

The Fall of Taiwan: Asia Goes Red – or at Least “Pinkens”

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Taiwan is a small place. But sometimes what happens in (or to) small places—such as Czechoslovakia in 1938—has cascading and even catastrophic effects well beyond their borders.

Taiwan—specifically the prospects of the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) coming to blows over Taiwan—is such a place of outsized importance.

The PRC says it wants Taiwan—which it says is part of China¹—and will not wait forever. Beijing warns it will use force to take it if necessary. The United States has promised to ensure Taiwan has the means to defend itself and, depending on one’s perspective, has implicitly obligated itself to step in and defend Taiwan. Understanding the thinking behind a potential attack and defense are important, and honestly examining the repercussions of the outcome even more so.

The Attack on Taiwan

Much commentary and analysis focuses on how the PRC might “take” Taiwan, and whether it actually could do so.

There is a range of scenarios, including:

- Isolating and browbeating Taiwan to the point it is demoralized, sees no help coming, and gives up;
- Occupying one or more of Taiwan’s offshore islands and issuing an ultimatum that the main island is next if Taipei does not concede;
- A coup de main, no-warning assault using special forces, airborne units, fifth columnists, and cyber and pushing troops ashore through seized ports and airfields;
- A full-scale amphibious assault to seize Taiwan.

Among these options, the direct kinetic assaults on Taiwan are the riskiest, and the PRC would prefer to bring Taiwan to heel without fighting. But the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has spent several decades developing necessary capabilities to assault Taiwan, and one is foolhardy to underestimate them.

¹ Taiwan has never been part of the People’s Republic of China. And Formosa, the island on which Taiwan sits, was only loosely under Qing Dynasty control for about a decade in the 18th Century – and the Qing’s weren’t even Chinese. They were Manchus. The Chinese Communist Party’s attempt to reestablish the Qing Dynasty claim to Taiwan is even less legitimate than their invasion of Tibet.



East Asia. Credit: Adobe Stock

United States' Defense of Taiwan

Opinions vary on what, if anything, the United States should do to defend Taiwan.

Excuses to Do Nothing

At one end of the spectrum, it is argued that defending Taiwan is not in America's national interests—and it is certainly not worth provoking China and risking nuclear war.

Others note that it's nothing personal, but little Taiwan is an irritant in the larger and far more important relationship with the PRC.

And it is sometimes said that Taiwan doesn't deserve American help, since it doesn't spend enough on defense, and what it does spend is spent on the wrong things. We can't want it more than they do.

"It's too bad, but we must let it go. There's nothing to be done. The PRC is too powerful now."

Along these lines, some analysts say Taiwan just isn't defensible and is the wrong place to defend against the much too powerful PRC. Yet they never say exactly where is the right place. Presumably even San Diego isn't quite the right place.

Another idea is to keep things as they are. "Strategic ambiguity" about America's willingness to defend Taiwan has worked fine at keeping the peace for many years, it is argued. But perhaps that had as much to do with the PRC not being ready yet to take on the United States—Beijing certainly hasn't been ambiguous. It has used the breathing space of American ambiguity to equip and train a military overtly designed to take and keep Taiwan.

A more recent variation calls for replacing strategic ambiguity with "strategic clarity"—though the idea seems to be to state that the United States will defend Taiwan, but apparently without doing much more in concrete terms to support Taiwan's defense.

Reasons to Defend Taiwan

At the other end of the spectrum, a constituency calls for more full-throated support for Taiwan and, if necessary, fighting on Taiwan's behalf to ensure it does not come under PRC control.

The policy debate over Taiwan is lively, and as is often the case with experts, few opinions ever change.

But it's useful to consider the broader potential, cascading effects if Taiwan falls—as much of the analysis focuses on the phases before and during an attack on Taiwan and not so much after such an attack.

First, however, the Taiwanese people themselves deserve a mention—not least since many American pundits and academics show a preference for letting 24 million free people (by comparison democratic Switzerland only has 8 million citizens) come under Chinese control—unaided by the United States, beyond some tut-tutting.

What would it be like for the people of Taiwan? Think Hong Kong—but probably more akin to **invaded and occupied** Tibet or **the mass incarceration of** Xinjiang. Once people get a taste of freedom – **as has Taiwan** – there’s no easy return to enslavement. And if there is any resistance or guerrilla activity, the Chinese occupiers might think a few massacres are necessary to set the tone.

Some might think such is the lot of “small far away [countries] about which we know little.”

But it is not really that far away. The fall of Taiwan will lead to a rapid change in political alignments as a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific shift closer to the PRC. At best, old partners will be rattled and doubtful of the United States’ commitment and staying power, and some may keep America and U.S. forces at arm’s length. At worst, some nations will shut the door on the United States.

One might argue that the shock of Taiwan falling will concentrate minds and drive nations closer to each other and/or to the United States for self-preservation. Perhaps.

