



THE WORLD AFTER TAIWAN'S FALL - PART ONE

BY DAVID SANTORO AND RALPH COSSA

David Santoro (david@pacforum.org) is President and CEO of the Pacific Forum. Follow him on Twitter @DavidSantoro1.

Ralph Cossa (ralph@pacforum.org) is President Emeritus and WSD-Handa Chair in Peace Studies at Pacific Forum.

Let us start with our bottom line: a failure of the United States to come to Taiwan's aid—politically, economically, and militarily—in the event of a takeover attempt by the People's Republic of China (PRC) would devastate the United States' credibility and defense commitments to its allies and partners, not just in the Indo-Pacific, but globally. If the United States tries but fails to prevent such a takeover, the impact could be equally devastating unless there is a concentrated, coordinated US attempt with likeminded allies and partners to halt further PRC aggression and eventually roll back Beijing's ill-gotten gains.

This is not a hypothetical assessment. Taiwan has been increasingly under the threat of a military takeover by the PRC and, even today, is under attack politically, economically, psychologically, and through so-called “gray-zone” military actions short of actual combat. The US government, US allies, and others have begun to pay attention to this problem, yet to this day, they have not sufficiently appreciated the strategic implications that such a takeover would generate.

The study

To address this problem, the Pacific Forum has conducted a multi-authored [study](#) on “the World After

Taiwan's Fall” with the goal of raising awareness in Washington, key allied capitals, and beyond about the consequences of a PRC victory in a war over Taiwan and, more importantly, to drive them to take appropriate action to prevent it. The study, which provides six national perspectives on this question (a US, Australian, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and European perspective) and fed its findings and recommendations into the second round of the Pacific Forum-run Track-2 “US-Taiwan Deterrence and Defense [Dialogue](#)” (and sponsored by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency), outlines these strategic implications in two alternative scenarios. In the first scenario, the PRC attacks Taiwan and it falls with no outside assistance from the United States or others. In the other scenario, Taiwan falls to the PRC despite outside assistance (i.e., “a too little, too late” scenario).

The study's main finding is that Taiwan's fall would have devastating consequences for the United States and many countries in the region and beyond. Regardless of how it happens (without or despite US/allied intervention), Taiwan's fall to the PRC would be earth shattering. The PRC could eclipse US power and influence in the region once and for all. Taiwan's fall could lead to the advent of a *Pax Sinica* where Beijing and its allies would pursue their interests much more aggressively and with complete impunity. Nuclear proliferation in several parts of the Indo-Pacific could also be the net result of Taiwan's fall, leading to much more dangerous regional and international security environments. To several authors, it would thus be necessary to build an Asian equivalent to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to prevent PRC adventurism and ultimately retake Taiwan.

Accordingly, the United States, its allies, and others should take major action—rapidly—to prevent such a development. In particular, the United States should lead an effort to strengthen collective deterrence and defense in the Indo-Pacific; this is especially important in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has shown territory takeovers still happen in the twenty-first century. The United States should also give serious consideration to establishing region-wide nuclear sharing arrangements; at a minimum, it should jumpstart research to examine the

benefits, costs, and risks that such arrangements would bring to the Indo-Pacific security architecture, as well as assess the opportunities and challenges that such a development would present.

National perspectives on a PRC takeover of Taiwan

Each national perspective imagines broadly similar implications of a PRC takeover of Taiwan.

United States. Ian Easton's chapter on the US perspective explained that Taiwan's fall would be disastrous irrespective of how it happens because the Island is a leading democracy, has unique military and intelligence capabilities, plays a critical role in global high-tech supply chains, and benefits from a special geographic location in the heart of East Asia. Easton further contended that the outcome would be especially dire if Taiwan falls without the United States and others trying (even if they failed) to defend it. The result would be Taiwan's destruction as a nation, the breakdown of the US alliance system, with some allies going nuclear and others falling into the PRC's diplomatic orbit, plus increased PRC influence globally. Taiwan's fall after an intense battle between the United States, its allies, and the PRC would not be as bad: Taiwanese resistance fighters would likely fight on, and the United States might be in a position to build a collective deterrence and defense system to keep the PRC in check. Still, the regional and global security orders would be shattered.

