



# THE GORDON CHANG REPORT

PRESENTED BY THE  
PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

VOLUME 1, NO. 6

## Why China Believes Taiwan Is An Existential Threat

by Gordon G. Chang | December 2024

“The reunification of the motherland is a historical inevitability,” Xi Jinping proclaimed in his 2024 New Year’s address, referring to Taiwan.<sup>1</sup>

China’s annexation of Taiwan as its 34th province, however, is by no means guaranteed. So far, Taiwan—officially the Republic of China—remains beyond the grasp of Xi’s People’s Republic of China. If events are moving in any direction, they are headed toward permanent separation of the two states.

There are many reasons for the forever division of the two republics, and two mutually incompatible ones stand out. First, most of the people on Taiwan do not think they are “Chinese.” Second, the Chinese in China disagree, believing the people living in Taiwan are of the same blood.

We start with context. “All Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait should be bound by a common sense of purpose and share in the glory of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” China’s leader also stated in his New Year’s address. He can say this because he believes there is a common bond based on blood lines. “Compatriots on both sides of the Strait are brothers destined by fate, members of one family whose blood runs thicker than water,” Xi declared in 2016, marking the 95th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China.<sup>2</sup>

Through decades of relentless Communist Party indoctrination, the people of the People’s Republic agree with their leader. The “family” line of argument of course supports what the Party terms “reunification” with Taiwan—families, after all, should not remain divided—but the notion of

one family also makes war on the island republic extremely unpopular.

China's people often say among themselves that "Chinese should not kill Chinese." A war against Taiwan would almost certainly result in tens of thousands and, more likely, hundreds of thousands of deaths. If Beijing has to resort to nuclear weapons—a distinct possibility—casualties could be numbered in the millions.

Officials also repeat the refrain of Chinese not killing Chinese. For instance, Cui Tiankai, the former ambassador to Washington, in January said this, referring to the U.S.: "Someone may be preparing for us that they will supply military assistance, they will supply weapons for proxy war, and Chinese will be killing Chinese."<sup>3</sup>

Cui was repeating Xi's startling comments from April of last year, made to European Union Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, that the U.S., in the words of the *Financial Times*, was "trying to goad Beijing into attacking Taiwan."<sup>4</sup> Why would Xi and Cui say they did not want to go into battle over the island after the regime had made so many bellicose comments that it was prepared to do precisely that?

Simple. The Chinese people, devastated by the first prolonged economic downturn since the 1970s, are in no mood for war and are even withdrawing from society in large numbers.<sup>5</sup> Killing Chinese "compatriots" on a mass scale is the last thing China's people want their rulers to do.

Most living in Taiwan, on the other hand, do not see themselves as "Chinese." True, "China" appears

in the name of their state, but that is because Chiang Kai-shek, losing the Chinese Civil War, fled the mainland and took up residence on the island of Taiwan. His Kuomintang party cemented its rule with a ruthless crackdown, the "White Terror," a period lasting from 1949 to 1992. Decades-long brutality, repression, and discrimination reinforced a sense of Taiwan identity among the people living on Taiwan before Chiang's unwanted arrival.

Today, generally about two-thirds of Taiwan's people in self-identification surveys deny they are "Chinese." In a recent Pew Research Center survey, conducted between June and September of last year, 67% of Taiwan's people said they were "primarily Taiwanese." Only 3%—those who came with Chiang in the 1940s or their descendants—see themselves as "primarily Chinese." The really bad news for Xi Jinping is the outlook of the younger age cohorts. Among those 18 to 34, 83% view themselves as Taiwanese and 1% Chinese.<sup>6</sup> Taiwan is fast developing a sense of identity separate and apart from China.

The survey results should not be a surprise. "The Chinese Communist Party leadership claims that Taiwan has been part of China 'since ancient times,'" Gerrit van der Wees, a former Dutch diplomat who teaches Taiwan history at George Mason University, told me. "A closer examination shows that this is simply not the case."<sup>7</sup>

In fact, no Chinese ruling group has ever held indisputable sovereignty to the island. Beijing likes to point to the Ming dynasty, van der Wees notes, but Ming rulers considered Taiwan "beyond our territory" and did not object to either the Dutch building Fort Zeelandia or the Dutch East Indies

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Company establishing administrative control over a portion of Taiwan. The Communist Party also refers to Qing dynasty rule over Taiwan, but the Qings never controlled the island's mountainous spine, which comprises about half the island, and the Chinese considered the Manchu Qings, who overthrew the Ming rulers, as foreigners.<sup>8</sup>

Chiang Kai-shek was certainly Chinese and he definitely controlled all of Taiwan's area, but the 1951 San Francisco Treaty, which resolved most of the World War II legal issues in Asia, did not confer sovereignty on his Kuomintang regime.

In any event, China's historical and other arguments have fallen flat with Taiwan's people. Xi Jinping has been promoting Beijing's rule of the island republic under the "one country, two systems" formula,<sup>9</sup> but that promise has fallen flat with most Taiwanese.

Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong's wily successor, developed the formula for Taiwan but first applied it to Hong Kong, then a British colony. China took control of that territory in 1997 after promising a "high degree of autonomy" for 50 years. Xi, however, dishonored that pledge to the territory, most notably in 2019 after his draconian actions triggered large protests and riots.

Xi took firm control of Hong Kong but lost Taiwan: His takeover of Hong Kong clearly changed the outcome of Taiwan's January 2020 presidential election. Prior to the events in Hong Kong, Tsai Ing-wen, the incumbent Taiwan president, was so unpopular that it appeared she might not get the nomination of her Democratic Progressive Party to run for re-election. Ultimately, she obtained the nomination and then won her second term in a landslide. China's heavy hand

in Hong Kong convinced Taiwan voters that they could not trust either China or its favored party in Taiwan, the Kuomintang, to protect their freedom.