But it is more likely the concrete and nearby evidence of Chinese power will drive regional countries to cut the best deal they can with China in hopes of being mostly left alone or not being treated too harshly by Beijing. And that deal may include shunning the U.S. military and turning a cold shoulder to U.S. government entreaties.

Why the PRC Needs to Take Taiwan: Breaching the First Island Chain and Unraveling America’s Asia-Pacific Defense

So how serious is the PRC about Taiwan? Taking Taiwan by coercion or brute force would be serious business for Beijing. It would face a potential U.S.-led military response and some degree of financial and economic sanction, as well as approbation from many quarters—not that the latter would matter much to China’s leaders.

But Beijing still might consider it worth it. For one thing, Chinese President Xi Jinping has promised to “reunify” Taiwan. And keeping such a promise in such a regime might be a matter of personal survival for Chairman Xi.

But from a PLA planner’s perspective (presumably the same as the Central Military Commission, which is also chaired by Xi), the military advantages of taking Taiwan just might be worth it. Regardless of cost.

Geography matters, and Taiwan has what real estate agents say matters most: location, location, location.

Taiwan sits in the middle of the so-called First Island Chain that runs from Japan southwards through Taiwan and the Philippines and onwards to Indonesia and Malaysia.

Viewed from the Chinese mainland, the First Island Chain is a barrier that effectively blocks easy access to the western Pacific Ocean for Chinese naval and air forces. Chinese forces need to pass through a handful of narrow (and easily defended) straits or pass over potentially hostile territory. Taiwan **and its** airfields and ports would allow the PLA both freedom of movement and extended range into the Western Pacific and beyond.

At the same time, Taiwan serves as a potential launch point and intelligence collection platform against China. Seize Taiwan and the PLA eliminates a potential threat. And, even more usefully, it seizes a lodgment smack in the middle of the U.S. (and allies) first defense line that bottles up the Chinese military.

It would also give Beijing increased leverage over other countries in the region. Taiwan is a splendid location for interdicting sea lanes through the South China Sea—through which much of Japan’s trade flows, including vital energy imports. And South Korea would be even more isolated.

Can’t commercial ships bypass the South China Sea and transit further east to reach Japan and South Korea? With Taiwan as a platform, the PLA naval and air forces can just operate farther to the east and pressure that route.

As for the South China Sea, the PRC claimed ownership and, by the mid-2010s, it had de facto control.² The only thing holding Beijing back was the United States. But with Taiwan under its control and China’s artificial islands—which are, in fact, military bases—in the South China Sea increasingly useful, the PRC will formally assert and enforce de jure control over what it claims as Chinese territory—and dare anyone to do something about it.

² This is analogous to seizing maritime terrain about 1.5 times the size of the Mediterranean Sea.



Credit: U.S. Department of Defense https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf

It's not unthinkable that the PRC will start charging administrative fees for ships from certain nations seeking to use the South China Sea as well as massively expanding its Air Defense Identification Zone, giving it leverage over air as well as sea.

The PRC recently passed a law authorizing the Chinese coast guard to use force inside Chinese territory – which is anywhere China says is its territory. This is something of a formality, but it shows China setting up the excuse “But we are just following the law” in advance of a conflict-

Even now regional nations with their own territorial claims in the South China Sea are pressured by China, but with Taiwan under Beijing's control, they will be able to operate in the South China Sea only with the PRC's permission.

The fall of Taiwan will have special meaning for Japan. Since 2012, PRC naval and coast guard ships have gradually increased their presence in the East China Sea around Japan's Senkaku Islands – islands also claimed by China (and Taiwan). Japanese forces have responded to Chinese incursions but have not initiated a shooting war.

However, Japanese naval and air forces are increasingly overmatched as Chinese ships and aircraft appear more often, in greater numbers, and for longer periods

of time. The Japanese are holding on and are also deploying Ground Self-Defense Force anti-ship missile units and air defense systems to the Nansei Shoto (Ryukyu Islands) to bolster their southern defense line.

However, with Taiwan under Beijing's control, the PRC will have effectively outflanked Japanese defenses in the Nansei Shoto, **and will be positioned to dominate the East China Sea and seize Japanese maritime and island territory.** This would of course put huge crimp in the ability of U.S. forces to operate. Japan will also need to defend its eastern approaches for the first time in a long while once PLA submarines, ships, and aircraft start operating regularly east of Japan's main islands.

Japanese military officers have been saying for years that "Taiwan's defense is Japan's defense." Japanese politicians and bureaucrats have never quite gotten the message, however.

