

## Sino-US Strategic Tensions: The Potential Flashpoints

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Since 1949, relations between the United States and China have seen profound transformations, including developing severe skirmishes into a more complicated combination of increasing diplomacy, expanding international rivalry, and growing economic integration.<sup>2</sup> China and the USA never had a swift relationship. During the Cold War, China and the United States engaged in several confrontations. These two nations were on the verge of war in 1950 when the Korean War broke out. During the first Taiwan offshore crisis, the United States and Chiang Kai-shek signed a mutual defence treaty in 1954. In 1955, the United States government proclaimed its intention to execute a nuclear strike against China. The split between China and the Soviet Union ultimately resulted in a closer partnership between China and the USA. Ping-pong diplomacy, the election of China as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and a covert visit by Henry Kissinger were all factors that led to a shift in the balance of power during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China has become the most important key player in global affairs. Few indicators can determine China's rise as a global power. These are economic, military and diplomatic capabilities. China was referred to as a "revisionist power" and a "strategic competitor" by President Trump's administration in 2017, and the administration warned that a new era of struggle was just beginning.<sup>4</sup> During Joe Biden's visit to Asia, he stated that the USA would go to war against China if Taiwan's sovereignty were intervened.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. (2021). *Timeline: U.S. Relations With China 1949–2021*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china>

<sup>3</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Zhao, M. (2019). Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US–China Strategic Competition. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 12(3), 371–394. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poz010>

<sup>5</sup> Smith, D. (2022, May 23). *Biden's Taiwan vow creates confusion not clarity – and raises China tensions*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/23/biden-taiwan-china-strategic-ambiguity-us-foreign-policy>

## Taiwan Strait

A trip was taken by Nancy Pelosi, the leader of the Congressional Democrats and the third most influential member of the Biden administration, to Taiwan. Due to the fact that China adheres to the One-China Policy, Beijing has cautioned the administration of the United States to cancel this visit. In a recent teleconference with President Joe Biden, the President of China issued a stern warning over the matter of Taiwan, telling him, "It would be like playing with fire." No matter how brief the trip may be, there will be huge consequences for the region's politics as a result of it.<sup>6</sup>

The islands in the Taiwan Strait were of particular significance due to their close proximity to both China and Taiwan and their involvement in the Chinese Civil War. During the Chinese Civil War, officials and soldiers from the Government of the ROC commanded by nationalist Chiang Kai-Shek fled to Taiwan after realising they had lost control of mainland China.<sup>7</sup> Here is where the Nationalists took refuge, and from here, they built their bases of operations on these two islands as well as the Dachen Islands, which are located further to the north. In the early 1950s, Chiang's forces conducted a series of limited operations against the coast of mainland China, launching them from the islands of Jinmen and Mazu.<sup>8</sup> Authorities on both sides believed that the islands continued to be strategically vital despite the fact that the ROC claimed sovereignty over them. This was due to the prospect that the islands may be used as a launchpad for an attack on the Chinese mainland from the islands.

The tensions in the Taiwan Strait were exacerbated by the United States policies toward East Asia during the early Cold War. Following the expulsion of Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, officials in the United States seriously considered providing assistance to the People's Republic of China in their attempt to battle him across the Taiwan Strait. In spite of this, the United States sent its

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<sup>6</sup> China condemns Pelosi's "extremely dangerous" Taiwan visit. (2022, August 2). *Www.aljazeera.com*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/2/china-slams-pelosis-taiwan-visit-extremely-dangerous>

<sup>7</sup> *Milestones: 1953–1960 - Office of the Historian*. (2019). State.gov. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/taiwan-strait-crisis>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Seventh Fleet to Korea as soon as hostilities began there in June of 1950 in an effort to stop the conflict from spreading to other parts of the country.<sup>9</sup> Seventh Fleet's appearance enraged Chinese Communists, and they transferred Taiwanese forces to the Korean Front. After the Korean War, the United States withdrew its fleet from the Strait of Malacca.

Recently, a 29-strong contingent of Chinese planes entered Taiwan's air defence zone as a response to Joe Biden's remarks. These bombers flew to the island's south and into the Pacific Ocean. A violation of Taiwan's air defence zone by Chinese aircraft has brought the level of animosity between Taipei and Beijing to a record peak. According to the Ministry of National Defense of Taiwan, China participated in its most recent mission with 17 fighters and six H-6 bombers.<sup>10</sup>

The United States has made several extremely visible demonstrations of support for Taiwan. Other high-profile acts by Taiwan's president, such as arms sales and visits to the US president, are not comparable to activities made by past administrations. The USA passed two major pieces of legislation supporting closer ties with Taiwan; senior US officials virtually attended; and the announcement that Taiwan's leading chip maker would build a \$12 billion cutting-edge semiconductor production plant in Arizona coincided with the declaration of a rule denying Huawei worldwide access to essential chip-making equipment.<sup>11</sup> US officials, it's said, are considering drastic measures, including sending US Navy ships to Taiwan ports or even rotating Marines across the country.<sup>12</sup>

