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Destined for Change: China, Taiwan and the Future of the Cross-Strait Status Quo

Brian Daniel Eno

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

**Introduction:**

Seven decades after its separation with Taiwan, China's motivations for reunion are as pronounced as ever. Dating back to the end of the Chinese Civil War and then codified in the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, *de facto* diplomatic relations between the United States and Taiwan have denied the People's Republic of China (PRC) the unification with Taiwan it deeply desires. China's motivations for reunification with Taiwan drive critical questions that policy practitioners must carefully consider when assessing future stability in the region: what are China's most pressing motivations in pursuing reunification with Taiwan and how might these factors drive change to the status quo? Three primary factors characterize China's motivation for reunification. First, China's intense nationalistic desire to right the wrongs of its "Century of Humiliation" thrust the nation towards unification to close a bitter chapter in China's long and storied history. Second, Taiwan's increasingly pro-independence posture undermines the notion of "One China" and drives an urgency among Chinese leaders who believe that the longer this fractured co-existence endures—the more difficult it will be to reunify. Third, classical realist calculations of power to be gained through reunification influence China's security instincts as it looks to bolster its position as the dominant actor in the region.

The prospect of change to the status quo presents myriad challenges to U.S. national security in the Asia-Pacific region. Alteration of this delicate balance, especially forceful change by an increasingly militarily-capable PRC, could lead the U.S. to high-end war with China in defense of the liberal democracy of Taiwan. As U.S. policymakers search for transparency regarding China's intentions amid its formidable rise, these critical motivations reflect one very

transparent aspect of China's intentions: it's demonstrated position that the status quo regarding Taiwan must change. Chinese rhetoric is consistent and increasingly assertive on this point, and China's motivations for reunification must inform U.S. policy options regarding the prospect of forceful change to the status quo.

### **Nationalism:**

Current Chinese nationalist objectives for reunification are most clearly manifested in the rhetoric of current Chinese President Xi Jinping. The CCP contends that the Taiwan issue is the foremost unrealized aspect of "national rejuvenation" consistent with Xi's "China Dream" that outlines the nation's path to continued prosperity.<sup>1</sup> Division with Taiwan is so inextricably linked to party history and the nation's future prosperity that Xi has pushed openly for reconciliation on a party-centric timetable. To exalt Communist China's historical arc, Xi has called for reunification between 2021 to commemorate the 100 year anniversary of the founding of the party and no later than 2049 to mark victory in the revolution.<sup>2</sup> Though it is unlikely that Xi will still be in office in 2049, that he portends reunification along such a political timeline underscores how existential the issue is for the party. Ultimately, the CCP's ambitious timeline captures how inseparable reunification and party prestige are to China's vision for its future.

Deeply-rooted nationalism is also a major driver of China's desire to right its historical wrongs. Continued separation with Taiwan is a lingering reminder of past national failures, especially considering how China lost Taiwan because of U.S. intervention in support of Chiang's exiled government. Intensely resentful of this kind of past affront to its sovereignty, the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew T.H. Tan, "A New Era in Taiwan Politics and its Implications," *Asia-Pacific Review* 24, no. 1 (2017): 123.

<sup>2</sup> Zhao Suisheng, "Are China and Taiwan Heading Towards Conflict," *National Interest*, (September 2016), 2, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/are-china-taiwan-heading-towards-conflict-17860>, accessed on September 27, 2017.

party views national reinvigoration following its “Century of Humiliation” as incomplete as long as China and Taiwan remain fractured. Former Chinese President Hu Jintao captured this sentiment at the 17th Party Congress when he said, “The two sides of the Straits are bound to be reunified in the course of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Xi’s rhetoric reveals the party’s belief that reunification can make the future right for future generations—despite the historical shame—when he states that the issue “should not be passed from generation to generation” and must be resolved soon.<sup>4</sup> Thus, according to China’s most senior leaders, reunification is China’s destiny, and must not be deferred any longer. Future generations would, therefore, live free of the shame of a divided China. The PRC’s ability to end the era of ideologically divided China would reflect the party’s ultimate legitimacy and power—a power so great that it can right China’s most shameful wrongs.

Xi’s exaltation reached new heights in October 2017 at the 19th Party Congress, where he used his elevated platform to reiterate his urgency for reunification. At this historic Communist Party gathering, Xi’s position on Taiwan was made even more authoritative. 2,287 delegates of the party congress voted in unanimous approval of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” cementing his political theory on the same level with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping in the pantheon of Chinese Communist philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Notably, the vote cemented “obligatory endorsement of all Xi’s policies to date summed up in the 14 points of Xi’s opening speech” including his unwavering position on

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<sup>3</sup> John Mearsheimer, “Say Goodbye to Taiwan,” *National Interest*, (March 2014), 2, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/article/say-goodbye-taiwan-9931>, accessed September 7, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Tan, 119.

