



QUARTERLY CONNECTIONS

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Taiwan's Complex Ties with Central American States

By Marshall Reid and Zoë Weaver-Lee

Before, during, and after Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) April 2023 transit through the United States, the overwhelming majority of analyses focused on her meeting with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.¹² While this preoccupation was perhaps understandable—such high-level encounters are as rare as they are policy-changing—these assessments largely neglected the final destination of Tsai's journey: Central America. Ultimately, this is by no means a new phenomenon. Long a stronghold of Taiwanese influence in the Western Hemisphere, Central America has nevertheless been frequently overlooked in discussions of Taipei's overall diplomatic and economic strategies, which have tended to focus primarily on the complex relationship between Taiwan and the United States. However, with its ties with Central American states more tenuous than ever before, Taiwan cannot afford to engage in such blinkered thinking in terms of its international diplomatic standing.

Just days before President Tsai arrived in Guatemala to begin her visit to the region, longtime Taiwan ally Honduras announced that it would be switching its recognition to the People's Republic of China (PRC).³ Though this decision was not entirely surprising—rumors of a change had circulated for years—it was nevertheless a substantial blow for Taipei.⁴ In recent years, the island democracy has seen its list of formal diplomatic partners shrink significantly, as Beijing has leveraged its vast financial resources and geopolitical influence to sway erstwhile allies to its side. This has been particularly pronounced in Central America, where four countries have switched recognition in the last five years alone.⁵ Despite these setbacks, however, Taiwan remains a crucial actor in the region.

As the following brief will make clear, Taiwan continues to play a substantial role in Central America, particularly

1 Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Hannah Price, and Matthew Slade, "Putting Taiwan President Tsai Ing-Wen's 2023 U.S. Transit in Context," ChinaPower Project, May 11, 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/taiwan-president-tsai-ing-wen-transit-united-states/>.

2 John Ruwitch and Emily Feng, "Taiwan's President Tsai Meets Kevin McCarthy despite China's Warnings," NPR, April 5, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/05/1167872114/kevin-mccarthy-taiwan-president-tsai-meeting-california-china>.

3 "Taiwan's President Seeks to Strengthen Relations with Allies in Central America Visit," *PBS NewsHour*, April 1, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/taiwans-president-seeks-to-strengthen-relations-with-allies-in-central-america-visit>.

4 "Honduras Cuts Ties with Taiwan, Opens Relations with China," *Al Jazeera*, March 26, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/26/honduras-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-taiwan>.

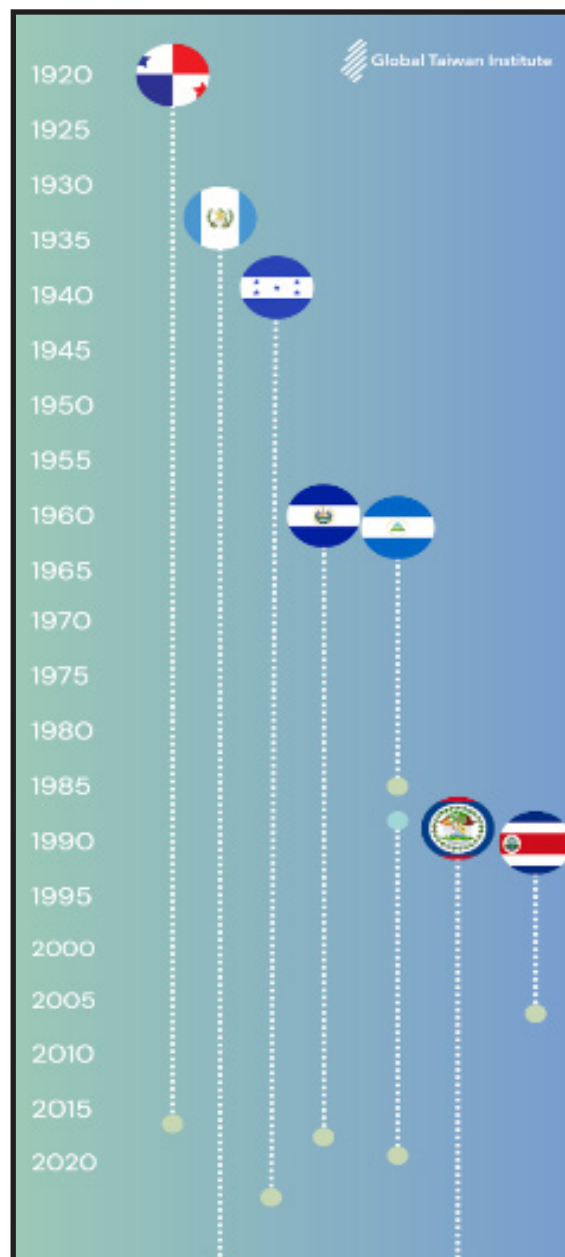
5 Michael Martina, Matt Spetalnick, and Daniela Desantis, "Insight: US, Taiwan Seen Powerless to Stem Island's Diplomatic Losses in Latin America," *Reuters*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-taiwan-seen-powerless-stem-islands-diplomatic-losses-latin-america-2023-04-05/>.