Second Island Chain and beyond

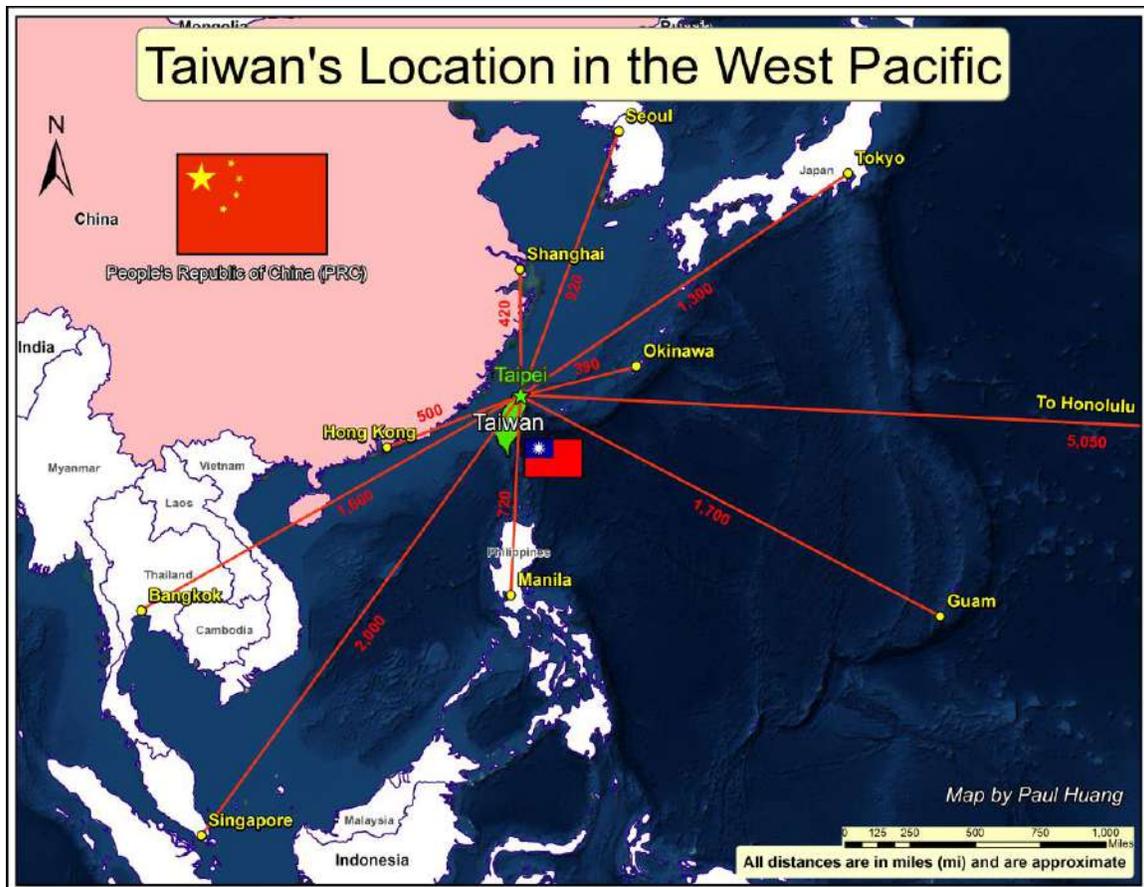
The PRC isn't just looking east; it's looking south and southeast as well.

From Taiwan, with some effort, the PLA can drive a salient into the heart of U.S. "second layer" defenses in the Central Pacific and even push into the Southwest and South Pacific. China doesn't have any military bases or access locations in the region and has only made modest military forays into the area.

But the PRC wants bases and has laid the groundwork with 30 years of political warfare, economic and commercial inroads, and physical presence—greasing the way via elite capture.

Australia can read the map—and understands what Chinese control of Taiwan means.

While Australia is indeed tucked away "down under," it can also be isolated or at least threatened with a little effort—as the Japanese understood in 1941 but couldn't accomplish. The Chinese tend to think they can do anything better than the Japanese can, and while the PLA has no military bases in the region, rumors have flourished in recent years of the PRC putting out feelers in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands. Just rumors, perhaps. But serious enough to spur Canberra and Washington into preemptive action.



Credit: Project 2049

And a Chinese company recently signed a deal to build a fishing port (by definition dual-use) in southern Papua New Guinea on the Torres Strait—across from northern Australia.

The PRC has also reportedly been encouraging secessionists in New Caledonia aiming to cut ties with France. The PRC has also been trying to weaken Paris' resolve with major investments in French Polynesia.

Eventual Chinese military access to one or more of these locations would provide the PRC with options for pressuring Australia—as Canberra well knows.

And PRC interest doesn't stop in the middle of the Pacific. Any Chinese Pacific bases or access locations can be used to threaten U.S. forces and facilities in the Central Pacific. The PLA is also gearing to operate farther east of Hawaii off the West Coast of the continental United States, as the PRC assiduously develops ties and "shipping routes" to the West Coast of Central and South America. Taiwan

isn't the front line; it's where the PRC can resupply and regroup as it pushes out much further.

What China *Could* Do versus What They *Can* Do

The aforementioned describe things that could happen if China takes Taiwan and PLA forces operate from the island. These are alarming but also theoretical.

So what can the PLA actually do? It can do a lot immediately and, with time and improved capabilities, can do a lot more.

