

Xi Jinping Under Pressure in Central Asia and Taiwan

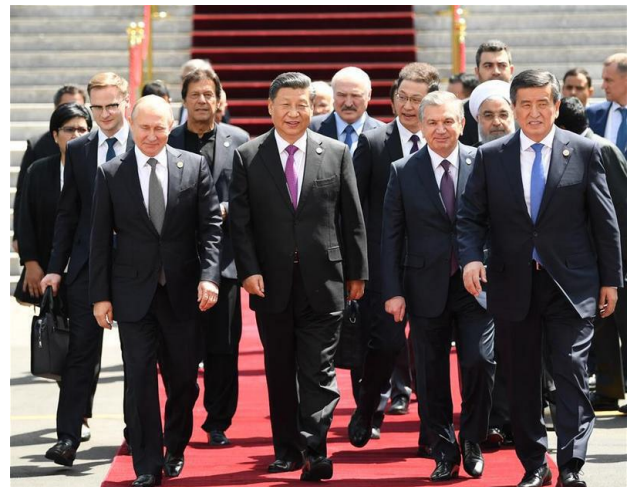
Mel Gurtov

Abstract: *In the course of his September Central Asia tour, Xi Jinping met with Vladimir Putin for what many expected would be a reprise of their “no limits” declaration, issued when Putin was in Beijing just prior to launching his war on Ukraine. In fact, there were major limits to Xi’s support of Putin’s war then, and that became even more evident this time around. Putin acknowledged as much. “We highly appreciate the balanced position of our Chinese friends in connection with the Ukrainian crisis,” Putin said. In plain English, Putin was expressing disappointment that China had failed to deliver as expected on their “friendship.” This article examines China’s position on Central Asia and Taiwan in a time of crisis.*

The Limits of “No Limits”

In the course of his Central Asia tour in September, Xi Jinping met with Vladimir Putin for what some analysts thought would be a reprise of their “no limits” declaration, which came out when Putin was in Beijing just prior to launching his war on Ukraine. In fact, there were major limits to Xi’s support of Putin’s war then, and that became even more evident this time around. Putin acknowledged as much. “We highly appreciate the balanced position of our Chinese friends in connection with the Ukrainian crisis,” Putin said. “We understand

your questions and concerns in this regard. During today’s meeting, of course, we will explain in detail our position on this issue, although we have spoken about this before.”



Caption: Xi Jinping with four Central Asian Leaders and Vladimir Putin. Image from [Xinhua](#).

In plain English, Putin was expressing disappointment that China had failed to deliver as expected on their “friendship.” Though officially backing Putin’s view of NATO aggression, and gladly buying up Russia’s cheap oil, Beijing has steered clear of US and European sanctions, refused to recognize Russia’s “people’s republics” in the Donbas region, and has not sent Russia any significant military assistance. The two countries recently

reaffirmed that they have a strategic partnership, but the Chinese know a bad investment when they see one. During his trip, Xi did not publicly mention Ukraine, and the Chinese press (so far as I can tell) put Putin to the side, instead highlighting Xi's brilliant statesmanship with the Central Asian leaders—a boost, perhaps, to approval of his third term as party leader. (At a separate meeting in Fujian Province, senior Chinese and Russian officials did agree, according to the Russian statement, to strengthen military cooperation, specifying “joint exercises and patrols.”)

While China may revel in all the attention it is getting in Central Asia, Taiwan must stick in Xi's craw following yet another provocation from Washington. Recall all the international speculation about Xi using the Ukraine crisis as the moment, and rationale, to “liberate” Taiwan. What has actually happened is that Beijing has *responded* to US actions that have elevated Taiwan's status and strategic importance to the US. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan was one such action; the bipartisan push in the US Senate for passage of the Taiwan Policy Act is another.

Undermining Taiwan's Security in the Name of Enhancing It

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, by a 17-5 vote, passed the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 (TPA).¹ The act, if it becomes law, would significantly expand the scope of US involvement in Taiwan's defense and promotion of its independent status. (See the details below.) The act supports the official US policy of “One China,” but shrinks its meaning, substituting what the committee majority considers “strategic clarity” for the longstanding US policy toward Taiwan of “strategic ambiguity,” a staple of US policy since the 1970s. The act's emphasis on substantial military aid to Taiwan in weapons

transfers, training, and grants, all in close coordination and with directions for US “whole-of-government” strategic planning to deter Beijing, has all the appearances of preparation for war.