as a provider of development assistance. Even as its formal diplomatic presence in the region has deteriorated, Taipei has demonstrated the ability to adapt to increasingly challenging circumstances, using technical expertise and deft diplomacy to maintain productive ties with several regional governments. At the same time, however, the PRC has greatly expanded its investment in the area, placing considerable pressure on Taiwan and its partners. If Taipei is to remain an important player in Central America, it will need to be highly proactive and flexible in its approach, leveraging its unique strengths to sustain—and potentially even expand—its partnerships in the region.

Central America and Taiwan: Engagement within Limits

Until recently, Central America was among Taiwan's oldest, most reliable sources of diplomatic support.⁶ Despite their geographic distance from the island, the states of the region were staunch proponents of the Republic of China (Taiwan) on the international stage for nearly a century, remaining steadfast long after most other countries switched recognition. However, this stronghold has come under mounting pressure over the past two decades, as the PRC has increasingly targeted the region as a focal point of its global effort to marginalize Taiwan diplomatically.⁷ As the timeline below shows, Beijing's inducements in the region have proven largely effective. Since 2007, five of the seven Central American states have switched their allegiances, leaving Taiwan with Belize and Guatemala as its only diplomatic partners.

These developments have forced Taiwan to confront



Graphic: Taiwan's diplomatic ties with Central American states⁸

⁶ For the purposes of this brief, Central America is defined as consisting of seven countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Source: Patricio Giusto and Juan Manuel Harán, "Taiwan Fights for Its Diplomatic Survival in Latin America," *The Diplomat*, May 16, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/taiwan-fights-for-its-diplomatic-survival-in-latin-america/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Graphic by author. Data from: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Diplomatic Allies," <https://en.mofa.gov.tw/AlliesIndex.aspx?n=1294&sms=1007>.

difficult questions about its approach to the region.

While Taipei maintains strong, mutually beneficial relationships with its two remaining allies, its partnerships with the other Central American states have largely collapsed in the wake of their respective diplomatic switches.⁹ In recent years, however, Taiwan has demonstrated a growing willingness to look beyond official alliances, leveraging people-to-people ties and technical expertise to build less-visible—yet still productive—unofficial relationships with countries around the world.¹⁰ As the following section will demonstrate, Taiwan has considerable experience of maintaining similar partnerships with governments and entities across Central America. Going forward, this could serve as a foundation for a continued Taiwanese presence in the region, even in the absence of formal allies.

Evolving Taiwanese Approaches to Central America

Given its long history of interactions with Central America, Taiwan's relationship with the region is predictably complex and nuanced. As the island democracy's place in the international system has evolved, so too have its partnerships with the states of the area. However, two primary pillars have remained relatively consistent and provided the framework for Taiwan-Central America interactions for decades: foreign assistance and bilateral trade.