The PRC has undergone the largest, fastest military buildup in the post–World War II era—and, some would argue, in history, especially during what much of the world (except Beijing) thought of as peacetime.

In terms of power projection capabilities, the PLA is believed to be capable of taking any island and establishing lodgments in the South China Sea and surrounding neighborhood. If unchallenged, the PLA can operate and apply force even farther afield. For now, its **warfighting** ability falls off once beyond the First Island Chain, but the PLA is expanding and improving capabilities—particularly for joint, long-range operations.

And PLA amphibious capabilities—essential for operating in the Pacific—are considerable. If it so desired, the PLA could assemble and operate at least two amphibious units akin to the U.S. Marine Expeditionary Unit (**MEU**) that is the mainstay of U.S. amphibious forces in the Indo-Pacific. The Americans currently **station and operate one such** unit only on a permanent basis in the region.³

The PRC also has sheer numbers on its side. The PLA Navy has more ships (about 360) than the U.S. Navy does (about 300)—and the gap is widening. This isn't surprising given that over the last decade the PRC has been launching four ships for every American one. Add in the Chinese coast guard and maritime militia ships (bringing the Chinese total to over 700) and the current overmatch is even more alarming. According to some estimates, for every ship the U.S. Navy can put into the South and East China Seas, the Chinese could match it with 10 ships.

Even without Taiwan under Beijing's control, before long the PLA will be able to field a more constant presence, in greater numbers, and in more places than the United States alone can manage. Although Japan, Australia, and maybe India

³ The standard configuration of a MEU is three amphibious ships and about 2,000 Marines and their equipment. A MEU's peacetime 'engagement' and HA/DR roles are important – especially if one considers the value of 'presence' and attendant 'influence.'

and others would help, there is no real multinational force the United States can bring into action.

(The U.S. military does conduct plenty of bilateral and multilateral exercises with regional militaries and navies. But this is a far cry from a multinational force that can be used to challenge the PLA, even assuming political obstacles to such employment could be overcome.)

Despite the breathtaking PRC military expansion over the last 30 years, it was possible for some in the region (and for many in the United States) to believe the United States was still the foremost military power and could defend itself and its friends. There was at least hope that China wouldn't take over. And there was an implicit belief that America would save Taiwan.

But if Taiwan falls to the PRC, the entire dynamic will be altered. Beijing will have demonstrated that it alone has the power—and the will—to dominate in Asia.

Consider what a regional nation will see in their neighborhood after the fall of Taiwan. China's military will be seemingly everywhere—and backing up China's huge fishing fleet. It will be intimidating.

The fall of Taiwan will leave a searing impression on all regional nations (even North Korea).

Psychology is an important part of the global security equation—even if it gets less attention than troop strength and aircraft and ship numbers.

The lesson Indo-Pacific nations and the world will take from the fall of Taiwan will be that the United States and any combination of allies couldn't stop the PRC from taking—by force or bullying—democratic, independent, U.S.-friendly Taiwan.

The U.S. military couldn't, or wouldn't, stop the PRC. Fear of economic and financial retaliation didn't stop it. Even fear of America's nuclear weapons didn't stop it.

And if the Americans couldn't stop the Chinese, who would, or even could?

Answers will be hard to come by. And U.S. officials will find it hard to convince partners (and soon to be former partners) that independent Taiwan becoming just another administrative district under Beijing's control is not a catastrophe.

Some nuanced observers may rationalize things by arguing that Taiwan was always part of China and the PRC was just taking what it was rightfully entitled

to. But most people in the region will know that the Chinese will always discover some other bit of territory that was always part of China.

Ultimately, Taiwan will serve as fatally demoralizing proof to most people in the region—including many who hoped otherwise—that the PRC has the upper hand in the Asia-Pacific and the United States is on the decline and won't be there if they need help.

Result: Asia Goes Pink, Dark Pink, and Red

Sometimes it is useful to decide what to do by considering what happens if you *don't* do something.

Don't defend Taiwan and allow it—or fail to prevent it—from coming under PRC domination and the United States will find itself in short order with very few partners—and the ones that do stay will be wavering (at best). This isn't surprising. The PRC's demonstrated and growing ability to exert power will have no counter-balance of the sort the Americans used to provide.

This will lead to a rapid change in political alignments as a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific are pulled deeper into the PRC's orbit. At best, old partners will have their doubts while others will keep American forces at arm's length. At worst, they will shut the door on the United States completely.

One might argue that the shock will drive nations closer to each other and/or to the United States for self-preservation or even, at last, to do more for their own defense.

But it is as likely the concrete and nearby evidence of Chinese power, combined with decades of Beijing's effective political warfare, will drive regional countries to cut the best deal they can with the PRC in hopes of being mostly left alone—or eaten last.

Even a cursory color-coded overview of what the Asia-Pacific strategic map might look like after the fall of Taiwan shows how dire the consequences will be. If countries that are favorable to the United States are on the blue end of the spectrum, and countries that have fallen into the PRC orbit tend towards red, the map looks even more pink than Victorian-era British colonial maps.