<sup>5</sup> Salvatore Barbones, “The Meaning of Xi Jinping Thought: National Revival and Military Power,” *Foreign Affairs* (2 November 2017), 1, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-02/meaning-xi-jinping-thought>, accessed May 1, 2018.

reunification with Taiwan..<sup>6</sup> Xi went on to implore his countrymen to “push forward the compatriots on both sides of the strait jointly opposing all separatist activities, to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>7</sup>

However, Xi’s rhetoric was even more direct later in his address. He received his most vigorous applause of his lengthy party congress speech when he addressed separatist movements: “We will never allow anyone, any organization, or any political party, at any time or in any form, to separate any part of Chinese territory from China.”<sup>8</sup> Though he does not reference Tsai and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan—it is entirely clear who Xi is referring to when he cites “anyone” or any “political party.” Furthermore, in March 2018 the National People’s Congress approved a measure that removed the two-term limit on Xi’s tenure as president, effectively clearing the path for him to remain in power for the rest of his life. Thus, rather than stepping down at the end of his second term in 2023 as tradition would have required, it is extremely likely that Xi will lead China well into the targeted reunification window between 2021 and 2049. He will most certainly bring his determination to reunify with him as he moves China ever closer to the national rejuvenation Chinese leaders have promised for decades.

### **Evolving Taiwanese Identity:**

Pro-independence indicators within Taiwan’s government and its citizenry are extremely threatening to China and reinforce its motivations to change the status quo. After eight years of close accommodation with China under President Ma Ying-jeou from 2008 to 2016, Taiwan’s electorate made a bold statement underscoring its increasingly Taiwanese identity when it

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, “Xi Jinping’s Marathon Speech: Five Takeaways,” *New York Times* (New York), 18 October 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-party-congress>, accessed on 1 May 2018

elected DPP candidate Tsai Ing-Wen.<sup>9</sup> Though not as overtly antagonistic towards China as her party was in the early 2000s, President Tsai has taken immediate steps to separate Taiwan from its economic dependency on China under the previous Kuomintang (KMT) administration. Tsai quickly established a framework to resolve territorial disputes with Japan, and she championed a “Go South” movement to encourage trade with Southeast Asia as an alternative to furthering Taiwan’s economic dependency upon China.<sup>10</sup>

Tsai’s political efforts to distance Taiwan from China are great cause for alarm in Beijing. Andrew T.H. Tan describes this abrupt shift in cross-strait relations in his piece “A New Era in Taiwan Politics and its Implications,” in the *Asia-Pacific Review*: “The DPP’s ascendancy represents a serious reversal for China, which had been working with the KMT towards greater integration, not separation, as its ultimate goal and priority is reunification.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Tsai’s policy reversal has demonstrated her administration’s willingness to distance itself from recent close ties to China. Especially troubling to the PRC, when addressing cross-strait relations Tsai has declined to reference the 1992 Consensus that clarified the “One China” principle. This agreement cemented the understanding that there is “one China,” though Beijing and Taipei disagree on which governing system is legitimate.<sup>12</sup> Tsai’s refusal to reference the 1992 Consensus drives a logical conclusion among CCP leaders on the mainland—Tsai is essentially rejecting the principle that there is only “one China.” Other members of Tsai’s party have also rejected the existence of the consensus outright, further infuriating leaders on the mainland.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tan, 123.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Eleanor Albert, “China-Taiwan Relations,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, (December 2016), 2-9, available at <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-taiwan-relations>, accessed September 25, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 2.

Coupled with nationalistic PRC calls for reunification, Tsai's rejection of the 1992 Consensus contributes to a growing rift that may result in a major disruption to the status quo.

While Chinese party officials might have hoped for a gradual reunification based on close relations under Ma, Tsai's Taiwan has clearly moved in the opposite direction—to great alarm in Beijing. Taiwan's pro-independence movement and increasingly cool relations under Tsai are entirely unacceptable to PRC leaders, and together these affronts energize China's reunification amid the challenge. A change in posture under Tsai, however, is only one aspect of Taiwan's growing pro-independence movement. Tsai's government is a manifestation of a much deeper evolving shift in identity among the Taiwanese citizenry and especially among its young citizens.