Foreign Assistance

Until recently, Central America was the largest destina-

tion for Taiwan's official development assistance (ODA), administered by the International Cooperation and Development Fund (Taiwan ICDF, or simply ICDF, 財團法人國際合作發展基金會).¹¹ The ICDF has been present in the region since the 1990s, but the levels of cooperation differ by country and timeline. In fact, much of the ICDF's programming in Central America is determined by Taiwan's diplomatic relationship with that state. As such, Guatemala and Belize are the only countries in the region that currently house Taiwan technical missions.¹² In addition, the ICDF once maintained robust aid relationships with former Taiwan allies, particularly Nicaragua and Honduras. However, these programs came to an abrupt end following the diplomatic switches, and it appears that all programs in former Central American allied countries have since been halted and removed from the ICDF's website.¹³

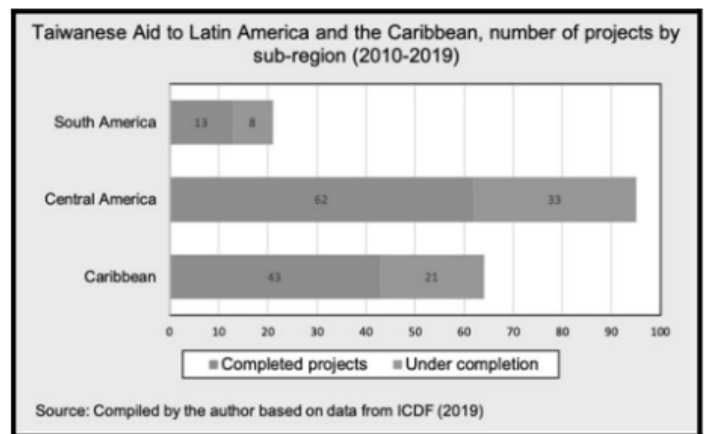


Image: As of 2019, Central America was the largest destination for Taiwan's aid in terms of the number foreign assistance projects.¹⁴

9 Megan Janetsky, "Taiwan's President Seeks to Strengthen Relations with Allies in Central America Visit," *PBS NewsHour*, April 1, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/taiwans-president-seeks-to-strengthen-relations-with-allies-in-central-america-visit>.

10 Eric Cheung, "China Thinks It's Diplomatically Isolating Taiwan. It Isn't," *CNN*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/24/asia/taiwan-diplomatic-allies-support-analysis-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.

11 "TaiwanICDF - Projects," <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=5293&ctNode=31568&mp=2>.

12 "TaiwanICDF - Guatemala," <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=65063&ctNode=31754&mp=2>; "TaiwanICDF - Belize," <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=65061&ctNode=31757&mp=2>.

13 "TaiwanICDF - Projects," <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=5293&ctNode=31568&mp=2>.

14 Lorenzo Maggiorini, "Taiwan's Development Aid to Latin America and the Caribbean and the One China Policy," *Razón*

Over time, Taiwan's approach to development assistance to the region has evolved dramatically.¹⁵ While Taipei was previously accused—often with substantial proof—of engaging in so-called “checkbook diplomacy” and bribery, it has increasingly shifted to a more focused, project-specific strategy, with particular emphases on technical expertise and people-to-people ties.¹⁶ Generally, the ICDF tends to focus on agricultural research and

development, healthcare training and infrastructure, as well as micro-lending programs for entrepreneurs in disadvantaged groups. In Guatemala and Belize, active programs include Mandarin learning programs, banana cultivation research, a family farming marketing program, and healthcare personnel training to name a few.¹⁷

Taiwan's former allies in the region also previously benefited from programs that provided COVID-19 relief, agriculture entrepreneurship trainings and opportunities, Mandarin training, healthcare, and more.¹⁸ Since

Crítica 7 (2019), 177-208.

15 “Era of ‘Checkbook Diplomacy’ Is Over, Tsai Ing-Wen Says,” *Taipei Times*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2016/07/01/2003650102>.

16 Nate Raymond, “Ex-Guatemalan Leader Admits Taking Taiwan Bribes in U.S. Court,” *Reuters*, March 18, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-guatemala-portillo-idUSBREA2H-1QD20140318>.

17 “TaiwanICDF - Guatemala,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=65063&ctNode=31754&mp=2>; “TaiwanICDF - Belize,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=65061&ctNode=31757&mp=2>.

