GREAT DECISIONS
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TEACHERS: CHECK OUT THE BACK PAGE

CHINA AND TAIWAN

A LONG HISTORY

STUDENT PROTESTS

RISING STAKES

GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES

BY ALLISON GUSTAVSON

TWO PERSPECTIVES

During the Sunflower Movement of 2014, Taiwanese students carried sunflowers as symbols of hope as they faced off against the KMT government.

What makes a country independent? Who decides whether a government is rightly in control? A fundamental dispute defines the complex relationship between Taiwan and China: is Taiwan a "breakaway province" of communist China, or is it an independent **democratic** nation? The answer depends not only on what people think of this issue, but also on how the threat of Chinese military response has forced the world—and Taiwan itself—to tread carefully when speaking about Taiwanese **autonomy**.

A democracy, the global economy, and the potential for direct conflict between the US and a nuclear-armed China hang in the balance.

THE BACKSTORY

Taiwan is an island off the eastern coast of China. Rather than a nation with a single culture and shared history, it is home to sixteen officially recognized **indigenous** tribes first marginalized by imperial forces in the 17th century, when the Chinese Qing Dynasty took over the territory. Complicated shifts in power and control have followed.

In 1895, China lost to Japan in the first Sino-Japanese war, leaving Taiwan under Japanese control. Meanwhile, sixteen years later, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, China entered a violent period of conflict, culminating in civil war between two leading factions: the Chinese **Communist** Party (CCP), led by Mao Zedong, and the Kuomintang (**Nationalist**) Party (KMT), also called the Republic of China (ROC), led by Chiang Kai-Shek.

In 1945, with the conclusion of World War II, Allied countries forced Japan to relinquish its seized territories, including returning Taiwan to China. Four years later, the CCP finally won the civil war in China, gaining control of the mainland and creating the People's Republic of China (PRC). Chiang Kai-Shek and the KMT party fled to Taiwan, where they seized control of the island, imposed martial law, and declared themselves a Chinese "government in exile"

While the PRC solidified its power on the mainland after World War II, a decades-long period of KMT reign in Taiwan, known as the "**White Terror**"—including a brutal massacre that led to tens of thousands of civilian deaths—was characterized by suppression, violence, and prosecution of anyone critical of the KMT regime.

Although the PRC was not internationally recognized as the legitimate government of China until 1971, the regime continued to gather steam as an increasingly **authoritarian** economic powerhouse throughout the second half of the twentieth century. By 1987, the KMT's martial law formally ended and Taiwan began the long work of addressing its traumas. Against all odds, in the face of a long-held Chinese aim of reincorporating Taiwan into a "rejuvenated Chinese nation" ("One China"), Taiwan was becoming democratized.

A NEW CHAPTER

The change in Taiwan was fueled by an upwelling of energy and determination from ordinary people, particularly youth. Three key movements brought significant progress: the Wild Lily Movement (1990), when students staged a four day "sit-in" to demand the dissolution of a KMT-dominated National Assembly; the Wild Strawberry Movement (2008), which protested a visit by a Chinese dignitary; and the Sunflower Movement (2014), in which student protestors occupied the parliamentary building to demand greater transparency. Instrumental in bringing the Democratic Progressive Party to power in 2016 with the election of Tsai Ing-wen (notably Taiwan's first female president), the Sunflower Movement and its predecessors have enabled Taiwan to emerge as a flourishing democracy through hard-won **incremental** change.

Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen celebrates her inauguration in 2016.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE U.S. SHOW EXPLICIT SUPPORT FOR TAIWAN?

YES

- ✓ Clear U.S. commitment emboldens the Taiwanese to fight back.
- ✓ Support for Taiwan is support for democracy around the world.
- ✓ Taiwan's situation similar to Ukraine's, which has received widespread support from the West.

NO

- ✗ We should not provoke China and risk nuclear conflict.
- ✗ A war would cost money and lives.
- ✗ U.S. involvement does not guarantee victory for Taiwan.

