

Critical Issues Confronting China Series featuring Bonnie Glaser – How Great is the Risk of War Over Taiwan?, September 29, 2021

– Welcome everyone. I'm Bill Overholt, Senior Fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School. This series on critical issues for contemporary China was founded by Ezra Vogel based on his conviction that Harvard has a responsibility to make the finest thinking on China available both to scholars and to the wider community. This is our first year without Ezra, whom we miss. We admire his vision and we try to emulate it. This Fairbank Center series has for seven years been one of the most popular lecture series at Harvard University. That mission now has become critical because the study of China, has become like the study of vaccines. Everybody who has done their own research on the internet is an expert with very strong opinions. The study of China is more complicated than the study of vaccines, because we have no stage three clinical trials that yield one objective result. There is more room for legitimate debate, as long as that debate is based on detailed, careful, objective balancing of the evidence. Our speaker today, Bonnie Glaser, embodies those standards of careful, detailed weighing of the evidence. Bonnie is Director of the Asia Program at the German Marshall Fund. Through last year, she was director of the ChinaPower program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a leading Washington think tank. Before that, she provided distinguished advice to the US government about China for many years. She has her Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Boston University and her Master's degree in International Economics and China Studies from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. The subject she's going to talk about, the risk of war over Taiwan, embodies that issue of difficult multifarious choices about conflicting evidence. We're delighted to have such a distinguished voice to kick off our new year of programs on critical issues for contemporary China, Bonnie over to you.

– Thank you so much, Bill, and thank you to the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies for hosting me. Well over a year ago, Ezra had invited me to give a talk and we were unable to find a time, and it is bittersweet to have been asked again to do this, but to know that Ezra of course is no longer with us and we all miss him greatly. He was a dear friend and such a leader in our field, but I appreciate this invitation to talk about the question of how great is the risk of war over Taiwan. In the past year, there's been more discussion about the possibility of war in the Taiwan Strait than I have seen at any time in the past 40 years, including during the 1996 Strait crisis. And many of us know that the former Commander of INDOPACOM, Admiral Phil Davidson, in testimony to Congress earlier this year said that the PRC could invade Taiwan within six years, which attracted quite a bit of attention. And I've spent countless hours in meetings just the last two days of the conference sponsored by the Hoover Institute a month before that, the Pacific Forum held another in-depth dive into the discussion of Taiwan and Cross-Strait stability and the risk of war.

There are many such examples. So what I thought that I would do today is not only give you my answer to the question of how great is the risk of war over Taiwan, but to try and summarize the arguments on both sides, because both sides make compelling arguments. I of course have my own views. If anybody has read my writings you know where I come down on this issue, and I'm happy to say so, but I will start at the outset presenting what I see as both sides of this argument. So I'm going to start with the argument for the risk is very high, of a war over Taiwan. Now I'm not going to attach a timeframe to it, whether it's within six years, but when we talk about the risk of war and the argument in favor of the risk being very high, really begins with analysis of the military balance and the situation from a defense perspective. And so the PLA has a window of opportunity. Over the past several decades, US military advantages have eroded. Certainly the military balance shifted away from Taiwan probably over a decade ago, if we just look at the PRC Taiwan balance. But today the US military is not able to intervene quickly or effectively to prevent a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The PLA has amassed capabilities to impose significant costs on the United States. It has developed a suite of anti-access area denial capabilities, and in recent years, China has made great strides toward acquiring the necessary lift and amphibious landing capabilities, which were not a priority until recently. Recent war games conducted by the Pentagon by RAND corporation and others. These are frequently cited and they show in almost all cases that a military clash between the United States and China over Taiwan would likely result in US defeat, with China completing an all out invasion in just days or weeks. China likely estimates that Taiwan would not aggressively defend itself, especially if the PLA can land on the beaches. Taiwan does not have, from China's perspective, a well-trained force. It doesn't have effective reserves. The population is seen as soft and likely to surrender. So China believes that it can present Taiwan with a fait accompli and that it might be able to achieve its objectives very quickly. The PLA is according to some sources telling Xi Jinping, that they are confident that they have the capability to regain Taiwan by force at an acceptable cost. The PLA now believes that it can achieve a quick victory before the US can even respond. And even if China faces a protracted war with the United States, the Chinese believe that they have advantages in that scenario. Their people are more willing to make sacrifices. Their large domestic market means China is less reliant on trade, and China can quickly transition to an industrial war time footer. Beijing also believes that the United States would be unwilling to pay a very high price. The Chinese often say that Taiwan is existential for them, but it is not vital to US national interests. Moreover, the US is seen as war weary and this conclusion could in fact be strengthened by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, as the United States is now not at war for the first time in 20 years. China likely calculates that the reaction of the international community to an attack on Taiwan would not be very strong. So it's one thing for countries to include language in joint statements like we have seen from the Japanese, the

