

Is Taiwan the Next Hong Kong?

China Tests the Limits of Impunity

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A protestor demonstrates against China's anti-secession law in Taipei, Taiwan, March 2005

Chris Stowers/Panos Pictures/Redux



Pro-democracy protests have rocked Hong Kong for more than a year. Now, China has imposed a draconian national security law that will undermine the territory's autonomy and, by extension, its identity. The new law is a profound tragedy for the people of Hong Kong, but unfortunately, there is little the international community can do to halt its implementation. The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has suggested

that it will dial up pressure on Hong Kong's government. But doing so risks hurting Hong Kong's economy more than Beijing's and accelerating the territory's absorption into southern China.

Some analysts have therefore [counseled](#) U.S. restraint, arguing that a softer touch could encourage Beijing to moderate its implementation of the law and avoid making the situation worse. But there are larger issues at stake. U.S. policymakers must consider more than Hong Kong when formulating their response. A tepid U.S. reaction could leave Beijing with the impression that it can proceed with relative impunity on other contentious issues in Asia. The shadow of Taiwan looms large in this context. Unless the United States demonstrates the resolve and ability to resist Chinese coercion and aggression, China's leaders may eventually conclude that the risks and the costs of future military action against Taiwan are low—or at least tolerable.

There isn't a straight line from Hong Kong to Taiwan, of course. A Chinese assault on the island is neither imminent nor inevitable. But Beijing's recent actions in Hong Kong—and elsewhere in Asia—raise worrying questions about its evolving objectives and increasing willingness to use coercive tactics to achieve them. In short, the United States must be careful not to play a narrow game on Hong Kong when Beijing is positioning itself for a broader competition for the future of Asia.

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WIDENING THE ASIA APERTURE

Under President Xi Jinping, China has become much more tolerant of friction in international affairs than it once was and much bolder about using coercion to advance Chinese interests—often at the expense of the United States and other powers, such as Japan

and India. In recent months, China has increased its military and paramilitary pressure on neighboring countries with which it has territorial disputes, including India, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Whether these aggressive maneuvers were intended to remind the world of China's resolve or to capitalize on the distraction caused by the coronavirus pandemic, they offer a stark reminder of Xi's appetite for risk, tolerance for conflict, and desire to assert territorial claims.

Recent history reveals that the international system is vulnerable to this kind of creeping irredentism. When Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Ukraine and annex Crimea in 2014, he was drawing on lessons from his 2008 invasion of Georgia. The latter created a permissive environment for the former: the Georgia invasion cost Russia little and drew only weak international condemnation. Taiwan and Ukraine occupy very different geopolitical contexts, but just as Putin factored the U.S. response to Russian actions in Georgia into his decision to invade Ukraine, China's leaders will factor the U.S. response to the Hong Kong security law into their decisions about future aggression in Asia. Given how little Beijing's crackdown in Hong Kong has cost it to date, we are concerned that Beijing will draw the wrong conclusions about the costs of future coercion against Taiwan.

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Hong Kong and Taiwan have more in common than many analysts appreciate, both in the view of Beijing and in the sentiments of their citizens. The protests that have raged in Hong Kong for the last year resonated deeply with the people and the leadership in Taiwan. Taiwanese citizens sent protective gear to the protesters in Hong Kong, and Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen won reelection in January in part because she voiced support for Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement. In a rare bipartisan move, her ruling Democratic Progressive Party, the opposition Kuomintang, and other parties jointly expressed "regret and severe condemnation" of Beijing's national security law. Taiwanese officials have also pledged to provide refuge to Hong Kong residents fleeing Chinese repression, and some Hong

Kongers appear to have taken them up on the offer. According to [news reports](#), the number of Hong Kong residents who moved to Taiwan in the first four months of 2020 was up 150 percent from the same period last year.

The democracy movement that has so united the citizens of Hong Kong and Taiwan has allies in other parts of Asia as well. A social media movement known as the Milk Tea Alliance—a reference to the sweet milk tea popular in East Asia—has brought together activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand who are critical of Chinese nationalist netizens and who oppose Beijing’s new national security law. Recently, the Milk Tea Alliance spread to the Philippines, where some citizens have joined the online movement to voice concerns about Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.

But what many in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Asian countries see as online mobilization in support of universal democratic norms, Beijing sees as a dangerous movement of “splittists” who seek to undermine China’s sovereignty, keep China permanently divided, spread Western values, and contain China in Asia. Indeed, Chinese authorities regularly blame “external hostile forces” for the protests in Hong Kong—and for the movement’s resonance in Taiwan and elsewhere.