AN UNWRITTEN FUTURE

Taiwan has realized many of its democratic aspirations while continuing to avoid "poking the bear" with China. Tsai originally campaigned on assurances that the China-Taiwan relationship should remain "as is." This relationship has long characterized by a vague status quo in which Taiwan steers clear of declaring itself fully independent from the PRC, China thus doesn't invade, and the U.S. declines to express support for Taiwan should a conflict erupt—an approach known as **strategic ambiguity**. Although she has adopted a more defiant tone as tensions have escalated, Tsai has strived to remain measured.

Current CCP President Xi Jinping, who took power in 2012, has been raising the stakes of this tense relationship and the likelihood of a full-blown conflict. Xi's power is now largely unchecked, and his rhetoric has become increasingly less restrained, raising concerns among world leaders not only about an imminent invasion of Taiwan to complete his vision of "the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history," but also about what seems to be his larger goal: a new world order that puts U.S. global leadership in the rearview mirror.

The threat to Taiwan is escalating, and President Tsai has had to strike a nearly impossible balance between preparing for a seemingly inevitable invasion while keeping it at bay. Like chess, international politics can be seen as a series of moves guided by rules and calculations. But what if, as with Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, we are forced to reckon with a nuclear superpower that violates international norms to attain its goals?

Undoubtedly, Xi is watching unfolding events in Ukraine with interest. The effective resistance mounted by Ukraine, coupled with the international response, profound financial consequences of global sanctions, and a protracted and expensive failure to quickly accomplish Russia's objectives could be giving Xi pause. Many experts worry, however, that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is less a matter of if than when.

THE STAKES

In a fully globalized world, everyone feels the impact of regional conflict. For China, Taiwan, and the U.S., complex calculations are at play.

Current Chinese president Xi Jinping has taken a much more aggressive position on Taiwan's status than previous Chinese leaders.

Credits for both images here

China

A recent headline put it succinctly: "China Wants to Rule the World by Controlling the Rules." China has evolved as a military and economic superpower over the last few decades, and countless nations, including Taiwan, depend upon Chinese markets. You probably have a Taiwanese product within arm's reach: your phone or laptop likely contains a Taiwanese microchip, and the Chinese have helped Taiwan become the second largest producer of semiconductors in the world. This buying power gives China enormous leverage to get what it wants, all around the globe. For example, even Tom Cruise's flight jacket in *Top Gun: Maverick* became an object of international discussion when China pressured the film's producers to remove its Taiwanese flag patch. The patch was removed for the trailers but later, after public outcry, restored for the film, which was thus never released in China.

Credit

An elaborate system of government censorship of Chinese citizens both at home and abroad makes it difficult to gauge the true levels of Chinese dissatisfaction with a "Chinese Dream" that claims to elevate the common person but engages in well-documented human rights abuses and sophisticated mechanisms of social and financial control, even on Chinese **expatriates** and students studying abroad.

Ultimately, few experts see a scenario in which China does not invade Taiwan, no matter what tactics—including **sanctions**—the West engages to delay this outcome. As a U.S. Marine Corps Intelligence Officer wrote, "The reality is that any Western policy seeking to alter Chinese behavior vis-à-vis Taiwan is doomed to fail. China is fundamentally committed to reunification with Taiwan, preferably through peaceful means, but, if necessary, through the use of force."

Credit

Taiwan

Home of world-famous "bubble tea," Taiwan is a cosmopolitan, confident island bustling with creativity and innovation. Freddy Lim was a frontman for a popular heavy metal band that rose to fame less than a decade after martial law ended and is now one of the island's most well-known politicians. "The younger generation is totally different from their parents," he says. "They were born in a country of democracy and freedom. To them, it's not even a question: Taiwan is independent."

If being told you can't have something has ever made you want it even more, then you have a sense of the impact of China's effort to squash Taiwan's democratic social movements, particularly on its youth. But there is concern about Taiwan's ability to defend itself against China's well-equipped, well-trained military.

Taiwan is, however, geographically positioned for a strong defense against invasion across the Taiwan Strait: inaccessible beaches, jungles, and complex landscapes known only by the island's inhabitants would be a strategic advantage. Also, as we've seen with Ukraine, we should never underestimate the possibilities that accompany a nation's determination to defend its freedom.