Koreans, the G7 and the EU asserting that an interest in the preservation of cross-strait peace and stability is in these countries' interests, but it's completely different for countries to take actions, to actually punish Beijing for using force or get involved in the fight if there were one. So even if some countries were willing to implement economic sanctions, those would likely be short-lived as they were after Tiananmen in 1989. Or so that argument goes that China would be relatively unconcerned about a strong enduring reaction from the international community. Pressure, another reason why China might be willing to take this risk is that pressure is growing on Xi Jinping to resolve the Taiwan question. Many in the PLA argue that the longer China waits the harder it will be to take control of Taiwan. They see that the United States is on the verge of improving its military capabilities, implementing more advanced technologies into its capabilities, revising its force posture, and therefore see a window of opportunity to do so, but that that window would eventually close. As for public opinion, public opinion polls in China, to the extent that they are reliable, which we could all question, say that 70% of mainlanders strongly support using force to unify Taiwan with the mainland. And there are also voices that argue that the strategy of promoting cross-strait economic integration as a means to political unification has failed. Peaceful reunification is really not achievable, many say. One country, two systems is not viable. Hong Kong has certainly proven that it is not workable, people would say. Public opinion polls in Taiwan, of course, which China cites and follows closely, show that only a small percentage of the people in Taiwan support unification. Support for independence indeed is growing, fewer and fewer Taiwanese see themselves as Chinese, rather they see themselves as Taiwanese. Taiwan will never willingly return to the motherland, the argument goes and China must therefore seize the strategic opportunity or may indeed lose the chance to unify their country. Xi Jinping has fanned the flames of nationalism and permitted growing discussion of a forceful takeover of Taiwan to be discussed within the party. Protecting PRC sovereignty of course is a very high priority under Xi Jinping, he speaks about this publicly. So achieving this goal of actually reunifying the country is important to Xi Jinping because sovereignty issues and resolving them in Chinese favor are important to Xi Jinping and something that he would want to achieve while he is in office. We don't know how long that will be. I myself am fairly confident he will get another five years in 2022. But whether he remains in power after that, I think is still a question mark. Xi Jinping has insisted that cross-strait differences not be passed down from one generation to the next, and this suggests some degree of urgency. In 2017, Xi Jinping announced, quote, "complete national unification is an inevitable requirement for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." And in his January 2nd, 2019 speech, the only comprehensive speech Xi Jinping has given on Taiwan, he stated, "our country must be reunified and will surely be unified." And he reiterated that reunification is critical to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the new era. So this means that

Xi Jinping, from the perspective of those who would make this argument, has in fact set a deadline of 2049, that unification must be achieved by then. National rejuvenation is unachievable without unification. That's the implication. Moreover, again, Xi Jinping wants to reunify Taiwan as part of his legacy. Some people say that when Xi Jinping pushed for the removal of term limits for the presidency in China, that he pledged that he would reunify Taiwan with the mainland, if he were to be allowed to remain in power. Finally, a point about China's assessment of politics in Taiwan. We've just seen the KMT Chair election in Taiwan. Eric Chu is now the chosen KMT chair, and he is essentially returned to the agenda of, of Ma Ying-jeou. But regardless of the fact that the KMT might put forward a platform and series of policies that are very similar to Mao, many of which China liked, some of which they did not. Nevertheless, in this argument of the fact that China is more likely to use force, it can be said that Beijing has lost hope in the KMT. The KMT is fractured. It's lost the support of the youth in Taiwan. It remains divided over whether Taiwan should really adhere to the 1992 consensus and how that should be defined. So going forward, Beijing will no longer implicitly accept, as it has in the past, that each side of the Strait can have its own interpretation of One-China and permit Taiwan to call itself the Republic of China. There is really no party in Taiwan left that can gain support from the people that will push for unification. So that is my case for the fact that the risk of war over Taiwan remains high. And I'm sure that I have not been completely comprehensive. There are probably other things I've left out, but I want to leave sufficient time to make the case that the risk of war in the Taiwan Strait in fact is really quite low. So China's priority is to prevent Taiwan's independence. It is not to achieve unification. Unification has been a goal of all Chinese leaders, certainly since 1949, but as long as there is no danger of Taiwan, declaring independence and being supported by the international community, China can accept the uneasy status quo for a long time. There are only 15 countries left that recognize Taiwan. Most of them are really quite small. Few of us could find them on a map or indeed even pronounce them properly. The United States is taking greater actions to support Taiwan, certainly, but it isn't pushing for Taiwan's independence, and Beijing knows that. Those that argue that Xi Jinping will use military force to solve the problem once and for all, really don't understand the broader historical context of the China Taiwan dispute. And they overemphasize the defense and military elements of that dispute. For Beijing, Taiwan is first and foremost, a political problem leftover from the civil war. It is in Beijing's interest to achieve unification without bloodshed if possible. Of course, Xi Jinping won't give up the option of using force. This is something that any Chinese leader has always had on the table, and it is included in the 2005 anti-secession law, but Xi Jinping will only resort to force as a last option after he has given up all other possibilities. PRC strategy, I would argue, is aimed at inducing a sense of despair among the Taiwanese people so that they eventually conclude that their only viable future is to join