It is simple to make mistakes and react in a manner that is not justified because of the difference in interests between the United States and China in relation to Taiwan. The foundation of the "one China policy" is in jeopardy of crumbling to pieces if Taiwan is made to serve as a weapon of retaliation against China.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Harrison, C. (2022, June 22). *China sends jets into Taiwan airspace after Biden threat as war games tensions rise*. Express.co.uk. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1629383/China-Taiwan-joe-biden-jets-airspace-tensions>

<sup>11</sup> Russel, D. (2020, June 3). *The 3 Flashpoints That Could Turn a US-China "Cold War" Hot*. Thediplomat.com. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/the-3-flashpoints-that-could-turn-a-us-china-cold-war-hot/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



Source: *Youtube*

## South China Sea

The South China Sea is home to a plethora of natural resources, including fishing grounds, oil and gas deposits, and other types of natural resources. China has territorial disputes with a number of other countries, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan, despite the fact that it claims the vast majority of the waters.<sup>13</sup>

Since 2014, China has increased the amount of territory it is reclaiming and the pace at which it is building up its military as part of the country's growing assertiveness in defending its claims.<sup>14</sup> As a direct consequence of China's massive island construction in the South China Sea, the region is currently undergoing the preparation of military hardware and infrastructure. Exploration for natural resources such as oil and gas is going on somewhere in the Spratly Islands and in the surrounding area as well. As part of its effort to bolster its sovereignty claim in the South China Sea, China has built several number of artificial islands in the area. Beijing continues to

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<sup>13</sup> Yong, C. (2022, May 21). *Four flashpoints in Asia to watch as US, China tensions rise* | *The Straits Times*. [Www.straitstimes.com. https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/asias-flashpoints-disputes-in-korean-peninsula-taiwan-strait-east-and-south-china-seas](https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/asias-flashpoints-disputes-in-korean-peninsula-taiwan-strait-east-and-south-china-seas)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

disobey the decision of an international court, despite the fact that the court has previously ruled against claims that are similar.<sup>15</sup> The militarisation of both China and the USA has increased significantly in the last three years. The United States enhanced the speed of its freedom of navigation operations and increased the amount of attention that was placed on these efforts during the first four months of 2020.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, China proclaimed administrative districts covering most of the South Chinese Sea and sent its sole carrier strike group to perform exercises in the area, all within the same period as the United States did.<sup>17</sup>



Source: *The Telegraph*

To put it another way: the blend of frazzled psyches, heightened operations, strategic mistrust, and severed dialogue channels could lead to a military conflict or worse if an incident is allowed to rise to the level of crisis.

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<sup>15</sup> Mundhra, S. (2022, February 15). *New US Report Flags “Five Potential Flashpoints” That Could Trigger A War Between China And America*. Latest Asian, Middle-East, EurAsian, Indian News. <https://eurasianimes.com/flashpoints-that-could-trigger-a-war-between-china-us/>

<sup>16</sup> Russel, D. (2020, June 3). *The 3 Flashpoints That Could Turn a US-China “Cold War” Hot*. Thediplomat.com. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/the-3-flashpoints-that-could-turn-a-us-china-cold-war-hot/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



## East China Sea

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are situated in the East China Sea and are claimed by Japan despite the absence of any permanent occupants, are currently the focus of military activities conducted by China.<sup>18</sup> The acquisition of these landmasses would not only provide access to the South China Sea, but it would also offer fishing rights, access to areas where hydrocarbons can be mined, and the prospect of deep-sea mining beds. In addition to everything else, these landmasses serve as a portal. China is gradually increasing the number of its air and marine patrols above and around the islands, as well as the capabilities of those patrols. The United States recognises that the island chain is an integral part of Japan, and it has given Tokyo the assurance that the islands are protected by the mutual defence and security guarantee that is held by the two nations. If this dispute escalates into a conflict, China and Japan could find themselves in a precarious situation as a result.

A conflict between China and Japan might force the world's largest economy to intervene to safeguard its friend and guarantee freedom of the seas and skies.<sup>19</sup> If Beijing prevented access to ships or planes operating in accordance with international law, the White House might respond. This problem is considered as a proxy for how the two countries would interact as Asian powers. Hence the events there have greater significance. As a result of Tokyo's purchase of three contested islands from their previous private owner, anti-Japanese protests broke out in China, compelling Japanese firms to cease operations on the Chinese mainland.<sup>20</sup> After Beijing declared an official Air Defense Identification Zone over sections of the East China Sea, Tokyo protested the next year also.

Both China and Japan are working to increase the power of their air and maritime forces in the East China Sea, which is important to an increase in the number of instances in which their respective vessels and aircraft come dangerously close to colliding with one another.