The United States

Although the U.S. has never formally committed to defending Taiwan, recent events have prompted much analysis about how this stance may be evolving. After a controversial visit to Taiwan in August, House Speaker

THE DEBATE

WOULD DEFENDING TAIWAN BE WORTH THE IMPACT ON THE GLOBAL ECONOMY?

YES

- ✓ Economic difficulties are preferable to an unchecked authoritarian takeover.
- ✓ We cannot put a price on freedom.
- ✓ Economies eventually recover.

NO

- ✗ War would incapacitate semiconductor manufacturing necessary for automotive and electronics industries.
- ✗ Global shortages would increase inflation for all of us.
- ✗ Imposing sanctions on China could lead to violent attacks against the U.S.

Credit

Credit

Because China's military is far stronger than Taiwan's, Taiwan would likely require aid from foreign nations to fend off a potential invasion.

Nancy Pelosi tweeted, "Our delegation's visit to Taiwan honors America's unwavering commitment to supporting Taiwan's vibrant Democracy," but said that this ". . . in no way contradicts longstanding United States policy," referring to carefully calibrated approaches to avoid antagonizing China. Beijing saw things differently, responding immediately with large-scale military exercises in Taiwanese territorial waters.

Amid congressional pressure to increase arms sales to Taiwan, President Biden was asked if the U.S. would defend Taiwan should China launch an invasion. He replied, "Yes, if in fact, there was an unprecedented attack." The White House subsequently reiterated that U.S. policy has not changed, but Biden's statement has been read by many as potentially inflammatory.

Defeat in Taiwan would not only be indescribably brutal, a defeat for democracy, and bring a significantly "weakened position" in a highly important trade region, it could also signify an American "collapse of credibility" on the international stage. A former U.S. ambassador to China said that Taiwan is "the cork in China's bottle," and that Chinese union with Taiwan would fulfill a historical and cultural dream and "end what China feels to be a

THE DEBATE

DOES CHINA HAVE THE RIGHT TO TAKE OVER TAIWAN?

YES

- ✓ There is no international law strong enough to say otherwise.
- ✓ If they can, they will; rights don't factor into it.
- ✓ Taiwan and China share a strong political and cultural history.

NO

- ✗ Taiwan is clearly a unique country that has worked hard for its independence.
- ✗ Connection with shared cultural heritage has all but disappeared with the younger generation.
- ✗ Taiwan has proved itself to be an important player on the global stage.

Credit

blockade on its abilities to control its surrounding seas."

U.S. military and government officials are currently employing a series of complex war games to "game out" various outcomes of direct military engagement with China, including high casualties, destabilization of the global economy, and the cost to the American military. While China continues to build up its nuclear arsenal, the U.S. is working with its allies to expand capacities for **deterrence**.

WHAT *YOU* CAN DO

- **Join** a global network of young leaders, including the youth of Taiwan.
- **Support** established and emerging Taiwanese authors and artists.
- **Become a counselor** with SEASAT Youth Camp to promote "cooperation among international youths" in Asia.
- **Stay informed.** Knowledge is power. When you find the opportunity to make a difference, arming yourself with knowledge about a topic beforehand will always lead you to make smarter and more helpful decisions.
- **Write or call** your elected officials to let them know what you think should be done.
- **Vote**, when you are old enough! With few exceptions, you can't vote until you're 18, but in many states you can register at 16 or 17, and you'll be all set when 18 rolls around.

TRAILBLAZERS

Tsung-wei Lin, a former country coordinator for the Global Youth Parliament, works to bridge "youths and the government." He also leads the Global Youth Trend Forum, bringing people from more than twenty-five countries to Taiwan for constructive dialogue.