the mainland. China wants to win without fighting. So there is a core psychological element to PRC strategy. Perhaps Xi Jinping has signaled impatience to achieve reunification, but I don't think he's really conveyed urgency. His call for not passing differences down from one generation to the next, really wasn't communicated as a threat. Xi Jinping first used this formulation in a conversation with former Taiwanese premier Vincent Siew, at an October, 2013 meeting on the margins of APEC. And what he said was quote, "the long standing political differences between the two sides must eventually be resolved step-by-step and not passed down from generation to generation." And this is what he reiterated in January of 2019, but Xi Jinping also talked about the people on both sides of the Strait as part of the same family. He raised unification in the context of cultural and historical affinity, of the people on both sides of the Strait, as part of the Chinese nation. But we really have to carefully parse Xi Jinping's statements about Taiwan and compare them to prior leaders. Xi Jinping has said very little about Taiwan, in his now almost 10 years in power, almost nine, we have another year to go. So what is new? What has he not said? So it was very notable that Xi Jinping did not tie reunification to national rejuvenation in the 100th CCP anniversary speech this past July. And I think that was an obvious opportunity for him to make that statement. So what he said was we will uphold the One-China principle and the 1992 consensus and advance peaceful national unification. On that occasion, he didn't have to underscore that China is still committed to peaceful unification. He could have just said, we want to advance national reunification, but he added the term peaceful, and I think that's significant. Statements like reunification is inevitable and no one should underestimate the resolve, the will and the ability of the Chinese people to defend their national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Those statements have been said by prior Chinese leaders. This is not a new statement by Xi Jinping. And importantly, Xi Jinping has not given up on economic integration playing a role in promoting reunification. So I don't think he has actually accepted the assessment that China's current approach has already failed and therefore China should use force. So for example, Xi Jinping visited Fujian province this past spring, but he didn't visit a frontline PLA unit. He visited a PAP unit, a People's Armed Police unit. And Xinhua reported him as saying that he called on local Fujian officials to quote, "be bold in exploring new paths for integrated Cross-Strait development." So no, Xi Jinping has not given up on peaceful unification. Now that said, he's certainly using more coercive tools, military, diplomatic, and economic. And we can talk more about that. So there really isn't a trend of ever tougher statements by Xi Jinping about Taiwan, nor is there a pattern of signaling urgency. When Chen Shui-bian was president, he was pushing for independence, there was such a pattern. PRC officials said at the time that the Cross-Strait situation was entering a period of high danger, and we have not heard that language today. In his speech on January 2nd, 2019, Xi Jinping reaffirmed the policy of peaceful development across the Taiwan

Strait. So for those who follow Chinese foreign policy closely, this is what is basically called a policy guideline. It was set under Hu Jintao, and with all the changes that Xi Jinping has made in Chinese policies, both foreign and domestic, including abandoning "tao guang yang hui," the hide and bide policy, or keep a low profile policy, that Deng Xiaoping announced, it's significant that Xi Jinping has not changed the policy guideline of peaceful development across the Strait. So Xi Jinping may eventually set a deadline for unification, but so far he has not. He has only loosely linked reunification with national rejuvenation. He could change that formulation anytime. Let's remember, Jiang Zemin first discussed the period of strategic opportunity at the beginning of the century, he said it would last for the first two decades. And then Xi Jinping came to power. He dropped the end date altogether, and then of course what happens in 2049, you can argue is not going to happen under Xi Jinping's watch at least according to actuarial tables. Xi Jinping would be 96 years old in 2049, probably not likely to be alive and certainly not in power. So I think Xi Jinping is more concerned about achieving the goals he has set for 2035 for the coming decade. And those are very much domestic and they focus on things like becoming a leader in high-technology, which I think is critically important for the rest of Xi Jinping's agenda. In fact, taking Taiwan by force eventually, it could in fact lead to a derailing of that agenda. So if Xi Jinping thinks about the risks of using force, he might conclude that attempting to take Taiwan by force could set back the fulfillment of his other goals, including his precious, China dream. The PLA could get bogged down in a long war, both with the United States and in Taiwan. Its Navy could be destroyed. The PLA could suffer many thousands of deaths of the children of the generation of one child families, which could lead to a negative backlash from the people. A prolonged insurgency on Taiwan, which cannot be ruled out, would distract Chinese resources and attention away from other national goals. The PLA could fail in its effort to seize Taiwan. I don't think that the PLA today has 100% confidence that it can achieve its goal of seizing and controlling Taiwan. Many experts doubt that the PLA has that capability of crossing 100 miles of water and sustaining a fleet off of Taiwan's beaches, long enough to prevail, is not assured. And US war games in which China is said to have defeated the United States, many times are really not good indicators of the outcome of such a conflict. War games are designed to stress US war fighting capabilities. They assume that the adversary in this case, China, encounters very few challenges. They're skewed in favor of the adversary in order for the US military to improve and figure out where its weaknesses might be so that they can address them. If the PLA fails, the CCP's legitimacy will certainly be damaged. Xi Jinping has told the Chinese people that the military has the ability to defend the country's interests. What if it doesn't? Will Xi Jinping risk regime security to reunify Taiwan with the motherland? And so I think the answer to that is no. And would the international community really shrug off a Chinese use of force against Taiwan and conclude that the PRC would not be emboldened