Japan: Blue

The only exception in the immediate neighborhood might be Japan. Japan has a constituency in its political class and big business that would turn Japan pink

today if it could. It will run afoul of public opinion. And even in the political world there is a large nationalist strain that gets less attention than it deserves.

Japan often requires a full-blown crisis to cause it to change course and address serious issues. Taiwan coming under PRC control would be such a crisis. It might be too late, and the PRC might grab the Senkaku Islands or even a few southern Nansei Shoto islands as part of “reunification” with Taiwan.

But this just might be the thing that finally drives the Americans and Japanese into a **genuinely powerful and** capable defense relationship—and even strengthens the political ties (that have never really been stressed) between Washington and Tokyo. Japan can improve its defense capabilities but probably could not go it alone in terms of conventional capability. It will have serious doubts about the United States and its commitment. (Of course this overlooks the fact Japan has left Taiwan up to the Americans and has done practically nothing to help defend Taiwan.) Japan can quickly and easily build nuclear weapons—in a matter of weeks or a few months, according to many observers. But the PRC just might call Japan’s bluff.

As for reaching a deal with China, that’s hard to imagine given the deep-rooted Japanese fear of Chinese domination, much less occupation. Even in peacetime it would be difficult—not least since it would require one side to admit it is inferior to the other. And neither is capable of that.

China is keen to pay back Japan for supposed historical wrongs and will keep up the pressure on Japan—and the United States—but this part of the map will remain blue, at least for a while. And the United States, if it wants, can try to cobble together a defense along the so-called Second Island Chain, which runs from Japan through several states that are in Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the United States or are key parts of its defensive infrastructure—such as Palau, Marshall Islands, Guam, and Northern Marianas—before continuing on to Indonesia and Australia.

Both Palau and the Marshalls recognize Taiwan, and Palau recently offered to host a U.S. base. So there is something to work with if the will is there. Though with the Americans belatedly fortifying the Central Pacific, even some of the COFA states might have second thoughts about being on the front lines.

South Korea: Pink

As Japan builds up capabilities—and the United States is seen as favoring Japan even more—the South Koreans (and the North Koreans) will erupt, **or at least boil over**. While this is going on, the Chinese will be applying pressure on Seoul.

Is it possible Beijing's attack on Taiwan would wake up Seoul and lead it to link with the Americans even more to fend off the PRC? It depends on the administration in Seoul. A leftist one is likely to use the opening to move openly closer to the PRC, arguing the United States is unreliable and/or weak, and vociferously turning against Japan. A conservative one might not like the idea of getting closer to the PRC but might feel it has no choice. It may not end the Washington-Seoul alliance, but it will rightfully have some serious doubts, and I would not envy the American officials trying to convince the South Koreans otherwise, especially as part of the deal for fending off the PRC would include cooperation with Japan.

Either way, expect South Korea to build nuclear weapons and attempt to reach an accommodation with the PRC. **Tokyo will in turn boil over.**

As for North Korea, the PRC just might encourage (or approve) a missile shot or two toward Japan (or even U.S. forces in South Korea) to prevent other nations from getting ideas about cozying up with the Americans for protection. **Another reason is to prevent the Americans and others from concentrating minds on what just happened in Taiwan.**

Philippines: Dark Pink

Is there a chance Taiwan's fall would make the Filipinos more receptive to a U.S. presence? Not likely. The lesson of Taiwan will be too obvious—and the PRC will apply across-the-board pressure just to be sure. Apart from economic pressure and the activation of the venal elements of the Filipino elite, it is likely that at the same time as the attack on Taiwan, the PLA will show up in large numbers in Philippine waters.

Expect the Philippines to cave to Beijing—even while despairing. Even pro-U.S. Philippine officials are already ambivalent about the value of U.S. protection. They are still stung by the 2012 experience of the Obama Administration allowing the PRC to seize Scarborough Shoal—Philippine maritime territory. In that case—which some analysts look at as a mini-Taiwan attack test by Beijing—the U.S. Administration went out of its way to rationalize how the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty didn't apply. The region as a whole noticed and began to seriously doubt America's commitment, egged on by pro-PRC elements.

If Taiwan falls, any residual faith in U.S. promises—or even the ability to defend the Philippines—will disappear. There is no great love for the PRC in much of the populace, but, it will be said, "There's nothing we can do."

In February 2021, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana made the position clear when he explained why the Philippines didn't participate along with the United States and others in naval drills in the South China Sea: "Firstly, it's not to antagonize China because China is watching us here and a lot of things could be done to us by the Chinese government if they are antagonized.... The main reason why we did not participate in the exercises in the South China Sea with the US and all the allies is because we didn't have equipment to match what they are doing there. We have frigates but they're not armed, we have ships but they're not also armed."⁴

The PRC is likely to push its advantage. Expect the PLA to quickly build an island base at Scarborough Shoal. Once that happens, the game is truly over. If the United States lets Taiwan go, it's unlikely to fight over Scarborough Shoal (just "some rocks," as one U.S. official called them at the time of their original seizure by the PRC). The effect of a PLA-militarized Scarborough Shoal going unchallenged will echo and magnify what just happened to Taiwan, leaving all others in the region wondering if they are next.

