



**WHAT INDO-PACIFIC COUNTRIES
SHOULD DO ABOUT TAIWAN**

BY HUYNH TAM SANG

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In retaliating against US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August trip to Taiwan, the People's Republic of China deployed military maneuvers to encircle the island and, for the first time in nearly 26 years, conduct missile launches into Taiwan's coastal waters. Beijing's recent military exercises, even after their scheduled end, continue to focus on "[anti-submarine and sea assault operations](#)," most likely making them a dress rehearsal for a full-scale invasion.

This time, and unlike in past crises (namely 1996), it does not appear as though there is an off-ramp, a peaceful path to reconciliation between Beijing and the United States. Preparation, and not just for Washington and Taipei, is thus of the essence.

1996, and now

China's recent military exercises remind of the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996, when Lee Teng-hui, then president of the Republic of China, visited Cornell University in the state of New York. Though US officials insisted that Lee's visit was a private and unofficial trip for a class reunion at his alma mater, it nonetheless caused dissatisfaction in CCP headquarters, leading to military exercises intended to intimidate Taiwan. Nevertheless, both the United States and PRC considered resolving the crisis to be in their long-term interests. Furthermore, the balance

of power largely favored the United States; China did not have the capability to impose its will.

To resolve the crisis, the Clinton administration reaffirmed Washington's "one China policy," while Chinese President Jiang Zemin underlined gradual peaceful reunification, while not renouncing the possibility of using force to achieve this goal. Both sides also agreed to engage in bilateral interactions through regular high-level dialogues. [Jiang](#) and [Clinton](#) subsequently paid state visits to Washington and China in 1997 and 1998, respectively.

This time, the crisis has received international attention due to intensifying threats from Beijing, which now seeks to [displace](#) the United States as the leader of both the regional and international orders. The balance of power across the Taiwan Strait increasingly tilts toward China, whose growth in military power is the "[largest and fastest](#)" in history—completely [outclassing](#) its smaller neighbor in aircraft carriers, ballistic missile submarines, fighter aircraft, etc. Furthermore, Xi Jinping pledges to "[smash](#)" any attempts at official independence from Taiwan.

Unlike after the 1996 crisis, there is no sign of rapprochement between Washington and Beijing—US and Chinese representatives did not hold dialogues at August's ASEAN ministerial meeting. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [condemned](#) Beijing's military exercises surrounding Taiwan and said the PRC "should not use the visit as a pretext for war, escalation, for provocative actions." On Aug. 6, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi justified Beijing's actions by [saying](#) they aimed at sending a warning to the "Taiwan independence" forces and denounced the US for "using Taiwan to contain China." One day before Wang's speech, the PRC halted bilateral cooperation with the United States on military dialogues, maritime safety, anti-drug efforts, transnational crime, illegal immigration, and climate change.

Taiwan matters for the Indo-Pacific

In the 1990s, although China's population was about 60 times that of Taiwan's, Beijing's defense budget was only double Taipei's. Today, the PRC spends

more than [20 times](#) that of Taiwan on defense spending. The PRC, a growing totalitarian power driven by irredentism and civilizational superiority, may intensify its efforts to subdue Taiwan with multiple strikes on political, military, and economic fronts. Such a cataclysmic conflict in the region will be detrimental to both the regional and international order.

The clock is ticking, not only for the United States but the Indo-Pacific as a whole. Regional countries should not dismiss this scenario, as a Chinese takeover of the island would have a chilling effect throughout Southeast Asia, specifically for countries with maritime disputes with the PRC. At some point in future disputes, it has been speculated that the PRC may “seek a [relatively controlled conflict](#)” to settle maritime disputes in its favor rather than invade Southeast Asian countries, as a manufactured crisis could awe regional smaller states into acceding to China’s interests. If the PRC is willing to launch an invasion to retake Taiwan, there can be little doubting of their intentions to settle maritime disputes forcefully.

In the meantime, the ongoing trade war, diplomatic spats, and tit-for-tat actions—such as imposing [visa restrictions](#) on officials and [suspending flights](#) due to altercations over air services—will continue to drive the Sino-US relationship, with spillover effects for Indo-Pacific countries. These nations [do not want](#) the PRC to have unfettered access to the Pacific as a result of Taiwan’s fall. Middle powers such as [Japan](#) and [Australia](#) have taken action at the regional level to prevent this development. Some Southeast Asian countries, namely [Vietnam](#) and [Singapore](#), have also sought closer cooperation with the United States, yet [stop short of directly condemning](#) China’s behavior.

If more regional countries, particularly middle powers, fail to strengthen deterrence, including by seeking tighter ties with the United States (including on the military level), condemning Beijing’s provocations, and sending joint congressional delegations to the Island, the consequences for Taiwan and the region could be dire.

Editor’s note: An earlier version of this article stated that Lee Teng-hui’s 1996 visit was to Washington, rather than Cornell University in New York.

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