to use force against others? Probably not. Instead, an invasion of Taiwan might catalyze the formation of an anti-China coalition. And that trend, in fact, I would argue, is in some ways already underway. So many countries willing to voice that they have a vested interest in the preservation of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, should be seen as a potential indicator of what other countries might do. So that is my argument as to why the risk of force is low. And I think I'll just spend maybe five minutes making a few, maybe provocative comments about US policy, because the United States plays a very significant role in determining whether or not there will be a war in the Taiwan Strait, and effective US policy could make that conflict less likely. And a US policy that is not careful, perhaps one that maybe signals that the US would not intervene or maybe pushes Xi Jinping into a corner. Those kinds of policies might end up provoking or leading to a conflict that the United States seeks to avoid. So it's very important that the United States pursue an effective policy. I would argue that under President Trump, there were some steps taken to strengthen ties with Taiwan that were important in signaling the PRC, that Taiwan's security is important to the United States. But there were times I think that the Trump administration used Taiwan as a weapon against China, which I think undermined our credibility and our interest. And there were times that it appeared that the Trump administration might indeed be walking away from the One-China policy. And if that were to occur, then that indeed I think could lead to Xi Jinping being forced to use military force, even though he might otherwise not wish to do so. So just a few things about the Biden administration's policy. I think it's aimed at reducing the risk of war in the Taiwan Strait. That is indeed one of US top national objectives regarding Taiwan and the Cross-Strait relationship. But it's also aimed at strengthening ties with Taiwan, not just to deter a Chinese attack, but because the administration believes that Taiwan is an important partner, that it has a great deal to contribute to the rest of the world, and that Taiwan has a right to have a voice. Also its role in IT supply chains like semiconductors are seen as extremely important, not just to the United States, but to many other countries. So Biden administration strategy includes what Richard Bush has called dual deterrence, but also dual reassurance. The US at times though, still lacks what I would call coherence, and at times that has detracted from its effectiveness. And I could cite some examples of that if you'd like to get into that, but I'll just simply quickly explain what I mean by dual deterrence and dual reassurance. So the United States is reaffirmed strategic ambiguity. It is not giving Taiwan an unconditional defense commitment that it's an ironclad Article 5 type guarantee that it would come to Taiwan's defense under all circumstances. We've heard Kurt Campbell say that there are downside risks to strategic clarity. So they recognize that there are risks in doing so. So that is, I think providing some reassurance to Beijing. It continues to warn Beijing against use of force. So that is certainly strengthening deterrence. Secretary Blinken has stated it would be a serious mistake if either side were to unilaterally change

the status quo through use of force, and that is obviously aimed at Beijing, not at Taipei. So not the statement of strategic clarity, but clearly warning against any use of military means to resolve differences across the Strait. Other things that the United States has done to bolster deterrence. Militarily, this is ongoing increased US military operations in the region and force posture changes that are forthcoming. On the diplomatic side, again, strengthening deterrence, internationalizing the Cross-Strait problem, persuading other countries to assert their interest in the preservation of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. There's also reassurance both to Taipei and to Beijing. So there's the invitation to Taiwan's ambassador, the representative in the United States, Bi-Kihm Hsiao, to attend the Biden Harris inaugural, was an example I think of reassurance to Taipei. The new contact guidance allows more and higher level contacts, including between US heads of mission abroad and their Taiwanese counterparts. There's public announcements on a monthly basis of Taiwan Strait transit. We've resumed TIFA talks, trade and investment talks with Taiwan, and we've expanded the areas of US Taiwan cooperation under the Trump administration and also under the Biden administration. So these are all elements, I think, to reassure Taiwan, we are not abandoning them. Reassurance to Beijing is also important. So in addition to saying that we are sticking with strategic ambiguity, which signals that we're not going to support Taiwan independence, if they were to articulate independence, we are not going to support them. We've also reaffirmed under the Biden administration that the United States does not support Taiwan independence. And that is an important statement. We continuously reaffirm our One-China policy. We have done so at every meeting, including in Anchorage and Tianjin and on the president's phone call that took place a few weeks ago. The United States has also shown some restraint. So there was a tweet, for example, with an ROC flag, when a US official met with a Taiwanese official, it was a mistake. It was actually tweeted from a US official's, Twitter feed. It should not have been done. It was pulled down. And I think that was an interesting signal to Beijing. Joseph Wu, Taiwan's foreign minister just visited the United States. It was reported in the "Financial Times" that he was here for the special channel talks. He was not permitted to come to DC, the talks took place elsewhere, yet another signal of at least some restraint in US policy. We haven't lifted all of the restrictions. We are not treating Taiwan as a diplomatic ally or indeed treating them the same as we treat sovereign nations around the world. And finally, to address a question that might come up, although there's been discussion of allowing TECRO to get an approval to change its name from Taipei to Taiwan, the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Representative Office in Washington, DC, I think that's unlikely to happen. And that again is a signal of reassurance to Beijing, that there are limits to what the United States will do. So I could say more about US policy, but I did want to just at least summarize a few points to provide some context and state that that also has an impact on whether or not there's likely to be war in the



Taiwan Strait. So I've asked our hosts to actually put up a little polling question and see what all of you think about the risk of war in the Taiwan Strait. So if you're able to do that, we have a poll question. You only get to choose, is it high, or is it low? I know I should ask a timeframe, but I'm not gonna say within the next five years or 20 years, but I'd like to, if people can vote and let me know your own views. Do you think that the risk of war over Taiwan is high? Or do you think that it is low? So maybe we'll just give people a minute or two to answer that question. And then I hope you'll submit your questions using the Q&A feature. I think we already have a bunch of them, which Bill is gonna get to pick and choose which ones he wants to fire at me. So do we have polling results?