Southeast Asia

Take a look at the hue of the rest of Southeast Asia—even before Taiwan fell, it was red to light pink. **Many if not most** nations were, at best, trying to straddle the fence, hoping they could do business with China but that the American presence and influence might restrain the PRC from really throwing its weight around.

But once Taiwan goes, Southeast Asia will have its mind made up for it—like it or not. The only thing that will be in question is the degree of PRC control over respective nations.

⁴ ABS-CBN News, "'China Is Watching': Philippines Won't Join Naval Drills in Contested Waters—Lorenzana," February 11, 2021, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/02/11/21/china-is-watching-philippines-wont-join-naval-drills-in-contested-waters-lorenzana>.



Credit: Voice of America (VOA)

Cambodia: Red

Cambodia is already dark pink—or at least its corrupt elite is. And indications are that a Chinese naval (and possibly air) facility is in the works at Sihanoukville. Given that the Cambodian government and the PRC are denying it so strenuously, it is likely true—and just a question of when.

PLA naval and air forces operating out of Cambodia will solidify Chinese military presence and control in the South China Sea (and beyond). If it isn't operational before the fall of Taiwan, it will be soon afterwards.

This, combined with the buckling of the Philippines and the (at best) shakiness of South Korea, will contribute to a sense of inevitability further afield—a sense that the United States is too weak or uninterested to do anything and that a Pax (or else) Sinica is inevitable. This sense of resignation will be amplified by local captured elites and felt across the region, including in Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, and beyond.

Vietnam: Pink

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is, of course, a sort of communist country already, but it has no love for Beijing—except in parts of its pro-China elite that benefits financially from PRC ties. Any hope that the United States will have a

serious presence to balance against China will be gone once it seizes Taiwan. Hanoi will be able to use the South China Sea (including resources in its own Exclusive Economic Zone) only to the extent the PRC permits. Vietnam will try to carve out its place via its willingness to fight for a certain room to maneuver but no more. It will cut the best *modus vivendi* it can with Beijing.

China doesn't need to occupy nations. It just needs to dominate them with economic and, if necessary, military intimidation so that they do nothing—particularly as regards the United States—that Beijing disapproves of.

Singapore: Pink

Singapore is often considered pro-West or even a U.S. ally. And that is true—as far as it goes. But in recent years one detects a certain wavering, reflected in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2019 comments that “China's growth has shifted the strategic balance and the economic centre of gravity of the world, and the shift continues. Both China and the rest of the world have to adapt to this new reality.”⁵

He doesn't quite say it, but there seems to be a feeling that he's inclined to see China coming out on top. For now, Singapore doesn't want to choose between the United States and China and hopes for the best.

The fall of Taiwan would shift the balance considerably, suggesting that the PRC is going to dominate and that the Americans are headed downwards.

Singapore might allow the U.S. Navy to remain in the country, and the PRC might even permit it. But that will perhaps be a face-saving gesture given that the PLA's nearby naval and air forces far outnumber whatever the Americans (and the Singaporeans) can deploy.

The bottom line is that, after Taiwan is lost, Singapore will not do anything that Beijing will really disapprove of.

And another worrisome possibility: For many years analysts talked about blockading the Strait of Malacca to pressurize the PRC's dependence on Middle Eastern oil. But with Taiwan gone and regional nations accommodating China, this blockade threat could be flipped in the blink of an eye. Such a blockade would prohibit the U.S. Navy from deploying from the West Coast to the Middle

⁵ Minnie Chan and Catherine Wong, “Singapore Prime Minister Urges China and US Not to Pressure Small Nations to Take Sides During Shangri-La Dialogue,” June 1, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3012690/singapore-prime-minister-urges-china-and-us-not-pressure-small>.

East or at least seriously degrade such an ability—and potentially severely restrict the global reach the Americans boast of.

Malaysia: Pink

Malaysia lacks the military resources or the economic strength to resist PRC pressure. That was shown when the Malaysian elite was willing to cut deals (on and below the table) with the PRC during Prime Minister Najib Razak's tenure (2009-2018). The populace will be of mixed minds, and in some quarters there is no affection for the Chinese (mainland or Malaysian), but without a counterbalance to Chinese power—gone along with U.S. prestige when Taiwan was lost—Malaysia will have limited options and must cut the best deal it can with Beijing.

Laos: Red Already

Landlocked, bordering China, already under strong influence, and with no options, Laos will be even more of a satrap once Taiwan falls.

Thailand: Pink

Despite a long-standing alliance with the United States, Thailand has been shifting closer to the PRC for a while. This was hastened by the Obama Administration's ill-conceived treatment of the Thai administration following the 2014 coup.