TAIWAN AND CHINESE ANXIETY

China’s leaders have always maintained that they are prepared to use force over Taiwan—either to prevent the island’s de jure independence or to compel its unification with the mainland. But Xi has taken a progressively harder line on Taiwan, in word as well as deed. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, he declared that reunification was linked to his “China Dream” of national rejuvenation. Since then, he has twice stated that the separation of mainland China and Taiwan “should not be passed down generation after generation.” And in his most recent speech focused solely on Taiwan, in January 2019, he said that “our country must be reunified, and will surely be reunified.”

Even more ominous, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang omitted the term “peaceful” in front of “unification”—previously standard in official communications about Taiwan—in his annual

opening speech to the National People's Congress in May. A few days later, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi did the same in his speech to the congress. As a former head of the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office, Wang was well aware of the significance of this rhetorical change. By the end of the NPC's two-week session, "peaceful reunification" was back in the final version of Li's work report approved by the congress—along with unconvincing explanations for its initial absence having to do with poor bureaucratic coordination.

In addition to hardening its rhetoric against Taiwan, China has sought to isolate the island diplomatically. In the last five years, Beijing has poached seven of Taipei's formal allies, leaving only 15 countries that recognize Taiwan as an independent country. At the height of the coronavirus pandemic in May, China even excluded Taiwan from the annual meeting of the World Health Assembly in Geneva, despite the island's global leadership in containing and mitigating COVID-19.

At the same time, China has ramped up military pressure on Taiwan. Its air force and navy have conducted more than ten transits and military exercises near the island since mid-January, including an increasing number of deliberate incursions into Taiwan's airspace, according to [research](#) by Bonnie S. Glaser and Matthew P. Funaiolo of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. In March 2019, China's air force sent two advanced fighter jets over the centerline of the Taiwan Strait for the first time in 20 years. Since then, it has sent an increasing number of aircraft across the centerline. China's strategic bombers have also circumnavigated the island multiple times in recent months, while other Chinese aircraft have crossed the Miyako Strait between Taiwan and Japan. All of these maneuvers were intended to intimidate Taiwan by demonstrating Beijing's readiness to use force at a moment's notice.

There is little Tsai can do to convince China to dial back the diplomatic and military pressure short of accepting its unilateral definition of "one China" and its "one country, two systems" model, both of which are now wholly discredited by what has happened in Hong Kong. In the worldview of China's leaders, Tsai's commitment to Taiwanese independence, her perceived efforts at "de-Sinification" on the island, and the growing connections between Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the democratic world more broadly all legitimize China's saber

rattling—and perhaps, eventually, its use of force. Xi appears to have made up his mind about Tsai—wrongly but perhaps conclusively. He and other Chinese leaders are still weighing the costs and benefits of a harder line on Taiwan as they take the measure of U.S. and international willpower—which is why the U.S. response to the Hong Kong law matters so much.

CHANGING BEIJING'S CALCULUS

To deter Beijing from further aggression, the United States must make clear that there will be consequences for the national security law, particularly if Beijing uses it to justify the arrest or rendition of journalists, peaceful activists, or political candidates in Hong Kong. The U.S. Congress has passed bipartisan legislation authorizing the Trump administration to deny visas and impose other targeted sanctions against those directly involved in the crackdown on Hong Kong, and the Trump administration has indicated a readiness to implement these measures. Targeted sanctions won't be cost-free for U.S.-Chinese relations or for the people of Hong Kong, but the United States can limit the collateral damage by implementing them incrementally, proportionately, and in concert with other powers.

The Trump administration will need to start by improving its coordination with European and Asian allies. It has issued symbolically important joint statements on Hong Kong, first with Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom and then with the G-7. But much more diplomacy is needed to broaden that coalition and coordinate pressure on Beijing. That so few Asian governments have criticized China's new law is deeply worrisome, as is the European Union's initial pledge that it will merely "follow developments closely." But before Washington can rally its European and Asian allies behind a unified message on Hong Kong, it will have to stop kicking them. Trump's unilateral withdrawal of troops from NATO, his extreme demands for payment from Tokyo and Seoul, his threats to pull troops out of South Korea, and his disinterest in the G-7 and other groupings have pushed these allies away at a time when they would ordinarily be open to U.S. leadership. These actions have also telegraphed vulnerability, disunity, and lack of resolve among Western allies to Beijing.