- [Man] Yes. Cool. What is it? Oh, wow. Okay. Low 63% and high 37%. Good number. Well, I'm glad to see that. Let me just close by saying, this is really an important discussion. It is an important debate. I think we have to include not just a focus on the defense elements, which are extremely important, but this should be a conversation where, regionalists, China experts and the defense community come together and continue to talk about this, because this is a critical challenge going forward. We must maintain deterrence in the Taiwan Strait, and we have to talk about not only whether the risk is high or low, but really what policy actions should be taken to ensure that that very catastrophic war does not occur. Over to you Bill.

- Well, thanks so much Bonnie. That was a masterpiece of careful presentation of the evidence, in a very clear way that gave people in the audience a chance to weigh their own views. Let me take the prerogative of the Chair and ask a couple questions. I thought one of the most important things you said, was that our own debate, tends to overemphasize the military and to, understate or ignore the fact that this is predominantly a political issue. Let me push you a little bit on some of the military questions. There have been drastic, serious Chinese Air Force overflights of Taiwan. And these are pretty universally interpreted by our press as, indications of Chinese aggressiveness under Xi Jinping, on the other hand, people like Jessica Matthews in "The New York Review of Books" said, well, these have typically come, right after the US has done something diplomatically that China sees as a provocation. How do you see that?

- So I'd start by saying Bill, that it is important to understand where the PLA is currently flying its military aircraft. They are inside of the Air Defense Identification Zone that Taiwan has, which actually extends over part of the mainland. They're not flying over Taiwan. They are not even flying within Taiwan's territorial airspace, within 12 nautical miles of its shore. "Global Times" has threatened to overfly Taiwan, but that's "Global Times." It's not what I consider to be at least the most authoritative of Chinese media sources. And it would be significant if a PLA nuclear capable bomber, overflowed Taiwan. So we have not seen that. So I think that that's important. This is

international airspace by the way, in the Strait. So it's outside of that 12 nautical miles. But when I've talked to PLA and retired PLA officers about this question, recently in fact, what I've heard is that there are times where China on short notice arranges a large number of fighters and bombers and other aircraft to fly in Taiwan's airspace or in the ADIZ, excuse me, or circumnavigate Taiwan, that does happen on occasion. But there are also some of these actions that take place that are not intended to send warning signals to Taiwan or the United States. Indeed, a growing number of them are part of PLA air force training missions that are part of annual plans. So March 31st, 2019 was the first time that a PLA air force plane crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait in 20 years. Not every one of these incursions is going right across that center line, by the way. And you can go on the MND website in Taiwan, and you can see all the information on a daily basis. How many aircraft? Look at the map where the incursion took place. They used to have actually photos of all the aircraft, but I think they're not doing that any longer. And so you can see what's going on, and you can also ask yourself when there's 30 aircraft or something... are they punishing Taiwan? It's just, sometimes you should scratch your head. You're like what's happened within the last week that Taiwan or the US has done? And the answer probably is that was just a military exercise.

- Thank you. One other military related question. In World War II, after MacArthur took back the Philippines, a lot of people expected that next he would go to the Taiwan and then to Japan, and MacArthur said, no, Taiwan's too tough, too difficult. We're just gonna jump over and attack Japan directly. On the other hand, Taiwan's defense budgets have been rather modest, and they don't seem to be mobilizing for the kind of, protracted, guerrilla warfare that would make Taiwan, the tough target that MacArthur talked about. Indeed, some analysts have said, the Taiwanese have just turned over defense to the US, which now is relatively weaker than it used to be. So is Taiwan undermining deterrence by the way they make themselves completely dependent on the US?

- Well, I don't accept the premise that Taiwan makes itself completely dependent on the US, but I will certainly agree that Taiwan is not doing enough in its own defense. The defense budget is absolutely a problem. All Taiwan leaders have said that they would spend 3% of GDP on defense. They are just about 2% now. In the last two years, President Tsai Ing-wen has increased the defense budget, but they also approved, I think just a week ago, a special budget for weapons procurement. Sometimes they approve special budgets, and then they're not actually spent, they go back into their funds and get spent on other things. But there there's many layers of problems here, Bill, which I think, really need to be understood. One is that Taiwan as a democracy that has faced this threat for so long, they become a little bit inert of what the threat is that they really face. The leaders in Taiwan don't really want to talk very much about that threat. That is

changing a bit, under President Tsai, she's opened up the military installations, encouraged people to actually visit them. Before they were just completely closed, and leaders really never talked about the possibility of an attack. So she's trying to raise awareness, but they're still not... Getting rid of conscription I think is an example of something that, it's given up a tool that can be used to forge national unity and increase awareness of the threat and commitment to defending the country. There is no homeland defense or territorial defense project underway in Taiwan, such as exists in places like Finland and Sweden and the Baltic states, which I think would not be terribly expensive for Taiwan to undertake. But then the leadership has to tell their people, there's this huge risk of war, and you need to do your part. I think it's important because it would signal, both to the United States and to the PRC, that Taiwan has the determination to defend itself. Democracy has really prevented Taiwan from spending more money on defense. Ever since Taiwan has really become a full-fledged democracy in the late nineties, we've really seen this unwillingness to take away these precious dollars from social purposes and put them toward defense, the public doesn't support it. And so I think this is certainly, a problem that they face. So to me, there's many layers of this. They are acquiring more asymmetric capabilities, but not all of the things, the weapons that they're acquiring, are asymmetric capabilities. They're spending too much money on very large and shiny objects like the heaviest tank in the world, the Abrams tank, that they purchased from the United States, which I don't think was really well-suited to Taiwan's geography, although I understand how they explained that they would use it to prevent the PLA from landing on the beaches. So there's so much more that Taiwan can do, but I don't think that they've outsourced their defense entirely to the United States. In fact, in my conversations with people from Taiwan's military, they have insisted to me that in their development of what was the overall defense concept, which I'm not really sure still exists, that that was developed with the assumption in mind that the US would arrive either very, very late or not at all.