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<sup>18</sup> Mundhra, S. (2022, February 15). *New US Report Flags "Five Potential Flashpoints" That Could Trigger A War Between China And America*. Latest Asian, Middle-East, EurAsian, Indian News.

<sup>19</sup> Chandran, N. (2017, December 21). *A second territorial dispute in Asia could be more dangerous than the South China Sea*. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/12/20/east-china-sea-could-be-riskier-than-south-china-sea.html>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

In order to drive Beijing out of the artificial islands it has built, the United States would have to risk an all-out war with China. Chinese forces would be put in jeopardy of defeat, and China's artificial islands would be destroyed if they attempted to impede US operations in the area.



Source: *Google*

## **Space: New Dimension of the US-China Tension**

The regulations necessary to formally commence crewed space missions were not enacted by the government of the world's most populous country until 1992, decades after similar legislation was passed in the United States and the former Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup> Even though the project was started a little bit later than planned, it has made significant headway. The word "space" in Chinese is pronounced, "taikong," which is where the term "taikonaut" originates from. 2003 saw the launch of the first taikonaut into space by the government, while 2011 saw the introduction of the first temporary module into orbit.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Yuan, S. (2021, May 13). Space: The new frontier for US-China rivalry. *Www.aljazeera.com*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/13/space-the-newest-frontier-for-resurgent-chinese-pride>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

In 2019, this nation was the first to successfully land a rover on the opposite side of the moon. In addition, it brought back the first samples of lunar rock to be brought back to Earth in more than four decades at the end of last year.<sup>23</sup> China, which boasts the world's second-largest economy, possesses a one-of-a-kind potential to extend its sphere of influence into the stratosphere.

According to President Xi Jinping, expanding China's space program is an "essential strategic step that will determine China's future development." This statement was made by the Chinese leader.

<sup>24</sup>Particularly in light of the escalating tensions in Taiwan and the South China Sea, some people in the United States are concerned that China will use its achievements in space to advance its military development. This is especially the case in light of the fact that China has made achievements in space. The successes of the country in space have provided a boost to its residents on a variety of levels, from those considering attending space camps to those who are thinking about making advancements in the virtual world.

## **Cyberspace Rivalry Front**

China and the United States have opened a new front in their cyberwar by accusing each other of extensive hacking. The United States and its allies said that cyber hackers working with China's Ministry of State Security had orchestrated a huge attack on Microsoft Exchange email software, starting the war of words between the two greatest economies.<sup>25</sup>

Responding to the charges, Beijing accused the United States of "indiscriminate eavesdropping across the world," which the United States denied. A front firm called Hainan Xiandun Technology Development was set up to launch cyberattacks against customers in 12 countries, according to the US Department of Justice.<sup>26</sup>

Cybersecurity breaches in China have also been slammed by a number of other countries like the EU and NATO. It's important for the United States and China to have an open dialogue on cyber

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Yuan, S. (2021, May 13). Space: The new frontier for US-China rivalry. *Www.aljazeera.com*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/13/space-the-newest-frontier-for-resurgent-chinese-pride>

<sup>25</sup> Jinghua, L., & Levite, A. (Eli). (2019, March 15). *Is There Common Ground in U.S.-China Cyber Rivalry?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/15/is-there-common-ground-in-u.s.-china-cyber-rivalry-pub-78725>

<sup>26</sup> Wang, A. (2021, July 20). US, China trade hacking claims on new cyberspace rivalry front. *Sg.news.yahoo.com*. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/china-rejects-microsoft-exchange-cyber-042114145.html>



challenges, according to Lu Xiang, an expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on China-US ties. I believe the two sides should sit down and have a constructive dialogue, as China is also a victim of cyberattacks and two sides have common threats in cyberspace," Lu added.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of the "Clean Network" program launched last year, the former Trump administration and other countries are no longer able to employ Chinese network equipment, software, or services.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the often-vulnerable equilibrium that has characterised US-Chinese relations for decades, we must not become numb to the possibility that we are dangerously close to a tipping point, where even a minor move could serve as a catalyst to let loose the dogs of war. This is something that we must not allow ourselves to become complacent about. The poison of the trade war or the COVID blame game should not be allowed to cause our ears to become deaf. Things are certainly not as bad as they seem to be because there is always room for improvement. As a consequence of this, it is essential to be on the lookout for indications that the political and diplomatic barriers erected between Washington and Beijing to prevent an escalation of tensions are mostly ineffective. Both of these leaders recognise the value in the old proverb that advises that it is better to be careful if you cannot be good. China and the US have been exchanging hot words for a long time. The recent visit of Nancy Pelosi can bring a serious downturn in the relations between the US and China. It might hit the lowest point of bilateral relations between the US and China. This issue can lead this region to tremendous geopolitical tension.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Wang, A. (2021, July 20). US, China trade hacking claims on new cyberspace rivalry front. *Sg.news.yahoo.com*. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/china-rejects-microsoft-exchange-cyber-042114145.html>