



Sigur Center
for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Cross-Strait Relations in Pandemic Times

During the pandemic, China has been ratcheting up military pressure on Taiwan, leading to more cross-strait tension than ever and raising concerns about Taiwan's ability to defend itself. Against the unsettled backdrop of COVID, [the Sigur Center for Asian Studies held a roundtable of panelists](#) to discuss U.S. security support to Taiwan, cross-strait military balance, Taiwanese attitudes toward China, as well as how these issues are influenced by deteriorating U.S.-China relations and November election results.

In this *Asia Report*, we present the answers to these questions from leading experts, including Elbridge Colby, co-founder of The Marathon Initiative and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development, and Shelley Rigger, Brown Professor of Political Science at Davidson College.

Taiwan's Security and U.S. Policy

Elbridge Colby addressed the security challenges in Taiwan by illustrating the cross-strait military balance and explaining the considerations for U.S. assistance. Since the 2000s, China's military threat to Taiwan became increasingly elevated as the cross-strait military balance shifted dramatically toward China, changing the ability of the U.S. to confidently defend Taiwan. Colby warned that the growth in both scale and sophistication of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) cannot be underestimated and one should not discount the PLA's capabilities even though they have not taken part in joint combat operations in the last few decades.

At the current level of cross-strait imbalance, China has a number of options to subordinate Taiwan. Colby predicted that economic sanctions and military coercion are less likely due to the perceived ineffectiveness of these strategies. However, military invasion, which is the most dangerous option, has become increasingly probable. In addition to cross-strait unification being a top political priority for Beijing, the growing coalition surrounding China - for instance, the deepening security cooperation of the Quad - would also motivate China to use the invasion of Taiwan as a signal of strength and resolve.

In response to China's rising threat, the U.S. has elevated its support toward the security of Taiwan under the Trump administration, including the release of 2018 National Defense Strategy and the signaling of U.S. commitment to help Taiwan defend itself. Colby argued that the main security challenge for Taiwan is that its investment in defense has been lagging for years, whereas one goal of U.S. policy should be focusing on preparing Taiwan to defend itself against a Chinese attack; therefore, the Tsai Ing-wen administration's decision to increase Taiwan's defense spending is an encouraging policy change. With more resources, Taiwan would be able to procure vital defense systems, including coastal cruise missiles, sea mines, air defense systems, cyber resilience systems, and UAVs, thereby alleviating the cross-strait military imbalance.

In a worst case scenario, if a Chinese invasion were to occur, China will aim for a swift attempt to subordinate Taiwan. The main security goal for the U.S. and Taiwan should be to deny the PLA's ability to land and its ability to consolidate a hold on Taiwanese territory. However, even if the landing denial was successful, China would still have the option of coercion through economic blockade and military bombardment. Facing such a scenario, Taiwan needs to increase its defense resilience by stockpiling key supplies and diversifying its economic reliance on the mainland. Colby expects that Beijing would recognize the determination of the U.S. coming to Taiwan's defense in the event of an unprovoked attack, while he also noted that the broad support within the U.S. for defending Taiwan comes with the caveat of Taiwan not declaring its independence.

Politics in Taiwan and Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan's increasing effort to invest in defensive resilience is closely related to dramatic changes in public attitudes toward China. Shelley Rigger explained how changing domestic politics in Taiwan has been shaping cross-strait relations. In recent years, there was a significant shift in the attitudes of Taiwanese people toward a direction that undermined Beijing's political preferences but benefited Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and President Tsai Ing-wen.

The percentage of people in Taiwan identifying as Chinese has rapidly dwindled to almost none, whereas people identifying as both Taiwanese and Chinese fell from 40% to 30%. Meanwhile, there has been a 10% increase in people identifying as Taiwanese only, representing almost 70% of the population, whereas favorability toward China sank to a new low at about 35%. Although Taiwanese support for immediate independence remains well below majority, the support for status quo now and independence in the future has been rising. Meanwhile, partisan affiliation with DPP increased to about 33% despite Taiwan's historical tradition of not affiliating with either party. The DPP's decisive victory in the January 2020 election clearly demonstrated the consequences of recent changes in Taiwanese public attitudes. After her reelection, President Tsai's COVID response and her handling of cross-strait relations both contributed to her administration's high level of approval ratings throughout 2020.

