

# War Fever: after Ukraine, Taiwan?

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*In late January, a top US general declared that a war over Taiwan could break out in as soon as two years. Are we shortly to find ourselves confronted with a second flashpoint in Asia after Ukraine? We put the question to China expert Dirk Nimmegeers.*

**To fully understand what exactly is going on, it is important to grasp Taiwan’s special status. Can you explain that status a bit?**

Taiwan does have its own government and parliament, but essentially it is not a sovereign or independent state because it is part of China. Almost every state in the world, including the US, recognizes that. Taiwan, for instance, has no seat at the UN.

There is only one China with a government based in Beijing. The Taiwanese political entity was installed in 1949 by the losing side in the Chinese civil war, after being expelled from the rest of the country by the Communist Party of China.

Legally, the island has been part of China for centuries like Flanders is part of Belgium, or Friesland is part of the Netherlands. In a way you can see Taiwan as a rebellious province.

**What is China’s relationship towards this ‘rebellious province’?**

China’s policy has been unchanging for years: Taiwan should be reunited peacefully with the rest of the country. Beijing would like to see economic ties between the mainland and the island province restored to the same strength as they were until recently. More social and cultural contacts would also be beneficial.

However, Beijing has always warned – and does so every time it is gravely provoked – that any declaration of Taiwanese independence or serious moves towards it would lead to a military response. Essentially, the ‘Taiwan issue’ is a domestic one, which the Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait will settle between themselves.

**How do they view that issue in Taiwan?**

In Taiwan, there are two main parties. Currently, the Democratic People’s Party (DPP) is in power. This party is pushing for separatism. The position of the DPP and its current leader Tsai Ing-wen is that Taiwan is already independent and that China and Taiwan do not belong

together.

This is in contrast to the view of the other major Taiwanese political party the Kuomintang (KMT). This party is still loyal to the 'one China' constitution, which assumed that a government from Taiwan would succeed in reclaiming all Chinese territory. Of course, the KMT also knows that this has since become an illusion, and that is why the party drew up the '1992 Consensus'.

This states that 'there is but one China, but this is interpreted differently on both sides of the Strait'. For Beijing and the KMT, this remains a good basis for mutual contacts and negotiations. The DPP separatists have always refused to recognize that Consensus.

### **And what is the US stance on the issue?**

Traditionally, the US has held the view that Taiwan is indeed part of China, and that there is only one China, with Beijing as its capital. In 1982, the US promised to phase out arms sales to Taiwan.

When meeting Xi at the G20 in Bali in November 2022, Biden reiterated that the US sticks to its 'One China' policy. The US president also stated then that he and his administration remain in favor of the status quo, i.e., the situation where Taiwan does not declare independence but continues to operate autonomously. The US would intervene militarily if any of the parties involved changed that status quo unilaterally and by force.

### **So, the US adheres to maintaining the status quo?**

What happened in the months before and after the Bali conversation raises serious doubts about the sincerity of Biden's statements. Rather, it seems that Washington is encouraging the most reckless separatist and militaristic politicians on Taiwan.

It is as if the US wants to fulfil its own prophesy that war with China is unavoidable. It seems that leaders in Washington are preparing for that conflict and recruiting or pressuring allies to join it.

### **Could you concretely elaborate on this?**

First, you have the US global strategy. Washington is going to spend unprecedented sums on armaments. Annually, Congress will allocate \$858 billion to the military. That's \$45 billion more than Biden had requested, and it is as much as the spending of the next nine countries combined.

With this arms race, they particularly put Russia and China in the crosshairs. That is not even what I am saying, Washington itself is very open about this. Two US strategic documents argue this and explain how Washington plans to deal with it. [The National Security Strategy \(2022\)](#) and the [Nuclear Posture Review \(2022\)](#), even state in bellicose language that the US has the right to use a nuclear bomb for the purpose of 'detering strategic attacks', i.e. not just nuclear attacks!

Indian commentator [Vijay Prashad](#) notes, 'this, combined with Washington's refusal to adopt a 'no first use' strategy, with Washington's modernization of its nuclear arsenal, and with Washington's withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Missile Treaty, has meant

the fear by many countries – certainly by China and Russia – that the United States might position intermediate-range missiles in their vicinity and arm them with nuclear warheads.’ Encircling China, more specifically in the Indo-Pacific, the US is expanding its fleet. Pacts such as [AUKUS](#), the military treaty between the US, Britain and Australia, are also increasing the military bidding in the region. So is [British military cooperation with Japan](#), a country that, like Germany, is doubling its military spending at the instigation of the US and NATO.

Washington now has agreements with Australia to move nuclear weapons with B-52 and B-1 bombers to Australia. Spending on the so-called Pacific Deterrence Initiative will be increased by \$11.5 billion.

It is clear, and again, Washington does not deny it, that all this is primarily directed against China.

This military strategy goes hand in hand with economic warfare. Recently, Biden launched a real [chip war against China](#). With sweeping export restrictions, the US is trying by all means to block China’s economic, technological and military development.