- Thanks very much. We have a question from Bill Bakalis, who authors one of the leading newsletters on China. He says, have we not consistently underestimated, Xi's growing readiness, even eagerness to take strong actions to demonstrate to his people and the world, that China is now strong enough to defy Western critics and act as it wishes, the crackdown on Hong Kong, the release of the two Michaels within moments of Meng Wanzhou, abandoning any pretense that they weren't being held as hostages. Are you making the same error, vis-a-vis Taiwan?

- I don't think so. I think that Xi Jinping has a cost benefit calculus, and we can disagree on what that calculus is, and how it applies to Taiwan. There are some implications of Hong Kong for Taiwan, but I think we have to be careful to not really over play this analogy. Hong Kong returned to Chinese control. Hong Kong could be

controlled through law. The Chinese didn't have to use its military in order to exert control over Hong Kong. They already essentially controlled how Hong Kong was ruled. And it was very easy for them to use law, and other means that are not non-peaceful means, with the exception of police actions, in what they claimed was, response to actions by protesters, to gain control over Hong Kong. The National People's Congress can pass laws on how they are going to control Taiwan, but they can't implement it. So they can't control Taiwan through law. Ultimately, if they cannot entice Taiwan peacefully, they have to do it through force. And I'm surprised at this interpretation, which I've seen everywhere, about the two Michaels. Surely this was part of the deal, whether anybody wants to admit it or not, there was no way that Meng Wanzhou was going to be released without the certainty that the two Michaels were going to be released. If you read the media in China, you will certainly not see much attention paid to this issue of the two Michaels, but it was said that they admitted guilt. They were released on bail for humanitarian reasons. And nobody in China really cares about the two Michaels, right? It's all about welcoming Meng Wanzhou back. So this is just for the international community. So it doesn't surprise me that China abandon pretense that they were held as hostages. I would argue they did that earlier. We had statements by Chinese officials that ultimately admitted they were taken in order to get leverage over the US and Canada over Meng Wanzhou. So I do think people have underestimated Xi Jinping's willingness to tolerate risk. That is true. But I think that we do have to fully understand all of his risk benefit calculus. This is really where I disagree with some people. Oriana Mastro, in her terrific piece in "Foreign Affairs." She's a good friend of mine and so we've had lots of discussions dissecting where we agree, where we disagree, why we disagree. And it is primarily over this issue of the risk benefit calculus that Xi Jinping has. So I think yes, people are continuing to underestimate what Xi Jinping will do, but I don't think I am in this case.

- Following a same general theme. Paul Heer, former DIA Analyst of these things, now at the Center for the National Interest says, press reports claim that Xi Jinping, in his recent letter to Eric Chu, referred to the Cross-Strait situation as complex and grim. How do you assess that apparent quote? What are the implications of quote, grim, unquote?

- So actually Paul that's reassuring to me, it fits in the analysis that I gave earlier. It is a description that China has used for years. It's nothing new. So if we go back and look at, I don't remember exactly how many months after, Tsai Ing-wen came to power, but at some point, after the Chinese... First, they gave her an unfinished grading sheet and said, the jury was out. Her exam wasn't finished. They would give her an opportunity to do a better job. In other words, to accept the 1992 consensus, and she didn't do so. And so after a period of time, they called it complex and grim. I'll be

more worried when they use much different language and a more urgent language. So to me, complex and grim, are not the worst descriptors that they could use, and it doesn't lead me to be more concerned.

- Yun Chung asks, how confident are we about the DPP and its allies' discretion about the independence movement, especially among young voters? Are they really willing to maintain the status quo without pushing for formal independence? I might add that several other participants asked essentially the same question.