Taiwan's citizens increasingly view themselves as distinctly Taiwanese in a development that greatly threatens China and precipitates its urgency to hasten reunification. A 2016 *Taiwan Indicators Survey Research* study found that 66.4 percent of all Taiwanese respondents and 81 percent of young respondents age 20-29 opposed reunification, while 72 percent of Taiwanese citizens age 20-29 supported outright independence.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a National Chengchi University poll found that between 1992 and 2013 the percentage of Taiwanese citizens who viewed themselves as exclusively Taiwanese jumped from 17.6 percent to a majority of 57.5 percent.<sup>15</sup> These results reflect central shifts in how young Taiwanese citizens identify with mainland China. Generations removed from the Chinese Civil War, these young citizens have few meaningful associations with the mainland to maintain a Chinese cultural identity. These changing demographics are driving urgency on the part of the CCP as it considers what kind of Taiwan it will be assimilating when it does achieve reunion.

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<sup>14</sup> Tan, 121.

<sup>15</sup> Mearsheimer, 2.

With a populace that increasingly identifies as pro-independence and distinctly Taiwanese, China is likely to face significant cultural challenges in assimilating Taiwan the longer it allows the status quo to delay reunification. To support its nationalist interests and to substantiate the prestige and unchallenged authority of the party, China will seek to reintegrate a prosperous and an essentially-Chinese Taiwan—while one remains. The party's unwavering position has been that Taiwan is unquestionably part of China; however, Taiwan's evolving identity challenges the substance of that assertion. Thus, delaying reunification only complicates the prospect of a smooth re-assimilation of the island and is yet another factor motivating China to force a change to the status quo. China's practical calculations in reunifying with Taiwan do not end here as it considers re-assimilation of Taiwan's citizenry—its expansive aims include critical realist dimensions as well.

### **Realism:**

Anticipated realist objectives secured during reunification would provide China with its most tangible benefits in the Asia-Pacific balance of power. Reunion offers China significant economic gains to bolster its considerable progress as an economic superpower. Taiwan boasts the 22nd-ranked global economy in global Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and ranks 7<sup>th</sup> in Asia.<sup>16</sup> Taiwan is already China's seventh largest trading partner—adding its entire economy would normalize the PRC's access to robust Taiwanese markets, solidifying commerce between the mainland and the island after decades of fluctuating ties.<sup>17</sup> Adding these substantial resources would bolster the already massive Chinese economy, further reinforcing China's economic pre-

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<sup>16</sup> *The World Factbook 2017*. Central Intelligence Agency, (2017), available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tw/html>, accessed on September 27, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Eleanor Albert, "China-Taiwan Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, (December 2016), 7, available at <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-taiwan-relations>, accessed September 25, 2017.

eminence in Asia. However, as substantial as the economic incentives are, potential military gains manifest China's realist aims even more powerfully.

Absorbing Taiwan for strategic gain is a major incentive reinforcing China's desire for reunification. Mearsheimer captures Taiwan's strategic potential when he calls Taiwan "effectively a giant aircraft carrier" in the South China Sea—the very location that the PRC regularly asserts increasing maritime power against its neighbors and the U.S. Navy.<sup>18</sup> While China and Taiwan were considered military equals during the 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis, that military parity is a distant memory.<sup>19</sup> China has increased its defense spending exponentially in the last two decades and is now a world-class military power while Taiwan has struggled to find nations to sell it advanced weapons.<sup>20</sup> With such a huge difference in relative military capability, China is increasingly capable of forcing unification, and in victory, it would absorb Taiwan's military capability and inherent its territory for basing options. This takeover would include Taiwan's fielded forces and its stock of offensive and defensive weapons—many of those weapons purchased from the U.S. Most importantly, absorbing Taiwan as a military staging base would bolster its ability to project power in the South China Sea significantly. Such an expansion of reach would significantly extend China's already extensive Anti-Access/Area denial network in a game-changing development in the Asian balance of power. Ultimately, these strategic gains could transform China's power position in Asia to the detriment of U.S. and allied interests.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the many factors suggesting change is near, not all practitioners agree that change to the status quo is inevitable. For instance, former U.S. Ambassador and Chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan, Nat Bellocchi, contends that forecasts of China's continued

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<sup>18</sup> Mearsheimer, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Tan, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Mearsheimer, 4.

meteoric rise are greatly exaggerated. He suggests that likely political turmoil resulting from a liberalized economy amid strict political controls will significantly weaken China's ability to force reunification.<sup>22</sup> However, it would be extremely dangerous for U.S. civilian and military leaders to accept this hopeful premise on its face. While the inevitability of China's rise might indeed be overstated as Bellocchi suggests, China's capacity to force reunion is already far too advanced for U.S. policymakers to disregard making immediate preparations for a major change to the status quo.