### **That is the overall strategy. What role does Taiwan play in this?**

One could argue that Taiwan has been assigned the role of a kind of military base by the US. Washington seems determined to use Taiwan against China as it is using Ukraine against Russia, however big the differences between the war that is already being waged and the one that seems to under preparation.

Before and often, US presidents have broken the 1982 promises to roll back and stop arming Taiwan. The Biden administration, however, is taking this the furthest. It has been able to convince the island’s current leaders to use purchases of massive amounts of arms to boost the profits of US arms manufacturers.

Under the recently planned military budget, Taiwan will receive \$10 billion in additional military aid. To that will come another \$6.5 billion under a new law called the [Taiwan Policy Act](#).

The White House wants to invest in ‘war games, large-scale military exercises and a continued US rotational military presence’. The House of Representatives calls on the US Navy to invite the Taiwanese navy to the Rim of the Pacific 2024 military exercises.

On 7 January, yet another US Navy [destroyer](#) sailed through the Taiwan Strait, the first such transit reported by the US Navy this year. As always, Washington claims it is a ‘freedom of navigation’ operation, while China obviously does not impede commercial shipping and has no intention of ever shooting itself in the foot like that.

New provocative and illegal ‘official visits’ to Taipei (the self-proclaimed ‘government’ of Taiwan), along the lines of [Nancy Pelosi](#), are being prepared in the newly elected US parliament.

### **How does Taiwan’s government respond to this?**

The separatist party in power there welcomes these actions and constantly calls for even more weapons. Taipei is extending military service from four months to a year and is doing

everything possible to convince the population that there is a military threat from China. There are even plans to teach children in kindergartens to distinguish the sound of artillery shells.

On the economic front, Taipei is also joining the escalation. Major companies like the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) are being forced to set up factories in the United States in an attempt to cut off the obvious and beneficial cooperation between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait.

**You put the warmongering on the US side, but most people here have the opposite impression and assume China is the aggressor.**

I am afraid people do so indeed. Politicians, commentators, academics and mass media do their foremost every day to convince the people of the US and its allies that it is China that is increasingly aggressive and a threat to its neighbors and peace.

For instance, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies conducted a study based on a [simulation](#) of a possible 'invasion' of Taiwan by the Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2026, to find that it would lead to heavy losses for the parties that would be involved: mainland China, the island of Taiwan and the US with its ally Japan.

In early January, the well-known US magazine Foreign Policy released a special issue with 12 essays by former CIA directors, US military commanders, a former NATO secretary general, a Trump administration minister and representatives of think tanks.

They think Ukraine's victory is imminent in the war that was started by Russia, and they put forward what they regard as some lessons to be learned from it. For some, the lesson is: 'we should definitely deter China by arming Taiwan much more.' Others are already speaking bluntly about the best way to wage war against China 'in defense of Taiwan'.

Just now, a top US general declared that a war for Taiwan could break out [in as soon as two years](#). Thinking back to Biden's words about the 'undermining the status quo' and 'unilateral and violently changing the status quo', it seems clear that it is precisely the US that is guilty of this, with contacts and visits that treat Taiwanese leaders as if they were official representatives of an independent state, with large-scale armaments and war propaganda.

**Yes, but surely you cannot get around the fact that China regularly deploys military force in the region; this was the case, for example, shortly after Parliament Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.**

As I said, China is aiming at a peaceful reunification. But it also wants past agreements to be respected. Every time the US and Taiwan go a step too far in their salami tactics to bring Taiwan's independence closer only stopping at declaring that independence by means of a resounding proclamation, the Chinese government will defend itself against the provocation with [symbolic exercises](#) to show that it does not intend to give up the military option.

During those exercises, the Chinese air force also crosses the boundary of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) declared by Taiwan. Of course, China does not recognize that air defense identification zone because such a thing can only be established by a recognized state. The imaginary border had not been until recently because China wanted to show its goodwill.

Still, as Washington and Taipei escalate their war preparations, Beijing will try its utmost not to fall into the trap of an arms race. However, China will never give up its aspiration to reunite Taiwan with the homeland and is making every effort to make that happen non-violently on the path towards the 'one country with two systems' model.

To this end, Beijing wants to resume the favorable development of economic relations, investment and trade between the mainland and the island, as well as reunions between relatives and other people-to-people contacts. A peaceful evolution that was interrupted by the election victories of the separatist DPP, which quickly emerged as an ally of the Trump and Biden governments with their new aggressive course.

### **Finally, do you think it could come to a war in Taiwan?**

I am not clairvoyant, but such a war should be avoided at all costs. The war in Ukraine, terrible as it is, will be child's play compared to what may await us in a war over Taiwan.

We should try to keep our cool and not be swayed by the war fever currently raging among much of the establishment in the US and Europe. The peace movement surely has its work cut out here.

*The interview was conducted by Marc Vandepitte*

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Note:

In the [3rd communiqué](#) of understandings between the US and China of 17/8/1982, paragraph 5 states that the US ..'does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or in quantitative terms, the level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, and that it intends gradually to reduce its sale of arms to Taiwan, leading, over a period of time, to a final resolution'..

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