- Well, this is an important question. Actually, we should address this from the perspective of, maybe two areas of inquiry. One is about young voters and what the people of Taiwan want. And then the other piece of it is really about the party itself and who is likely to be a candidate in the future, in 2024, and even beyond that in 2028. I think that most voters in Taiwan, the polls continue to show, do not want to put at risk what they have, their democracy, their freedoms, their standard of living, in order to make this bid for de jure independence, which carries great risk. And I think that most voters really know that. So it's always interesting if you look at the annual polling that's done in Taiwan, which has been taking place for decades and ask the question, do you want independence immediately? Or do you want independence in the future and preserve the status quo for now? So it doesn't define how long that period will be, but that ultimately Taiwan should pursue independence. So the numbers of people, or percentage of people who support independence now still remains really, pretty small, but the numbers of people who want independence eventually, is really what's growing. And so that just represents to me, most people understand that there are risks in doing so. If you ask them the question, which we've seen in different polls, would you want independence if there were no costs, if you could guarantee that the PRC would not use force against Taiwan, then yes, much higher numbers will say yes. But I'm really more interested in the other part of this question, and that's the DPP itself and who is likely to run and what their positions are likely to be. They might actually justify, try to push for Taiwan independence based on the polls and support from the people. So those factors can be connected, but I think that we are not going to see another candidate from the DPP that resembles Tsai Ing-wen. Tsai Ing-wen has great international experience, headed up the WTO negotiations for Taiwan. She headed the Mainland Affairs Council. She has lived abroad. She really understands the international situation, I believe. And she is prudent and cautious. Indeed, there was one former senior person in the DPP who I had a conversation with a few years ago about Tsai Ing-wen, and asked him to sort of critique her. And one of the things he said to me was, she's very, very deliberate. She always wants to hear all sides, all points of view, and sometimes she will want to hear them again and again, and sometimes it takes so long for her to make a decision that the whole situation has changed. We have to start all over again. So that person was airing frustration about an overly prudent and

cautious President, that Tsai Ing-wen maybe perhaps is, I'm not confirming that, but this was just his perspective. So I worry that we could get a candidate that has in the past actually endorsed independence and might try to push for Taiwan independence. And that's one of the reasons why I think that a US president has to preserve flexibility and why we should not endorse strategic clarity. And I would just note that Richard Haass, who has advocated for adopting strategic clarity or giving Taiwan an ironclad commitment of defense, just gave a speech the other day at the Hoover Institution. And he's actually revised some of his opinions. And on this particular point, he said, we should not give Taiwan a blank check. So that seems to be a bit of a change from some of the views that he had articulated in that "Foreign Affairs" article. And I'm glad that he shares that view because I do think that the United States should not give Taiwan a blank check, and we should not assume that what we see as Taiwan's policies today, will continue for the indefinite future.

- Thanks, William Hsiao of Harvard School of Public Health asks a big, complex question. How does US domestic politics affect the US positions on Taiwan?

- It is an important question. And especially, really, I think the role of Congress, the role of Congress just cannot be underestimated in our policy toward Taiwan. It was so important in 1979 and the creation of the TRA and it just remains important today. It's one of the few bipartisan policies we probably have in the Congress. And outside Congress, among the American public. I don't think there's really a significant difference between Democrats and Republicans. Across the board, there's actually growing support for Taiwan. At times, I do think that maybe some that are in Congress tried to use this issue to say that, the president, if he's from a different party, or he or she, that they're soft on Taiwan and use this to put pressure on them. But I don't think that we see this happen really that frequently. At the end of the day, there's so much bipartisanship on Taiwan. Sometimes Congress is pushing for things that might be potentially dangerous, calling for maybe US Navy ships to make port calls in Taiwan was an example. This was in our NDAA, I think in 2017. It was ultimately a sense of Congress provision in the NDAA, but it really aroused very strong reactions from China, whether at the end of the day, what they would have done, if that had taken place is a totally different question, but they presented it to many people in the United States as a red line. It probably itself would have been more symbolic because it wouldn't have done anything to enhance the capabilities of Taiwan's military or increased our ability to come to Taiwan's defense. But showing the flag in a port, perhaps some would say, could have strengthened deterrence and other others might've said it would have undermined deterrence. So that's an example where maybe, the Congress might push for something that could end up being accepted by the president for domestic political reasons, or if he has to pass the NDAA and Congress insists on it, so he could decide not to execute

it in any case, but let's say he felt that he had to. But for the most part, I don't think politics is that significant in our policy toward Taiwan. It is far more significant in our policy toward China.

- Nara Dillon from Harvard asks, how do you think Taiwan's leadership can counter the PRC strategy of inducing despair? I take it that refers to your comment that China thinks that over the long run, it will just overshadow Taiwan to the extent that Taiwan will give up.

- And I think that's really an important question for Taiwan's government and Taiwan's leadership, and they have taken some action. So if we look at how Taiwan has dealt with disinformation, for example, we see that civil society, as well as Taiwan's government, has come up with some really creative and effective solutions to informing people in Taiwan if there's something on social media that is not true. And sometimes this requires almost instant response, within a very short period of time, because otherwise it could really lead to a serious misunderstanding within the Taiwan public, if it's saying that there's going to be an attack or something like that. But there have been moments where there has been some pressure to respond quickly and they have done so. And so they have fact checkers. They have Audrey Tang who is in charge of social media. I forget what her exact title is, but she has dealt very effectively with disinformation. She believes the wrong thing to do is to take it down because then it looks like you're hiding information. Leave up this wrong information and then you put up something that corrects it and maybe does it in a humorous way, because she likes to use humor to respond to that kind of disinformation. So I think she's been really effective. So that's an example of something. The government has to show that it has a good capability to defend against cyber threats. This is very, very serious. They have publicly announced how many cyber attacks they get per day, and what percentage of those come from China. So this is a serious threat. They certainly need to do more in that regard, but they've obviously taken steps. And they have to, I think, demonstrate that they can defend themselves. This is one of the reasons why I was disappointed that Taiwan got rid of conscription. And I understand why they did that. And there is a historical context here, but those that come into the military today, because conscription exists now for just four months, you can't even call it conscription. They're still shifting to this all volunteer force. They're not doing enough, I think, to attract good recruits. So again, they've improved in that regard. But at the end of the day, it would be great, if it was a situation like they have in Estonia. You know where to go if there's a crisis, where you get your gun or your stinger missile. You have medical training. You can contribute. So you don't just go in your basement and hide. You understand that you have a responsibility to defend your country and civil society can do a great deal in that regard. There's somebody I know named Enoch Wu, who is single-handedly pushing this in Taiwan, trying to provide this kind of education about what territorial defense means and how individuals

can contribute. So I think if you believe that there's something you can do to defend your country, you're less likely to give in to this despair and psychological pressure that comes from China.