But China is creating more favorable conditions for U.S.-led diplomacy on Hong Kong. Beijing's so-called wolf warrior diplomacy, aimed at intimidating countries critical of its handling of the pandemic, combined with its recent aggression on territorial issues has alienated much of the world. The United States should seize this opportunity to make Hong Kong a diplomatic priority. In the lead-up to the Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong in September, Washington should lead the G-7, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, and the so-called Quad of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India in joint statements and actions warning Beijing against arresting political candidates it dislikes.

The United States and its European and Asian allies should also consider offering Hong Kong citizens residency and a path to citizenship, just as the United Kingdom has done. And if the situation in Hong Kong deteriorates—owing to arrests of candidates in the September elections, for instance—the United States should consider sanctioning the Chinese officials responsible. Such measures won't restore Hong Kong's autonomy in the near term, but they could discourage overt acts of repression and help shape Beijing's thinking about Taiwan.

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Staving off Chinese aggression, whether in Taiwan or elsewhere in Asia, however, will also require the United States to get serious about military deterrence in the western Pacific. Over the last two decades, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has made advances that seriously eroded U.S. military power in the western Pacific, especially around Taiwan. Recent operations by two U.S. carrier battle groups in the South China Sea were important demonstrations of willpower, but capacity matters, too. As former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work has [written](#), the U.S. military now faces the prospect of losing a fight with China in defense of Taiwan. The Pentagon has focused on building large platforms, such as aircraft carriers and big-deck amphibious ships, but such facilities don't effectively deter China's anti-access/area-denial capabilities. The United States needs to rethink its forward-

basing posture, increase its cooperation and interoperability with allies such as Japan, and improve its ability to fight in highly contested environments, including through greater use of unmanned systems. The House and Senate Armed Services Committees have proposed a Pacific Deterrence Initiative that would go a long way toward restoring the United States' competitive edge in these areas. The U.S. Congress should fund the initiative and hold the Pentagon accountable for its timely implementation.

Aiding and cooperating with Taiwan will be crucial to larger U.S. efforts to deter Chinese aggression. Washington should help Taiwan make its political system more resilient in the face of Chinese pressure and its military better able to degrade Chinese capabilities in a fight. The latter objective will not be served by selling the island the billions of dollars' worth of M1A2 tanks authorized by the Trump administration in 2019. These do little to deter a combined naval, air, and missile campaign from China—and the PLA will always be bigger and better equipped than Taiwan's army in a ground battle. Rather, the United States should work with Taiwan to develop asymmetric military capabilities that would actually stand a chance of deterring a Chinese invasion or attacks on critical infrastructure. The Pentagon should further assist Taiwan's military in reforming its reserve and mobilization systems, which are critical to the institution's long-term strength. All the while, the United States should be quietly intensifying its preparations with Japan and other capable allies for contingencies involving Taiwan.

But even shrewd diplomatic and military preparations won't guarantee Taiwan's security unless the United States communicates its intentions, policies, and concerns about cross-strait relations clearly and consistently to Beijing. Doing that will require senior national security officials in China and the United States to resume the kind of candid strategic dialogue that took place during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations but that essentially ended after Trump took office. As former senior directors for Asia at the National Security Council, we can attest to both the value and the limits of such a dialogue with China. Expansive discussions of global order, such as those between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, are no longer possible, as few Chinese officials now have the freedom to range far and wide in discussing China's intentions, let alone international politics. Nonetheless, in such talks the United States can set down clear markers that underscore what it will and will not do.

In our experience, dialogue of this nature was exceptionally useful in dispelling Beijing's worst-case assessments of U.S. intentions and in clarifying that official warnings from Washington should not be dismissed as the isolated rhetoric of "hard-liners." Even when such discussions are frustratingly one-sided, they should be seen not as a sign of weakness but as a critical investment in avoiding misperceptions that can lead to crises. Many U.S. allies now worry about joining U.S.-led coalitions to counter China, because they fear being pulled into a competitive spiral between Washington and Beijing that has no bottom. Resuming a strategic dialogue with China would signal that the United States is interested in arresting that spiral.

The fundamentals of the U.S.-Chinese relationship are changing as Beijing becomes more willing to take risks internationally and with a larger and more coercive toolkit than ever before. The new national security law is one instance of China's increasingly assertive behavior. We worry that more instances could be on the horizon. However, U.S. national interests have remained constant for decades, if not centuries, and they must guide U.S. policymakers now. Since the beginning of the republic, the United States has sought to prevent a rival hegemon from dominating the Pacific. The situation in Hong Kong is a reminder that advancing this objective is rapidly becoming more difficult. U.S. pressure must be tempered with skillful diplomacy to ensure that Beijing sees an international coalition moving against it but doesn't feel so threatened that it lashes out or is able to separate the United States from its allies. 🌐