Rigger offered two main explanations for the recent changes in Taiwanese public attitudes. First, the positive features of cross-strait relations have been deteriorating. Economic opportunities in mainland China has long been the main counterbalance to the negative aspects of cross-strait relations. However, Beijing's developmental policy of moving Chinese manufacturing up the value-chain - for example, deploying a vast amount of state resources to establish an indigenous semi-conductor industry - has generated pressure on Taiwanese companies and diminished the value of China's economic opportunity from the perspective of Taiwanese investors.

Second, the negative features of cross-strait relations have been accumulating in the last two years. Chinese policies that undermined democracy and freedom in Hong Kong, as well as the initial outbreak of COVID in China both confirmed and consolidated Taiwan's distrust toward mainland China. Moreover, the Taiwanese public sees the increasing level of military pressure from China as a sign of hostility. Compared to ten years ago, these negative and critical sentiments toward China are most prevalent among young people in Taiwan. Rigger concludes that the pressures from Beijing and the negative sentiments in Taiwan generated a negative feedback loop in recent years. Previous administrations in Taiwan were able to accommodate such feedback by seeking win-win opportunities with Beijing, but the acceleration of negative interaction in the last two years has made accommodation increasingly difficult.

Finally, Rigger suggested that the feedback between pressures from Beijing and negative sentiments in Taiwan also affected U.S.-Taiwan relations. Donald Trump's China policy is the main reason behind his 53% favorability in Taiwan, whereas President Tsai's lack of response to Secretary Pompeo's recent quote of "[Taiwan has](#)

[not been a part of China](#)” has led to some criticism within her own party. Rigger commended President Tsai for insisting that Taiwan should not take sides in the U.S. election, but also anticipated that Pompeo’s quote may be an immediate challenge for the incoming Biden administration because both the U.S. and China understand that the dramatic policy shift implied by the quote is unrealistic.

Prospects for Taiwan’s Defensive Resilience

Taiwan’s capacity to defend itself is not only about the investment of military hardware, but also the Taiwanese people’s willingness to fight against a potential military attack from the mainland. According to Rigger, there is some uncertainty as to the level of Taiwanese people’s motivation to take military action. She suggested that fatigue from decades of cross-strait tension, coupled with people’s confidence that the consequences for military attack is too high for China, are factors challenging the necessary preparation for Taiwan’s defensive resilience. In response, the Tsai administration has been coordinating a top-down effort to spread awareness among the people, especially on encouraging the younger generation to join the military. Social media has played a key role in this regard. Moreover, Rigger also points out that Taiwanese people are extraordinarily motivated to defend what they perceive as the slightest threat to their democratic system from across the strait.

Colby agreed that President Tsai’s effort has generated positive impact on Taiwan’s preparation for defense resilience and advised that Taiwanese people should have a better understanding of U.S. assistance to Taiwan’s security. For the U.S., defending Taiwan is not a binary decision, in that there is considerable discretion in how the U.S. could assist Taiwan. For instance, if China decides to initiate a blockade and the U.S. perceives that Taiwan is anemic in response, the U.S. will still try to help Taiwan defend itself, but will also be less inclined to put service members at risk for relieving the blockade. Taiwan’s defensive resilience, therefore, not only improves its own capability against a potential military threat, but also affects the willingness of the U.S. to provide assistance.

By Dennis Yuen Li, Ph.D. Candidate, The George Washington University and Graduate Research Assistant, Rising Powers Initiative.

About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies

The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia. RPI acknowledges support from the MacArthur Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York for its activities.

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers.

**Sigur Center
for Asian Studies**
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Sigur Center for Asian Studies
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
1957 E St. NW, Suite 503

TEL 202.994.5886
EMAIL gsigur@gwu.edu
<https://sigur.elliott.gwu.edu>
<http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org>