No-win' Futures

The 2020 Taiwanese and U.S. presidential elections, and the ongoing U.S.-China trade war, all bode ill for Taiwan. In his January 2019 speech, Xi had openly called for talks with Taiwan over reunification. Tsai's January 2020 reelection, however, has sent a clear signal to Beijing that Taiwanese voters do not want reunification talks. Even worse, Tsai's landslide victory killed any hope Mainland Chinese have for "peaceful reunification." The remaining Taiwan doves in Beijing are now discredited.

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<sup>5</sup>DadaYes\_106. 2018. "Within the Kuomintang, How Many Actually Desire Reunification?" *Weibo*, November 25. <https://www.weibo.com/1974576991/H4gYticya?type=comment> (accessed November 29, 2018).

<sup>6</sup>Heiheihe de Liulian. 2018. "Almost None." *Weibo*, November 25. <https://www.weibo.com/1974576991/H4gYticya?type=comment> (accessed November 29, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Banjian jinghong. 2018. "KMT Sucks Anyway, . . ." *Weibo*, November 25. <https://www.weibo.com/1974576991/H4gYticya?type=comment> (accessed November 29, 2018).

<sup>8</sup>Baoxian-Xiaozhu. 2018. "If We Say DPP Is a Bastard, Then KMT Is a Petty Person . . ." November 24. <https://www.weibo.com/1850145517/H4bMDBK0E?type=comment> (accessed November 29, 2018).

<sup>9</sup>Xihuan Youdang de Feng. 2018. "The KMT Is Not Reliable, and the DPP Sucks . . ." *Weibo*, November 25. <https://www.weibo.com/1974576991/H4gYticya?type=comment> (accessed November 29, 2018).

The hawks have been empowered, cheering the 2020 DPP victory for the same reason many lamented its poor showing in the 2018 elections: With Tsai still in power, China retains its “pro-independence” DPP pretext for war. “When the DPP came to power, it seemed like the situation worsened,” wrote Wang Zaixi, former deputy director of the Taiwan Affairs Office. “But sometimes a bad thing can be turned into a good thing. The more the [ruling] DPP promotes Taiwan independence, the more it brings about an opportunity to accelerate the reunification of the Motherland” (*Global Times* 2016). Following Tsai’s reelection in January 2020, calls for military action flooded Chinese social media. Chinese nationalists were outraged at China’s own Taiwan Affairs Office, arguing that its dovish policy was a failure. The tide of criticism was so massive that *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin, widely known for his hypernationalistic views, had to call for calm and patience (Hu 2020).

The ongoing U.S.-China trade war also bodes ill for Taiwan. And it again appears to be a no-win situation. If Chinese perceive the United States to have won the trade war, pressure will rise to make progress on Taiwan, furthering the “China Dream”—and appeasing popular nationalists. But if China appears to have won, the same nationalists, bursting with self-confidence, may be emboldened to use force against Taiwan. After all, if the United States was bluffing over trade, an issue that affects its economy directly, it is certainly bluffing over Taiwan. “If China loses the US-China trade war, the focus will shift to Taiwan, accelerating reunification,” Li Mi of the Shanghai Institute of Public Relations told a reporter in September 2018. “But if China wins, national self-confidence will grow to an unprecedented height, hastening reunification as well” (US-China Perception Monitor 2018).

Chinese reactions to 2019 setbacks in the U.S.-China trade talks appear to support the prediction that if China is seen as losing to the United States, nationalist ire will be redirected at Taiwan. After Trump put tariffs on US\$200 billion in Chinese products in May 2019, many Chinese nationalists expressed a strong sense of humiliation and betrayal—and redirected their anger toward Taiwan. “The fiercer the trade war, the more likely that China will take Taiwan back,”<sup>10</sup> a Nankai University

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<sup>10</sup>Mingyue Zhishi. 2019. “Before, a War May Cause Problems in Economy . . .” *Weibo*, May 18. [https://www.weibo.com/5493934570/HuJ0unN3D?type=comment#\\_rnd1564610930573](https://www.weibo.com/5493934570/HuJ0unN3D?type=comment#_rnd1564610930573) (accessed August 5, 2019).