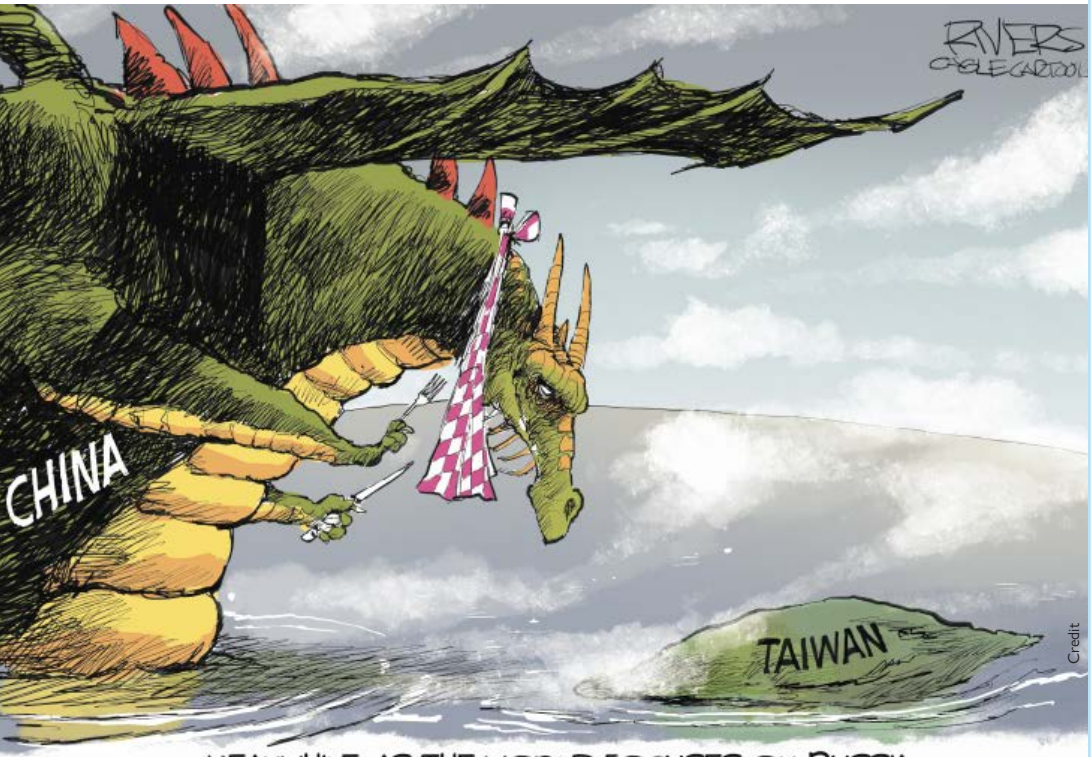
Tuhi Martukaw, (Jocelyn Ting-Hui Hung Chien) is an indigenous woman from the Kasavakan Community of the Pinuyumayan Peoples in Taiwan. Taiwan is home to several different indigenous groups, each with its own language and culture, and in many cases these languages and cultures are slowly disappearing and in need of preservation. Tuhi founded the LIMA Taiwan Indigenous Youth Working Group to "connect the indigenous youth across the borders and continents."

National Taichung First Senior High School students staged a 2015 sit-in that sparked a nationwide protest against a modified curriculum and textbook changes promoting a "China-centric" view of Taiwanese history and events. They launched paper airplanes made from student letters "expressing their dissatisfaction" into the Ministry of Education courtyard.

Tuhi Martukaw Credit

Student protesters Credit

THE BACK PAGE



MEANWHILE, AS THE WORLD FOCUSES ON RUSSIA

AN APPETITE FOR CONQUEST

1. What is this cartoon trying to say? Why do or don't you agree?
2. How is the situation in Taiwan like the situation in Ukraine? How is it different?
3. Why is or isn't it fair to portray China as a hungry dragon?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. What stance should the U.S. take on the China-Taiwan issue?
2. How are Taiwan's student protest movements similar to protest movements in the U.S.? How are they different?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Do you or someone you know have friends or relatives in China or Taiwan? How do they feel about the conflict?

KEY WORDS & TERMS		
authoritarian	deterrence	Nationalist
autonomy	expatriates	sanctions
Communist	incremental	strategic ambiguity
democratic	indigenous	White Terror

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