18 Aswin Aziz and Jeffaya Basen, “COVID-19 and Taiwan's Medical Aid to Honduras: The Last Latin American Frontier for the Republic 2020-2021,” *Journal of International Conference Proceedings* 5(2), 588-598; “TaiwanICDF - TaiwanICDF Assisting El Salvador in Developing Distinctive Local Industries,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=27125&ctNode=31572&mp=2>; Colin R. Alexander, *China and Taiwan in Central America*:

2013, Taiwan has also been able to engage with both current and former allies in the region through a part-

nership with the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), which provides funds to the region at large.¹⁹ These projects were related to education, coffee production, and women's empowerment.²⁰ Additionally, applicants from Panama, Nicaragua, and El Sal-

vador were all eligible to receive ICDF scholarships to study in Taiwan until 2017.²¹

In response to the diplomatic switches of recent years, Taiwan has largely halted all programs with former diplomatic partners in the region. This has had significant implications for beneficiaries of these projects.²²

Engaging Foreign Publics in Diplomacy, <http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/29029/>; “TaiwanICDF - Partnering to Create a Better Life for CKD Patients in Nicaragua,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=55922&ctNode=31572&mp=2>.

19 “CABEI - Central American Bank for Economic Integration,” May 30, 2023, <https://www.bcie.org/en/>.

20 “CABEI and Taiwan's International Cooperation and Development Fund Promote Educational Credit,” September 5, 2023, https://www.bcie.org/en/member-countries/non-regional-republic-of-china-taiwan?tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=1655&cHash=344724fc3350d9af9103ab1ff3860009; “CABEI and Taiwan-ICDF Promote Sustainable Practices for Coffee Production in Central America,” September 5, 2023, https://www.bcie.org/en/member-countries/regional-non-founding-members/republic-of-panama?tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=2337&cHash=b8b8570ef5f21bc911892e2d2bcd3af2; “中華民國僑務委員會,” <https://overseas.ocac.gov.tw/OCAC/>.

21 “2017 Recipient List for TaiwanICDF Higher Education Scholarships,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/DownloadFile?type=attach&file=7621683222.pdf&realname=7621683222.pdf>.

22 “2023 Higher Education Scholarship Application Guidebook,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/DownloadFile?type=attach&file=f1677750377687.pdf&realname=2023+TaiwanICD->

For example, complications arose when recipients of the ICDF scholarship in Honduras—and similarly for Nicaragua—were in the midst of their studies in Taiwan when their home country cut diplomatic ties. However, Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA, 中華民國外交部) allowed these students to stay in the country and finish their programs.²³

Bilateral Trade

In addition to foreign assistance, Taiwan has also engaged with Central America by negotiating bilateral trade deals with regional states.

Once again, these types of agreements often vary depending on Taiwan’s diplomatic relationship with the given country. Taiwan once had several active economic agreements in the region, of which its Economic Cooperation Agreement (ECA) with Belize, its Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Panama, its FTA with Guatemala, and its Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) with Costa Rica remain in effect.²⁴ Taiwan also formerly had an FTA with El Salvador and

Despite Taiwan’s best efforts, its position in Central America seems to be on shaky ground.

Honduras beginning in 2007, though these agreements were recently suspended, as the two Central American countries began or are set to begin trade talks with China.²⁵ Additionally, its 2006 FTA with Nicaragua was repealed in 2021, with Managua entering talks with Beijing in late 2022.²⁶

Despite Taiwan’s efforts to expand its economic influence in the region, its trade presence remains limited. As of 2023, goods from Taiwan did not exceed 0.1 percent of any Central American country’s imports, with its highest presence being in Belize (0.87 percent) and Guatemala (0.89 percent).²⁷ Conversely, China has consistently accounted for

over 12 percent of exports for each Central American country, and was the highest export destination for Panama (the United States was the top importer for all others). While this is not especially surprising due to the differences in size of China and Taiwan’s economies, it is important to note the significant contrast in economic influence.

F+Scholarship+Application+Guidebook++V.4.pdf; “Despite Diplomatic Split, Taiwan Schools Continue to Help Nicaraguan Students’ Studies,” *ANI News*, December 11, 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/despite-diplomatic-split-taiwan-schools-continue-to-help-nicaraguan-students-studies20211211163106/>.

²³ Jono Thomson, “Honduran Students Grateful for Support from Taiwan,” *Taiwan News*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.taiwan-news.com.tw/en/news/4849878>.