If Taiwan falls, and with the PLA locking up the South China Sea and expanding its military presence in the region, Thailand's self-declared bamboo foreign policy (which bends with the geopolitical winds) is likely to lean even more toward the PRC rather than snapping back toward the United States.

Indonesia: Light Pink

There is a limit to what Beijing can do to Indonesia. Expect to see increasing Chinese naval and maritime presence in the South China Sea and Indonesia waters—even if Taiwan doesn't fall. If the PRC doesn't overreach and demand too much (always a challenge for Beijing) it might get **the** Indonesians to succumb. That would mean not linking with the Australians against the PRC and keeping the Americans at a distance—especially if they try to get closer to Jakarta to shore up regional positioning following Taiwan's fall.

East Timor: Pink

A small place but a good location. The PRC noticed and established a heavy presence even before the fall of Taiwan. Afterwards, East Timor won't have much choice or alternative to an arrangement with Beijing.

Papua New Guinea: Pink

Even with Taiwan intact, the PRC is doing pretty well with Papua New Guinea. Chinese investment is widespread, and now there is a plan for a huge, potentially dual-use fishing port in the southwest on the strategic Torres Strait just across from Australia.

Theoretically, the United States could be in a position to try to build a presence, but any statements of long-term commitment would be undermined by what just happened in Taiwan, combined with active in-country PRC political warfare.

This same dynamic will be found in every capital in the Indo-Pacific (and likely beyond). If an insurance agent sells your neighbor a fire insurance policy, ignores the repeated statements of a known arsonist that he is going to burn down the house, and then just watches as the house is burned down, saying it wasn't covered in the fine print of the policy, would you buy insurance from him?

New Zealand: Dark Pink

Besides the PRC's stunning influence in New Zealand's political class, the country is economically vulnerable to Chinese pressure, and militarily its defenses have declined to the point that a PLA mechanized brigade or two landed on New Zealand could possibly take the place.

Once again, Taiwan's fate might be a wake-up call and cause them to rebuild defenses, but then again it might not. And even if it did, there might be nothing they could do.

More likely, given Wellington's existing willingness to bend over backward as the New Zealand-PRC relationship requires—or, to be more accurate, as Beijing requires—one imagines that the PRC taking Taiwan would be seen as requiring further New Zealand bending.

Australia: Blue (but with the Wrong People in Power, Light Pink)

Australia is a long-standing defense and Five Eyes partner, but even so there are Australians who wouldn't mind turning the nation pink. If Taiwan falls, that sort will have proof for their PRC political warfare talking points that Australians

might as well accept that the Americans can't (and won't) defend them. That will lead into the argument that "we are small (population-wise), China is big, so let's return to how things were before the hawks took over and upset our prosperous ties with the PRC." Well, their prosperous ties, at least.

But they may not win. Australians may feel isolated, but it's hard to imagine them conceding—and there does appear to be bipartisan support for implementing a defense strategy that uses Australia's geographical advantages to make the country a tough nut to crack.

But the fall of Taiwan—and what it portends for U.S. influence in the region (and Australia's psychological dependence on America)—will be immensely disruptive. Australia can still stay blue(ish) though, especially if, as one might reasonably expect, Washington deepens the relationship with Canberra in the event of a Taiwan catastrophe. At least to some Americans, when things are going bad, there's nobody you'd want on your side more than the Australians (most of them, at least).

Oceania

The pinkness of New Zealand and potential wobbles in Australia raise interlinked questions about the alignment of nations across the vast and strategic zone of Oceania.

For the purposes of this analysis, Oceania is divided into two zones. The South Pacific consists of countries largely below the equator such as Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji. The Central Pacific is largely to the north and includes Guam and the three states in COFAs with the United States: Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia.

New Zealand and Australia have been the main Five Eyes points of contact in the South Pacific for decades. There have been some wins. The PRC had its eye on Blackrock base in Fiji a couple years back but was preempted by the Australians and the Americans, who set up a regional policing training center there in partnership with Fiji.

However, in other cases, Australia and New Zealand have failed to provide the countries of the South Pacific the support they needed (or at least wanted), leaving the door open for Beijing.

For example, recently the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched recognition from Taiwan to the PRC. This means Canberra and Wellington not only failed to

provide—or failed to facilitate other democratic partners in providing—what the Solomons and Kiribati needed; they failed Taiwan as well. Similarly, recent shortsighted decisions by Canberra and Wellington caused a split in the Pacific Islands Forum, weakening the region’s cohesiveness.

PRC gains in the South Pacific **should Taiwan fall** have major strategic consequences. PLA lodgments or access in the region potentially threaten Australia’s lines of communication and trade to the north and east. And as the PLA operates more extensively in the Indian Ocean, sea lanes to the West also come under threat.

In the North Pacific, the United States and (to a degree) Japan are the main non-PRC options. There are very close relations between the United States and the three COFA states, and two of the three recognize Taiwan. But in all three—as well as in even more militarily sensitive locations such as Guam and the Marianas—the PRC has been patiently, intelligently, and effectively looking for openings.