History repeated itself. The DPP, as Taiwan's governing party is known, can also thank Xi for its big victory this January when Vice President Lai Ching-te won the presidency. For the first time since 1996, when the island republic held its first democratic presidential election, a party won a third straight presidential term. Previously, the DPP and the Kuomintang traded the presidency every eight years.

Lai's campaign was ailing in the weeks before the election because voters were expressing dissatisfaction with DPP governance on bread-and-butter issues. Then Beijing decided to weigh in, calling the vice president a "separatist" and "destroyer of peace."<sup>10</sup> As a result, ethnic Taiwanese voters began to focus on their ethnicity and the China threat.

Beijing's threats and warnings—a senior Chinese official declared before the voting that the Taiwan election presented a choice between "peace and war"<sup>11</sup>—only reminded the electorate that, despite unhappiness with the DPP, the governing party was best able to maintain Taiwan's separate existence. The Taiwanese, especially after seeing how Beijing suffocated Hong Kong in previous years, did not want to be ruled by the Chinese regime.

China's extensive political warfare efforts directed at Taiwan, therefore, have been counterproductive for Beijing. Yet Xi Jinping keeps adopting the same hardline approach. That is why some in Chinese political circles have come to a stark realization. "The reality is that hope for peaceful reunification

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is dwindling,” wrote Jin Canrong of Renmin University in June on [guancha.cn](http://guancha.cn), a Communist Party-affiliated site. “Thus, we need to prepare ourselves for reunification through non-peaceful means.”<sup>12</sup>

Jin is right: Taiwan will not voluntarily agree to become a Chinese province. Yet Xi demands just that. “Looking further ahead, the issue of political disagreements that exist between the two sides must reach a final resolution, step by step, and these issues cannot be passed on from generation to generation,” he declared in October 2013 with regard to Taiwan.<sup>13</sup> Xi, in his first year as ruler of China, created a marker and staked his legitimacy on annexing the island republic. He has repeated his demand many times since this landmark statement.

To annex Taiwan, therefore, China will have to use force. The People’s Liberation Army, however, is not ready to invade. Even if it has sufficient firepower to do so, as many analysts believe, the senior leadership of the PLA, as China’s military is known, is in disarray, wracked by purges during the last two years.

The purges are continuing. In late November, China’s Defense Ministry announced that Admiral Miao Hua, a member of the Communist Party’s Central Military Commission and the director of the Commission’s political work department, had been suspended and placed under investigation.<sup>14</sup> The news, rumored for weeks, came after reports, officially denied, that Defense Minister Admiral Dong Jun was also under investigation.<sup>15</sup> Other military officers are also rumored to be the subject of corruption probes.

Because China is not ready to invade, Xi may try something else. Taiwan officials late this year have told visiting foreigners that they expect Beijing to impose a quarantine over the island republic in the coming months. “The Communist Party of China is developing and finalizing their quarantine concept for Taiwan,” John Mills, a retired U.S. Army colonel and former director of Cybersecurity Policy, Strategy, and International Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, told me after meetings in Taiwan with senior officials. “They know a blockade is an act of war, so they’re playing the quarantine game, modeled after what President Kennedy did in 1962 for Cuba.”<sup>16</sup>

Xi may think he can take Taiwan with just a quarantine, but the risk is that the move fails and he has to escalate to a full blockade, which is an act of war. The Chinese military announced that its Joint Sword-2024B exercise in the middle of October practiced a “key port blockade.”<sup>17</sup> A quarantine, therefore, could start a chain of events that leads to conflict.

Xi cannot back down if his quarantine fails. At the moment, only the most hostile answers are considered acceptable in senior Communist Party circles, so the world has to be prepared for anything, at any place, and at any time.

Taiwan must be prepared. And it must show the world that it has the will to defend itself, as Minister of National Defense Wellington Koo said early last month.<sup>18</sup>

“Because of the extreme amount of precision-strike capability possessed by China, every Taiwanese command bunker, aircraft, or key weapon system

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has been pre-targeted by multiple PLA weapons,” Erik Prince, Navy veteran and founder of Blackwater Worldwide, pointed out in comments to me. “The best way to achieve deterrence is to build a Taiwan Home Guard, which will turn every city block or jungle road into a hellish guerrilla war.” The cost to build the home guard, Prince says, would be small: about a billion dollars.<sup>19</sup>

Many Taiwanese, reports defense analyst Brandon Weichert, have volunteered for the island’s civil defense force.<sup>20</sup> “China will be fighting the modern-day Vietcong in the streets of Taipei and the mountains of the island,” he told me last month. “Armed resistance could last years.”<sup>21</sup>

Would the fight be worth it to Xi? He evidently believes that Taiwan poses an existential threat to the mighty People’s Republic of China. By its mere existence, a society of 24 million people in Taiwan can bring down the regime ruling 1.4 billion souls—by doing nothing more than continuing to exist and prosper. Because the Chinese people

believe Taiwan’s people are of the same blood, the people of Taiwan fatally undermine the Communist Party’s core narrative that the Chinese are not yet ready to govern themselves. Taiwan’s democracy is vibrant, and the island republic is proof that the Chinese people are capable of good governance.

Taiwan, therefore, has to be prepared because the Communist Party believes it cannot allow the island republic to remain independent. Conflict, therefore, is virtually inevitable. Success for China’s regime, however, is not.

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## ENDNOTES

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