²⁴ Directorate General for Foreign Trade Belize. “Belize-Republic of China (Taiwan) Economic Cooperation Agreement (ECA) - Directorate General for Foreign Trade Belize,” May 19, 2021, <https://www.dgft.gov.bz/belize-republic-of-china-taiwan-economic-cooperation-agreement-eca/>; “SICE: Trade Agreements: Panama - Taiwan,” http://www.sice.oas.org/trade/panrc/panrc_e.asp; “Taiwan y Guatemala Firman Tratado de Libre Comercio,” http://www.sice.oas.org/tpd/gtm_twn/Negotiations/firma_s.pdf; “Costa Rica - Taiwan Province of China BIT (1999),” <https://investment-policy.unctad.org/international-investment-agreements/treaties/bit/1055/costa-rica---taiwan-province-of-china-bit-1999->.

²⁵ “SICE: Trade Policy Developments: Free Trade Agreement El Salvador-Honduras-Taiwan,” http://www.sice.oas.org/trade/SLV_HND_TWN_FTA_e/Index_e.asp; Lai Yu-chen and Kay Liu, “Taiwan to Suspend Free Trade Agreement with El Salvador,” May 11, 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202305110026>; “China and El Salvador to Begin Free Trade Talks,” *Reuters*, November 10, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-el-salvador-begin-free-trade-talks-2022-11-09/>; “Honduras Will ‘Soon’ Launch Trade Talks with China as Ties Deepen,” *Reuters*, May 13, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/honduras-will-soon-launch-trade-talks-with-china-ties-deepen-2023-05-13/>.

²⁶ James Cunningham, “China Expands Influence in Nicaragua,” *Diálogo Américas*, December 21, 2022, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/china-expands-influence-in-nicaragua/>.

²⁷ “The Observatory of Economic Complexity,” OEC - the Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/>.

Beijing's Growing Regional Presence

Recognizing Central America's position as a key source of diplomatic support for Taiwan, the PRC has increasingly sought to outflank its rival in the region. Much as it has elsewhere in the world, Beijing has poured billions of dollars into Central American states, often in the form of massive, highly visible infrastructure and entertainment projects.²⁸ In return for such investments, China has strongly pressured regional states to sever their ties with Taiwan and switch their recognition to the PRC.²⁹ In a region that has historically struggled with limited economic growth, poorly developed infrastructure, and political instability, Beijing's offers have been difficult to refuse.³⁰

Across the region, China—and its countless state-owned enterprises (SOEs)—has been highly active. Armed with vast financial resources and growing geopolitical power, the PRC has been able to rapidly assert itself as a dominant force in the area. Over the last decade alone,

Beijing has invested in a massive range of projects in Central American countries. These have included a USD \$5.5 billion high-speed rail project in Panama, a USD \$40 million cultural center in El Salvador, and a USD \$810 million investment in Costa Rica's "transport, entertainment and technology sectors."³¹ Perhaps the most outrageous of these projects was a proposed USD \$50 billion canal across Nicaragua, which would have theoretically allowed the PRC to circumvent the Panama Canal.³² Though the canal project has since stalled due to local pushback, it is nonetheless emblematic of Beijing's growing ambition in the region.

Utilizing the ICDF, Taiwan could work to reestablish itself as a major provider of aid to regional countries, even those that have severed ties.

For the PRC, investing in Central America presents a number of valuable opportunities. Besides permitting Beijing to undermine Taiwan's diplomatic standing by peeling away its formal partners, it has also allowed China to extend its influence directly into the backyard of the United States.³³

This influence has become increasingly formalized in recent years, as several Central American states—Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua—

28 House Committee on Foreign Affairs, "China Regional Snapshot: Mexico and Central America - Committee on Foreign Affairs," Committee on Foreign Affairs, November 29, 2022, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/mexico-and-central-america/#:~:text=China's%20Investment's%20in%20Mexico%20and,with%20the%20PRC%20in%202017>.

29 Jie Xi, "China Expands Influence in Central America," VOA, February 24, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-expands-influence-in-central-america/6456733.html>.

30 Ibid; Jerry Haar, "Latin America Must Prioritize Infrastructure to Spur Economic Growth," Wilson Center, March 13, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/latin-america-must-prioritize-infrastructure-spur-economic-growth>; "A Persistent Crisis in Central America," *World Politics Review*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/why-the-central-america-crisis-is-so-persistent/>.