With 30 years of PRC political warfare and influence efforts, the fall of Taiwan, and the United States having to get serious about using the region as a defensive position—in fact the new first line—some of those PRC efforts might pay off, with some locals deciding going pink is the safer option. Even in nations that have COFAs with the United States (the agreements are currently being renegotiated), Washington should take nothing for granted. U.S. territories are probably safe enough for now, but the same caution applies.

Myanmar: Dark Pink

With the recent coup, Myanmar, already pink, is now trending toward deep rose. The United States has notably little influence in Myanmar as it is. Let Taiwan fall and the visibly impotent United States will have even less. That’s a problem that extends beyond Myanmar’s borders, as compliance from Myanmar gives the PRC a route to the Bay of Bengal and onward to the Indian Ocean.

Indo-Pacific Kaleidoscope

This analysis does not cover the Indian Ocean in depth. But if Taiwan goes under, there will be even more pink in the “Indo” part of the Indo-Pacific. How pink will depend to a large degree on India, which has its own reason for its reinvigorated pushback on the PRC **that has built considerable presence and influence in the region already.**

Sri Lanka just rejected an India-Japanese proposal to build a port to compete with the one run by China. Not a good sign. But the Indians won't give up.

Similarly, Delhi is trying to reinforce ties with Bangladesh, Nepal, Seychelles, Maldives, and elsewhere in a range of ways, including via gifts of COVID-19 vaccines. Pakistan, another conduit to the Indian Ocean for China, has turned to Beijing for vaccines **and is perhaps the PRC's strongest 'partner' in the region.**

This is not to say that India is blue. It is its own color—one that it is happy to splash across the region. But at least it is not on the red part of the spectrum.

What Does It All Mean?

The list of places that will be colored pink if Taiwan turns red goes on and on. How about Mongolia? Mongolians hate the color, but geography is what it is. Mongolia would have no other major cards to play once the United States is brought down a notch with the fall of Taiwan. And we haven't even started on Latin America.

Perhaps this author is overstating the risks and outcomes of Taiwan coming under Chinese control. That is always possible. Predicting the future is a difficult business.

After all, when South Vietnam fell to the North Vietnamese military invasion in 1975, there were predictions that Asia would turn red and that the United States was finished in Asia. But, other than North Vietnam grabbing South Vietnamese-held islands in the South China Sea (**and the PRC later taking some Vietnamese islets as well**) and the hellish experience with the Khmer Rouge taking over in Cambodia, the United States maintained its presence and influence in the region.

In fact, it seemed to make some nations appreciate the U.S. presence even more and open up some opportunities.

The United States still had bases in the Philippines, Japan, and Korea, and by the 1990s, Singapore allowed the U.S. Navy to use its naval base **on a very regular basis**. The Japanese were particularly keen to keep the Americans nearby.

However, in 1975, the PRC was unable to capitalize on the blow to U.S. power and prestige and fill in or precipitate vacuums either militarily or economically.

Forty-five years later, it's a very different PRC. It's far more able to exert its military power as well as commercial and political power. It openly wants to

displace the United States and already can in a number of places. And that's before Taiwan falls and Washington is on its heels.

Is there any likelihood the fall of Taiwan will force Southeast Asian nations to finally join up into a real mutual defense relationship? Hard to imagine.

And what about us, the United States? One can hear it: "We really are a power. Really." But will we fight our way back and try to liberate Taiwan? Don't bet on it. Some will say the cost is too high and we should just defend from farther back. But that's not the best option. If you keep getting farther and farther back, eventually the front line is in your home.

Certainly the United States wouldn't let this happen, right? One hopes not.

We need to understand that the fall of Taiwan would change the world. This isn't about one far-away island; this is about alliances, about freedom, and ultimately about trust in the United States—a country that many nations have looked to for decades (even if they won't say so openly). If Taiwan falls, the United States will find itself on the defensive militarily and politically—and not only in the Asia-Pacific—as too many nations contemplate going with the likely winner, the PRC.

If the PRC is to make good on its promise to push the United States out of Asia, the lever it will use will be the seizure of Taiwan.

We need to make it clear to the PRC elites that if they try to take Taiwan **by assault or coercion**, they will lose everything.

Protecting Taiwan requires nerve and accepting risk, but that is better than the alternatives. And it will take that rarest of things: political will.

The situation recalls a scene from the BBC comedy *Yes Minister*:

Sir Richard: Standard Foreign Office response in a time of crisis. In stage one we say nothing is going to happen.

Sir Humphrey: Stage two, we say something may be about to happen, but we should do nothing about it.

Sir Richard: In stage three, we say that maybe we should do something about it, but there's nothing we *can* do.

Sir Humphrey: Stage four, we say maybe there was something we could have done, but it's too late now.

Yes Minister was a TV show and a comedy.

Taiwan is neither.