



**CHINA'S NEW (OLD) TAIWAN WHITE  
PAPER: WHAT'S THE POINT?**

BY JAKE STEINER

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In the wake of the People's Liberation Army exercises in August, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [released](#) a new white paper on its goal of "reunification" with Taiwan. Much of the change in this paper, compared to the most recent white papers (in 1993 and 2000) papers is tonal—Cherry Hitkari of the Lowy Institute [notes](#) it is "far more assertive, elaborate and emotionally charged." There is also an added sense of urgency, as the resolution of the Taiwan question is now seen as a necessary condition for the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation," the catch-all term for Xi's ambition for great-power status. Rhetorical flourishes aside, the 2022 white paper is by no means revolutionary. Mentions of "peaceful reunification," "one country, two systems," and "people-to-people exchanges," continue to litter its pages.

The differences, however, are indicators of Chinese intentions towards Taiwan, and the prospects for preventing further escalation.

The CCP reiterates its stance on pursuing "peaceful reunification," under the "one country, two systems" (OCTS) policy, parroted by successive Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping. According to the paper, the CCP will pursue "people-to-people" economic and cultural exchanges, leading to "consultation and discussion as equals," as the process by which

unification would be achieved. It continues to discuss OCTS as the "only" and "inevitable" solution for Taiwan.

These calls will likely remain unanswered in Taiwan, which [views](#) OCTS as "wishful thinking." Unification, or moves towards unification, have all-time low levels of support among polls of Taiwanese people. The most recent [poll](#), conducted before House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit, found that 6.4% of respondents support either "unification as soon as possible," or to "maintain status quo, move toward unification." The experience of Hong Kong under OCTS further diminished the already-bleak outlook for the policy. The steady [dismantling](#) of Hong Kong's autonomy, starting with the State Council's 2014 white paper on the region, and now the "overly broad interpretation of and arbitrary application" (per a UN [report](#)) of the Beijing-imposed national security law in 2020 showed Taiwanese exactly what to expect under OCTS.

The white paper, despite its talk of "peaceful reunification," also provides ominous signs for the (im)balance of carrots and sticks the CCP has used and will continue to use against Taiwan. The paper notably [removes](#) more conciliatory language present in the 1993 and 2000 white papers, including prior promises of a high degree of autonomy, and to not deploy military and administrative personnel to the island. The noted absence of the latter assurance is especially worrying, as the CCP has [declared](#) its intention to prosecute members of Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party for "secession," made a crime under the Anti-Secession Law in 2005. The absence of the military deployment promise also comes alongside worrying [calls](#) by Chinese ambassador to France Lu Shaye that Taiwanese people need to be "re-educated" in a unification situation. Thus, the Chinese are doing little to rehabilitate the OCTS plan in Taiwan.

The white paper advocates "peaceful reunification" under a discredited system rejected by the Taiwanese, a majority of whom are now [willing](#) to fight to prevent its imposition on the island. The Chinese are apparently aware of this and defend their actions in Hong Kong: according to the 2022 white paper, the

CCP “made some appropriate improvements,” which “laid a solid foundation for the law-based governance of Hong Kong.” Thus, the Chinese are aware of the discredited status of OCTS and make no effort to rehabilitate it.

In this light, the question is: what, then, is the purpose of the white paper?

The answer is probably domestic. On the one hand, the paper may be geared towards party cadres ahead of the 20<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress, slated to occur later this year. Observers have remarked that Xi’s administration [relies](#) less on economic growth—as had been the case for the prior three paramount leaders Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao—and more so on nationalist sentiment and delivering on the plan for national rejuvenation to legitimize his rule into an unprecedented third term. On the latter, Xi faces increasing [headwinds](#) internationally with (further) growing great-power rivalry with the United States, souring [opinions](#) of the Belt and Road Initiative among some partners, and [failure](#) to conclude a trade deal with the European Union. The more in-depth discussion of post-unification Taiwan and setting a (rather ambiguous) deadline of not “leaving the Taiwan question to the next generation” could demonstrate the CCP’s intentions to escalate pressure on Taiwan heading into Xi’s third term.

The other answer is that the white paper serves as a nationalist “anti-inflammatory”. The CCP has stoked nationalism as another plank in their domestic legitimacy, and often refers to this sentiment—allowed to flourish on sites like Weibo—to justify their more aggressive moves abroad. Yet, despite creating and stoking these sentiments, it has [grown](#) to something beyond Beijing’s control. In the run-up to Speaker Pelosi’s visit, nationalists called for strong action against both the United States and Taiwan, with Hu Xijin, the former editor-in-chief of *Global Times* [calling](#) for the PLA to “forcibly dispel,” and if ineffective, shoot down Pelosi’s plane. Following Pelosi’s visit, censors [hurried](#) to delete posts calling Beijing’s response too weak, as some appeared to demand “reunification by force,” or an invasion of Taiwan.

The attempt to dispel nationalist fervor constitutes self-recognition that the PRC is not yet ready to unify Taiwan by force, reinforcing the Pentagon’s [assessment](#) that an invasion is unlikely for another two years. To some extent, this involves military capabilities—while China does not have the necessary [lift](#) capacity to sustain an invasion the recent exercises have shown that an air and sea blockade of the island is [possible](#). Rather, the CCP Leadership recognizes that the military, economic, and diplomatic costs of such an offensive are too high, especially given the current self-inflicted damage to the domestic economy from the zero-COVID policy, a [collapsing](#) housing market as developers like Evergrande default on its debts and foreign debt [crisis](#) as partners are forced to default on Chinese loans.

As Beijing continues its naval modernization and escalation around Taiwan, the United States must prepare, striking a balance between support for Taiwan that increases the potential costs of a CCP offensive military action, and overzealous support that Zhongnanhai can [contrive](#) as pretext for further escalation. Some [aspects](#) of the Taiwan Policy Act currently in the Senate may stray to the latter side of this balance. Following President Biden’s [statements](#) of intent to defend Taiwan, Washington should clarify that it considers a military blockade an act of war, as one participant [stated](#) at our US-Taiwan Deterrence and Defense Dialogue earlier this month. Though Manila may be hesitant for fear of retribution by the CCP, stationing a small, mobile naval force in the Philippines would decrease the response time for cross-strait disturbances, forcing further Chinese recalculations. If stationing such a force proves infeasible, the US should increase its military engagement with the Philippines beyond the occasional freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea. Last, the United States must finally answer the [call](#) of Rep. Elaine Luria, a frequent critic of the deterioration of the United States Navy, who noted in 2021 the Navy wanted to retire fifteen ships while procuring only four. This trend must reverse—Chinese calculations already expect US intervention in a Taiwan contingency, thus empowering our navy helps to prevent the contingency from happening.

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