31 "China Regional Snapshot: Mexico and Central America - Committee on Foreign Affairs," Committee on Foreign Affairs, November 29, 2022, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/mexico-and-central-america/>; Jie Xi, "China Expands Influence in Central America," VOA, February 24, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-expands-influence-in-central-america/6456733.html>; "China Regional Snapshot: Mexico and Central America - Committee on Foreign Affairs," Committee on Foreign Affairs, November 29, 2022, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/mexico-and-central-america/>.

32 Nicholas Muller, "Nicaragua's Chinese-Financed Canal Project Still in Limbo," *The Diplomat*, August 20, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/nicaraguas-chinese-financed-canal-project-still-in-limbo/>.

33 "China Regional Snapshot: Mexico and Central America - Committee on Foreign Affairs," Committee on Foreign Affairs, November 29, 2022, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/mexico-and-central-america/>.

gua, and Panama—have signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with the PRC, committing them to joining China’s vaunted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, formerly known as “One Belt, One Road,” 一帶一路).³⁴ These MOUs—in addition to others signed by several South American nations, including Argentina and Chile—represent a bold expansion of the BRI, which was previously limited to Asia, Africa, and Europe.³⁵

The Future of Taiwan in Central America

Despite Taiwan’s best efforts, its position in Central America seems to be on shaky ground. Presented with a choice between Taipei’s more modest, people-focused aid and Beijing’s lavish, conspicuous spending, a growing number of regional capitals have opted for the latter. While this is not a new phenomenon—China has outspent Taiwan in countries around the world, from Africa to Oceania—Central America’s long history of ties with Taiwan and close proximity to the United States makes these recent developments all the more troubling.³⁶

As President Tsai’s recent visit to Guatemala and Belize clearly demonstrated, Taiwan is well aware of the need to provide reassurance to the region. During her remarks in Guatemala City on March 31, Tsai repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Taiwan-Guatemala alliance, as well as Taiwan’s many contributions to partner countries in Central America:

“I also want to tell you that our embassy has worked with the private sector in Taiwan over the past several years to arrange donations of wheelchairs and other assistive devices in Guatemala. Donation ceremonies in Guatemala have been presided over by President [Alejandro] Giammattei. Such donations from Taiwan enable underprivileged persons in remote villages of Guatemala to live much safer and more convenient lives. [...] We all share the same goal. We all want to see Taiwan’s efforts have [a] positive impact in every part of the world. Each of you is a source of pride for Taiwan. I thank you all. Taiwan is lucky to have you.”³⁷

While Tsai’s efforts were certainly admirable, regional trends remain concerning. As numerous commentators have noted, China’s investments in Central America are simply too large for Taiwan to match.³⁸ And though Guatemala and Belize have consistently affirmed their support for the Taiwan alliance, China is unlikely to back down in its efforts to sway them to its cause.³⁹ With

34 “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Green Finance & Development Center,” <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

35 Ariel González Levaggi and Ryan Berg, “Argentina’s Embrace of China Should Be a Wake-Up Call,” *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/23/argentina-china-us-imf-bri-debt-economy-summit-americas/>; “China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Chile,” *BORGEN*, October, <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/belt-and-road-initiative-in-chile/>; Lucas Chiodi and Thu Nguyen Hoang Anh, “The Belt and Road Initiative in Latin America: How China Makes Friends and What This Means for the Region,” *Latin American Focus Group*, March 18, 2022, <https://blogs.eui.eu/latin-american-working-group/the-belt-and-road-initiative-in-latin-america-how-china-makes-friends-and-what-this-means-for-the-region/>.

36 Yike Fu, “The Quiet China-Africa Revolution: Chinese Investment,” *The Diplomat*, November 22, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/the-quiet-china-africa-revolution-chinese-investment/>; Marshall Reid, Russell Hsiao, and John Dotson, “Quarterly Connections, Q1 2023,” Global Taiwan Institute, March 2023, https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Quarterly-Connections_2023Q1.pdf.

37 “President Tsai Arrives in Guatemala on Diplomatic Visit and Attends Welcoming Reception,” <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6474>.