Australia. Malcolm Davis' chapter on the Australian perspective painted a similarly dark picture. Regardless of how Taiwan's fall happens, Davis explained that the PRC would be "much better placed to deny US forward presence, to weaken American geopolitical influence in Asia, and expand Beijing's domination in the region." He added that a US and allied failure to intervene would generate a "highly permissive environment for Beijing from which it could expand its influence and presence as well as coerce other opponents, notably Japan as well as Australia." Meanwhile, in the event of a failed US/allied intervention, Davis contended that the outcome would be a substantial US defeat, which would reinforce the perception of US decline, or a

protracted high intensity war with the PRC, and neither outcome would be good for Australia. Canberra, then, would have to recalibrate and fundamentally rethink its defense policy, its alliance with the United States, and its strategic relationships with other regional partners.

Japan. Mataka Kamiya's chapter on the Japanese perspective argued that Tokyo, too, would regard the Island's fall to the PRC as deeply troubling. As Kamiya put it, "If China seizes Taiwan, the consequences—in political, military, economic, and even in terms of values and ideology—would have serious repercussions for Japan." Kamiya considered that the outcome of Taiwan's fall would be "equally bad" whether the fall takes place without or despite US/allied assistance. He pointed out that, in Japanese eyes, US credibility would be at stake if a PRC takeover takes place without US intervention and that the US ability to defend Japan effectively would be seriously questioned if there is a failed US intervention. Either way, serious problems would then likely emerge in the US-Japan alliance as a result.

South Korea. Duyeon Kim's chapter on the Korean perspective echoed Kamiya's on the Japanese perspective. Kim stressed that "the expected outcomes of Taiwan's fall for Korea would be the same under the two scenarios—both equally bad in terms of South Korean perceptions and sentiments about the US security commitments to them and their interest in obtaining an independent nuclear deterrent." Kim, however, did insist that much would depend on the degree to which South Koreans question US credibility and lose trust in Washington, as well as on the political party in power in Seoul, the state of the US-Korea alliance, the state of Korea-PRC relations, and North Korea's nuclear capabilities and strategic calculus. Still, she argued that a determining factor would be President Xi Jinping's worldview and the PRC's economic situation. Either way, Kim stressed that a "constant outcome" could be an emboldened and more aggressive North Korea.

India. Jabin Jacob's chapter on the Indian perspective argued that a PRC invasion of Taiwan would "change very little on the ground for India in terms of the bilateral [India-Taiwan] relationship itself..." Yet he

explained that a PRC invasion of Taiwan would force India to refocus its national security policy squarely on the PRC, making it its primary threat. He added that India would also reconsider its relationship with the United States by distancing itself from Washington because a post-US world order would be in the making and, at the same time, seeking to extract concessions from Washington. More generally, Jacob stressed that Taiwan's fall would have far-reaching (very negative) implications for India in its immediate neighborhood, in its wider Asian and Indian Ocean neighborhood, as well as at the international level.

Europe. Bruno Tertrais' chapter on the European perspective began with a reminder that Europe has only recently begun to worry about the PRC and the possibility of a conflict over Taiwan and, as a result, views and perceptions on this matter vary widely. Still, Tertrais explained that Europeans agree that the economic and strategic consequences of Taiwan's fall to the PRC would be problematic for Europe. Tertrais argued that a failed US/allied intervention would be "less damaging for Europe" because a failure to intervene risks inviting "renewed Russian aggressiveness." In both cases, however, Tertrais explained that "the fall of Taiwan would be a wake-up call for Europe that it must act fast to be in a position to defend itself," adding that several European countries would likely seek to strengthen their security and defense ties with several US Indo-Pacific allies.

This is Part One of a two-part PacNet. In Part Two, we will review in more depth some of the key findings and recommendations emanating from our study.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.