Senate Liberals joined conservatives to push the act forward, another sign of how the bipartisan Congressional consensus on China has fully embraced a hostile relationship with Beijing. The consensus has led to numerous pieces of legislation, all with full administration support, that are driven by the downturn in US-China relations and the aim of ramping up geopolitical, economic and cultural pressure on China and decoupling cooperation. Among the examples are restrictions on Chinese investments in US technology firms, elimination of federal support to colleges and universities with ties to Confucius Institutes, the Indo-Pacific Engagement Act, the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, and the CHIPS and Science Act.

When it comes to the TPA, Democrats and Republicans are largely of one mind. Democrat and committee chair Bob Menendez of New Jersey said: “If we hope to have a credible deterrence ... we need to be clear-eyed about what we are facing.” He introduced the legislation alongside Sen. Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina. Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon added: “If we don't crank up our support for Taiwan, there will be a military offensive” against Taipei. Nevertheless, two prominent Republicans are among the five senators who voted against the TPA. Sen. Mitt Romney said: “We're doing something that's highly provocative and bellicose.” Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky was concerned that the US would be abandoning the One China policy.²

No one who favored the TPA gave much weight to how the Chinese might react to this legislation. They never paused to consider how adding to Taiwan's “deterrence” might be interpreted as hostile interference, how yet

more military aid to Taiwan—another \$6 billion, as noted below—would be considered provocative and lead to another round of live-fire exercises around Taiwan, and how upgrading Taiwan’s status through unrestricted visits by US officials and displays of Taiwan’s flag would be seen in Beijing as stepping over its red line: Taiwan’s independence. Misperceptions sometimes lead to war. The Senate committee’s top Republican, Sen. Jim Risch of Idaho, said the legislation “gives Xi Jinping reasons to think twice about invading Taiwan.” Yes, it does, but in the wrong way.

Let me clarify my position on Taiwan. With its 23 million people, its democratic system, and its first-class economy, Taiwan is very important. It is also the eighth-largest US trade partner, an important investor and job-producer in the US economy,³ and a world leader in advanced computer chips production. If China carried out an unprovoked attack on Taiwan, the US should certainly defend the island. In fact, Taiwan has been a major recipient of US military aid for decades, so much so that Taiwan has a *backlog* of \$14 billion in undelivered weapons. Now, under Biden, US arms support is exceptional, with stunning new weapons packages that the administration and Congress are pushing for approval this year.⁴ Those sales, a boon to Raytheon and other weapons makers, may be more than Taiwan can actually absorb, as the TPA’s emphasis on Taiwan’s need for improved military preparedness for various contingencies (including cyber warfare) suggests.

Defending Taiwan should be accomplished in ways that do not invite precisely the situation we want to avoid: an aggressive Chinese response. Yes, China has stepped up its own provocative actions against Taiwan, mainly to signal its concern about the independent direction Taiwan seems to be headed toward with US, and specifically the Biden administration’s, encouragement. Beijing has also published a new white paper on Taiwan

that substantially reduces the once-promised autonomy under the “One Country, Two Systems” unification policy.⁵ But Xi Jinping has made clear that Chinese policy remains peaceful unification, and so long as that is the case, strategic ambiguity coupled with US support of Taiwan’s political autonomy and defense self-sufficiency is the wisest policy course. In fact, polls in Taiwan consistently show that most people want President Tsai Ing-wen to maintain the current policy of rejecting both unification with China and Taiwan independence.

A Dark Future

The best thing that can be said about the TPA is that it is unlikely to pass. The Biden administration reportedly doesn’t like it, though in a “60 Minutes” interview on September 18 Biden once again said, contrary to standing policy, that US forces would defend Taiwan with troops if China attacked.⁶ Enough senators seem more cautious about making an advance commitment of that specificity and adding to the antagonism in US-China relations.

But that sentiment can change overnight, in Washington or in Beijing. All it takes is another provocative move by either side—a follow-up visit to Taiwan by a senior administration official, one too many transits through the Taiwan Strait by a US or Japanese warship (several have occurred since Pelosi’s trip⁷), a further expansion of Chinese military construction in the South China Sea islands. The danger here is not war by design or the crossing of a tripwire; rather, it is war by misperception and miscalculation. Taiwan is not Belgrade 1999 or Hainan 2001, where cooler heads prevailed to prevent a dicey situation from getting worse. It is a core Chinese interest, easily subject—as in the Chinese missile tests near Taiwan in 1996 and

the live fire exercises after Nancy Pelosi's visit—to sudden actions and reactions that are unpredictable and not necessarily controllable. Conflict management in the age of artificial intelligence can make a bad situation worse, and as a recent study shows, the US and Chinese militaries rely heavily on AI in crisis situations.⁸

([Military AI risks in U.S-China crisis management](#)).