Other critics contend that the status quo has lasted for nearly 70 years and given its considerable economic growth, forcing a change to the status quo is simply not in China's best interests in a globalized economy. These critics maintain that China is essentially content with the status quo of the "One China Policy"—a policy which affirms its unrelenting position that there can only be *one* China. Such criticisms, however, fail to appreciate how deeply existential the party views its fracture with Taiwan and just how deeply that perspective shapes its view of the future. The status quo was forged and perpetuated in an era when China was too weak militarily to force unification. However, the era of China's national weakness is over. Chinese party rhetoric increasingly reflects its insistence that reunification is inevitable and that it is drawing near as China's power increases. These criticisms fail to appreciate the party's consistent rhetoric on reunification and how inseparable it is with party legitimacy and prestige.

### **Conclusion:**

Despite criticisms that the status quo is unlikely to change, the evidence strongly suggests that China's motivations for reunification are indeed propelling change to the status quo. U.S.

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<sup>22</sup> Nat Bellocchi, "Say Goodbye to Taiwan, Say Goodbye to Peace" *Taipei Times*, (March 2014), p. 8, available at <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2014/03/09/2003585202>, accessed September 30, 2017.

policy should be well-informed by these Chinese interests, and U.S. national security strategy must be poised to respond in the event of a forceful reunification with Taiwan. Because forceful reunion has such significant potential to escalate into a much wider conflict, China's motivations to alter the status quo must be studied comprehensively and accounted for appropriately in continued U.S. efforts to support the status quo. Therefore, U.S. policymakers must reexamine the national interest in resisting forceful reunion and scale response options accordingly.

American leaders should reevaluate the value of the object regarding Taiwan's long-term *de facto* independence given China's clearly stated intent to reunify. Certainly, U.S. policymakers might confirm that defending Taiwan against a forceful unification is in the national interest. However, this reassessment must be given appropriate consideration given China's incredible leaps in economic and military power in recent years. This critical reevaluation should inform an essential outcome—American policymakers must decide what role the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act will play in driving U.S. policy if the status quo changes. This Cold War congressional agreement does not include explicit provisions obligating the U.S. to come to Taiwan's defense if the PRC attacks China. Thus, the U.S. must consider its full range of options as China is now a much more formidable force than it was in 1979 when the act was approved. Further, China is growing its amphibious lift capability, presumably to conduct an amphibious assault onto Taiwan. The People's Liberation Army is already capable of standing up to the U.S. militarily in a high-end fight, especially in a Chinese "home game" in the Taiwan Straits or the South China Sea. Therefore, U.S. senior leaders must be absolutely certain that the national interest demands that the U.S. come to Taiwan's defense—and to what end.

American preparations for a change to the status quo must also be informed by a comprehensive assessment of each belligerent's readiness to fight. Unquestionably, China views

Taiwan as inseparable from its national identity, and every indication suggests that its senior leaders are resolute in their desire for reunification. The Taiwanese, on the other hand, have an increasingly distinct identity from those on the mainland. However, the extent to which the Taiwanese government and citizenry are ready to fight to ensure their *de facto* independence remains unclear. This uncertainty regarding Taiwan's resolve to contest a forceful reunification must inform U.S. planning and preparation accordingly. American policymakers must charge its diplomats and intelligence officials with gathering the insight required to identify if the increasingly distinct Taiwanese identity has created a zeitgeist on the island in which the populace is truly ready to meet this existential threat. Only with this fundamental insight can the U.S. understand the political environment to prepare the joint force to meet U.S. objectives in the event of a major change to the status quo.

As U.S. civilian leaders assess policy options to respond to potential Chinese aggression, American military commanders must prepare for the most dangerous course of action to support U.S. national security objectives. Most critically, the Commander of the United States Pacific Command should devise comprehensive near-term response options for the armed defense of Taiwan against a Chinese act of war in initiating forcible reunification. These preparations must include operational plans to defeat a suffocating blockade of the island, an amphibious invasion and land assault against Taiwan's key seaports, airports, and capital of Taipei, or a cruise missile bombardment aimed at obliterating the separatist nation. During this process, U.S. military commanders must conduct operational preparation with a laser-like focus on national security objectives and with a clear end state in mind as the joint force prepares for a change to the status quo. Ultimately, the U.S. must make every effort to inform its policymaking and military

planning with a keen understanding of China's motivations and intentions as it moves to become one China—with only *one* governing system.