- Thank you, an anonymous attendee asks, what are the implications for the Taiwan question of US loss in Afghanistan and strategic mistakes in the Middle East?

- Well, China lost no time telling Taiwan that the US was not going to come to its defense and that the withdrawal from Afghanistan was evidence of that. But there's been, I think, a number of articles that have outlined, I think, in a very compelling way, why this is not true. Taiwan, of course we had a mutual defense treaty, we continue to have very close relationship with Taiwan. We have enduring national security interests in Taiwan as a democracy, the more competitive and tense our relationship gets with China, in fact, the more important Taiwan has become. Taiwan is, as I mentioned earlier, its importance in semiconductor supply chains. It stands as the only Chinese democracy in the world. George Bush called Taiwan a beacon of democracy, and I believe that that's true. It stands as an example that ethnic Chinese can in fact implement their own democracy in an effective way. I know that the PRC likes to say that Taiwan doesn't implement effective governance, but I think that the facts belie that claim. So, Afghanistan is not a US ally. We went there to kill Bin Laden and to eradicate terrorism. And we were there, even though Afghanistan was not a democracy, probably had no hopes of becoming a democracy, we stayed there for 20 years. We actually spent over a trillion dollars and lost well over 2000 of our own people. I mean, what would we do for Taiwan? Would we do less? Now I would argue that the Chinese should conclude that we are willing to sacrifice blood and treasure for our interests, and that Taiwan is a far, far greater interest in fact, to the United States than Afghanistan is. So I don't see that the United States is war weary and we will never step in to defend Taiwan. I would also note, even though I don't always put a lot of stock in public opinion polls, but if we do look at the Chicago Council, public opinion poll, I think it was several months ago. They've asked this question about Taiwan and whether or not the United States should come to Taiwan's defense if attacked. I don't remember the exact number, but it's significantly higher than it has been for some time. So I think it's now over 50%, a majority of Americans would say yes. Now were they asked, at the cost of whatever that might be, a war with China or some other great consequence, for the United States? No, the wording of the question of course matters in any poll. Nonetheless, I think that Taiwan's demonstration of its effective handling of COVID-19 far better than most places around the world, its contributions to the world in terms of humanitarian assistance, as well as providing assistance for countries that are suffering from COVID-19 in the form of PPE and other things. There's so much that that Taiwan brings to the world. It seems to me that Americans are becoming actually more aware of Taiwan and what it can contribute to



the international community. So I'm actually more hopeful about this trend and I don't think that the Chinese really believe that US withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan makes it any less likely that we would come to Taiwan's defense, but it's good disinformation.

- We technically have one more minute left. We have a long list of great questions.

- Sorry.

- Let me give you Ira Kasoff's question, can China achieve its objective by ramping up economic pressure on Taiwan? For instance, an economic embargo, even a physical embargo, short of a full military invasion.

- Well, first I would say the PRC pressure on Taiwan in the economic sphere has been very limited. It started with strictly limiting tourists from China who could go to Taiwan, that began very early in Tsai Ing-wen's tenure. Then we saw the pineapple ban, that was a slap on the wrist, surely China knew that wasn't gonna have much consequence, but that led to people like, Prime Minister Abe and Secretary of State Pompeo and others showing that they eat Taiwanese pineapple, so signaling support. And recently we've seen some apples that have now been said to be infested with fleas or something, that they're now boycotting from Taiwan. China has tremendous economic leverage over Taiwan if they want to use it, but they're gonna hurt themselves. They're very dependent on Taiwan, particularly of course, for semiconductors, but also some other things. So I think that China is reluctant to use... Sorry, one second. I think that China is reluctant to use economic pressure on Taiwan, because it will further alienate the Taiwanese, right? It will not draw them toward wanting to unify with China. Indeed, if they start using real economic pressure on Taiwan, I would say it might be a signal that they've given up on unification. So I would find that very worse. If we think about a blockade, this is one of the most challenging scenarios for the United States because China has the capability, I think, to impose a blockade on Taiwan and Taiwan is very reliant on imports, in a number of categories. How willing are the people to withstand the shortage of goods that would result very quickly? So that's something that I think we need to spend far more time thinking about and how we would respond to that kind of scenario. Some people say China is more likely to implement a blockade, others say, China is more likely to just want to make it a short, sharp, quick invasion and get it over with before the US can ever get there. So I think both of those scenarios are challenging and worth thinking through.

- Thank you so much, Bonnie. The director of the Fairbank Center, Mike Szonyi has asked me to give you his personal thanks for the perfect start to our new season. So again, thank you so much.

- Thank you for having me.