Features of the TPA that Go Beyond Current US Policy on Taiwan

Below is some of the specific language in the TPA (in quotation marks) that stretches current US policy, in particular the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (TRA). The provisions of the TRA relevant to US security interests in Taiwan are the following:

- (4) to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States;
- (5) to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and
- (6) to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.

The TPA states:

- US national interests (*italics added*): “The security of Taiwan and the ability for the people of Taiwan to determine their own future are *fundamental to United States interests and values*.” “It is the policy of the United States . . . to *strenuously oppose* any action by the PRC to use force to change the status quo of Taiwan.”
- US commitment to defense of Taiwan: “reaffirms that Taiwan’s future must be determined peacefully and in accordance with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan.” Amends paragraph 6 of the TRA by adding “and to implement a strategy to deny and deter acts of coercion or aggression by the People’s Liberation Army.”
- Taiwan’s strategic value: It includes “limiting the PLA’s freedom of maneuver to engage in unconstrained power projection . . . in order to protect United States territory, such as Hawaii and Guam; (B) defending the territorial integrity of Indo-Pacific allies, such as Japan; deterring other countries and competitors from exercising force as a means to revise the established status quo; championing democratic institutions and societies in the Indo-Pacific region and throughout the world; and maintaining a rules-based international order.”
- Diplomacy with Taiwan: “engage with the democratically-elected government in Taiwan as the legitimate representative of the people of Taiwan; and end the outdated practice of referring to the government in Taiwan as the “Taiwan authorities”. “The United States Government shall not place any undue restrictions on the ability of officials of the Department of State or other Federal departments and agencies to interact directly and routinely with their counterparts in the government in Taiwan.”
- Symbolism: No restrictions shall be placed on Taiwan’s government or armed forces “to display, for official purposes, symbols of Republic of China sovereignty,” such as the flag.
- Military aid: Taiwan’s military needs will be prioritized; it will be treated as a “major non-NATO ally” such as Thailand, and as a partner in the Indo-Pacific

security strategy. \$2 billion in loans and \$5.5 billion in military aid (for fiscal years 2023-2027) are proposed. A “comprehensive training program” with Taiwan should be established to ensure interoperability with US forces, including “full-scale military exercises” among other activities.

- US government readiness (*italics added*): The President shall convene a “whole-of-government review of all available economic, diplomatic, and other strategic

measures to *deter the use of force* by the People’s Republic of China to change the status quo of Taiwan.” The secretary of state shall “announce, *in advance*, the severe consequences that would take effect immediately after the People’s Republic of China engaged in any such use of force.”

Mel Gurtov is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Portland State University and Senior Editor of *Asian Perspective*. His latest book, *Engaging China: Rebuilding Sino-American Relations*, will be published in October by Rowman & Littlefield. He blogs at *In the Human Interest: Critical Appraisals of Foreign Affairs and Politics from a Global-Citizen Perspective*.

Notes

¹ Text at foreign.senate.gov.

² [U.S.-Taiwan bill sails through Senate panel despite White House misgivings](#)

³ According to the US State Department’s Fact Sheet, “[U.S. Relations with Taiwan](#),” May 28, 2022, “Taiwanese cumulative investment in the United States was nearly \$137 billion in 2020. Taiwan’s direct investment in the United States is led by manufacturing, wholesale trade, and depository institutions. These investments directly support an estimated 21,000 jobs in the United States and \$1.5 billion in U.S. exports.”

⁴ Bryant Harris, “[U.S. Approves \\$1.1 Billion Taiwan Arms Sale](#),” *Defense News*, September 6, 2022. The rest of the arms package, values at roughly \$4.5 billion, is in the Taiwan Policy Act. Actual arms deliveries from the US to Taiwan came to just under \$900 million between 2017 and 2021, underscoring the significance of the backlog. [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute \(SIPRI\)](#), September 24, 2022.

⁵ [The white paper](#), published on August 10, 2022, removes previous assurances to Taiwan that, after unification, it could maintain its own political, administrative, and military system, and that China would not station troops in Taiwan.

⁶ [Biden again says US forces would defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression](#)

⁷ See, for example, [US and Canadian warships sail through Taiwan Strait after Biden vows to defend island](#).

⁸ Shuxian Luo, “[Addressing Military AI Risks in U.S.-China Crisis Management Mechanisms](#),” *China International Strategy Review*, September 2022.