graduate wrote on Weibo. A deepening trade war means that U.S. economic sanctions following China's forceful reunification of Taiwan will lose their bite. "If there is no deal between China and the U.S. within a year or two," a woman similarly argued on Weibo, "inflicting major damage on our economy, then it will be time for the forceful reunification of Taiwan."<sup>11</sup> But if Trump backs down, and China appears to win the U.S.-China trade war, it is likely that the old Maoist and nationalist view of America as a "paper tiger" will resurface, emboldening Chinese hawks. "If we go to war, will the Americans win?" Politburo standing committee member Wang Yang recently asked the Taiwan media. "I'm guessing not" (Sabatier and Lim 2019). Such bravado would likely increase if China is seen to have won a trade war—and pressure on Beijing to forcefully reunify Taiwan would rise.

The 2020 U.S. presidential election does not bode well for Taiwan either. If Trump wins reelection, Chinese hawks will continue to argue that he will not go to war over Taiwan. Many view Trump as a businessman and isolationist willing to bargain Taiwan away. "Once China and the U.S. reach a deal, America will absolutely sacrifice Taiwan," argued the *Global Times* (2017): "On the premise of America First . . . the United States is not likely to send troops to fight for Taiwan" (Global Times 2017).

Trump's "America First" slogan certainly provides ample fodder for the longstanding Mainland Chinese view that Americans do not actually care about democracy, but are completely selfish and self-interested. "The purpose of U.S. bargaining with mainland China is not to defend Taiwan's democracy and status quo, but to stem the decline of U.S. hegemony," claimed Wang Dake (2018) in a *People's Daily* overseas edition editorial. "If the price is reasonable and the deal is profitable, America will sell Taiwan out in the blink of an eye."

Should Trump lose his reelection bid, however, China is likely to confront a Democratic Party that has also hardened on China. American liberals feel warmer toward China than conservatives do, and are more likely to embrace diplomatic over military solutions to international

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<sup>11</sup>Wode Huochaine. 2019. "If There Is No Deal between China and the US in a Couple of Years, . . ." *Weibo*, May 20. <https://www.weibo.com/3509276735/Hv2NL5qkE?type=comment> (accessed August 5, 2019).

disputes, so there would likely be some improvement in U.S.-China relations under a Democratic administration (Gries 2014). However, a bipartisan consensus has emerged in Washington that China does not play fair on trade—and that decades of U.S. engagement of China have not worked. Pro-labor Democrats such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, furthermore, would likely insist on a U.S.-China trade deal including high standards for labor, environmental, and human rights. China would likely balk at such requirements, and the trade war would continue. As the Chinese economy suffered, Chinese hawks would argue that they have little to lose economically from U.S. sanctions following a forced reunification of Taiwan.

### **Conclusion: Dangerous Delusions**

China may “break the enemy’s resistance without fighting,” Wang Zaixi (2017), the former deputy director of Taiwan Affairs Office, proposed. Just as the Communist Party seized Beijing in 1949 without shooting a single bullet, he argued, China can do it again to Taiwan. By surrounding Taiwan, imposing economic sanctions, and cutting off its oil supply, Beijing can force Taipei to surrender, achieving an effortless victory with “[n]o need to shed blood.”

The idea that China can achieve force reunification without fighting is both delusional and dangerous. Any military or economic tightening of the noose around Taiwan would likely provoke U.S. intervention, which Beijing would likely feel forced to respond to. “The Taiwan Strait is an active volcano about to erupt,” retired General Wang Hongguang declared at the *People’s Daily* Headquarters in Beijing on December 8, 2018. Taiwan will be at the frontlines of a “new Cold War” with the United States, so “there will very likely be military conflict—it’s just a question of scale.”<sup>12</sup>

In sum, conflict in the Taiwan Strait is more likely than is commonly recognized. Many Chinese are growing impatient for reunification,

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<sup>12</sup>Wang Kevin. 2018. “General Wang Hongguang Discussed the Situation in Taiwan Strait in 2019: The Volcano Is about to Erupting.” YouTube, December 8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kkNf1e5NGY> (accessed December 11, 2018).

and have convinced themselves that they can use force without major repercussions. Many Taiwanese act oblivious to the growing threat, while Trump has abandoned a long-successful U.S. policy of dual deterrence. Wishful thinking in Beijing, Taipei, and Washington is increasing the odds of war. All sides need to awaken to the dangers of backing into a war that few desire.🌐

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