38 Megan Janetsky, “Taiwan’s President Seeks to Strengthen Relations with Allies in Central America Visit,” *PBS NewsHour*, April 1, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/taiwans-president-seeks-to-strengthen-relations-with-allies-in-central-america-visit>.

39 Johnson Lai, “Guatemala Leader in Taiwan Expresses ‘Rock-Solid Friendship,’” *AP News*, April 25, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-guatemala-china-f173f76769d-fa0cb208bb05d98bd3909>; and Jose Sanchez, “Belize Reaffirms Ties with Taipei as Taiwanese President Visits,” *Reuters*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/belize-reaffirms-ties-with-taipei-taiwanese-president-visits-2023-04-03/>.

this in mind, Taiwan should take a clear-eyed, pragmatic approach to the region, recognizing that aid programs and trade negotiations do not necessarily need to be limited by a lack of formal relations.

As its list of formal allies has shrunk, Taipei has been forced to confront challenging questions about the future of its relations with its growing list of non-diplomatic partners. For the most part, it has opted to pursue a relatively normal—albeit quiet—approach, working to build productive relationships with partners around the world, regardless of their respective “One-China Policies.” Rather than limiting its operations to formal allies, the organization has established programs in a wide range of countries, including Türkiye, Myanmar, and Uganda.⁴⁰ Much like those located in Central America, these programs largely consist of smaller, more people-focused projects that capitalize on Taiwan’s technical expertise and world-leading medical technology.

On the trade front, Taiwan has also proven capable of striking deals with countries that are not its diplomatic partners. In Europe, for instance, Taiwan has been able to build highly lucrative trade ties, with trade between the European Union and Taiwan increasing “more than eightfold over the past two decades.”⁴¹ And while many countries—including the United States—remain wary of signing full FTAs with the island democracy, Taiwan has nevertheless been successful in negotiating a range of smaller, more narrowly focused deals.⁴²

For Taiwan, these successes could serve as a template for a future approach to Central America. Utilizing the ICDF, Taiwan could work to reestablish itself as a major provider of aid to regional countries, even those that have severed ties. While doing so may be unpopular among the Taiwanese population, it could nevertheless allow Taiwan to build goodwill and improve its reputation as a valuable contributor to the international system.⁴³ Similarly, Taipei could attempt to reinvigorate its trade ties with Central American states, negotiating more specific, sector- or product-based deals when possible. All the while, Taiwan could continue to present itself as a democratic alternative to the PRC. In doing so, Taiwan could make progress toward solidifying its position in Central America.

40 “TaiwanICDF - Turkey,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=65031&ctNode=31694&mp=2>; “TaiwanICDF - Myanmar,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/ct?xItem=65029&ctNode=31688&mp=2>; “TaiwanICDF - Uganda,” <https://www.icdf.org.tw/wSite/np?ctNode=31648&mp=2>.

41 “EU Trade Relations with Taiwan,” European Commission, April 28, 2023, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/taiwan_en.

42 Rachel Oswald, “Path Uncertain for US-Taiwan Free Trade Deal despite Hill Support,” *Roll Call*, October 3, 2022, <https://rollcall.com/2022/10/03/path-uncertain-for-us-taiwan-free-trade-deal-despite-hill-support/>; and Daniel Workman, “Top US Trading Partners,” <https://www.worldstopexports.com/taiwans-top-import-partners/>.

43 James Baron, “Why Taiwan Should Maintain Its Foreign Aid Programs,” *Taipei Times*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2018/06/06/2003694392>.

The Status of Delayed US Weapons Sales to Taiwan—and the Potential Impacts on Taiwan’s Defense Planning

By John Dotson

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The Recent History of US-Taiwan Arms Sales Prior to the Ukraine War

Throughout most of the first two decades of the 21st century, arms sales from the United States to Taiwan were one of the visible and active—and it could be credibly argued, the most active—component of government-to-government relations between the two states. For nearly four decades following the US severing of diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC) in 1979, arms sales represented one of the most pivotal (or at least, the most public) remaining engagements in the unofficial ties between Washington and Taipei. However, such engagements were often fraught with frustrations related to either the denial of sales, or else long delays in delivery from the US end—frequently related to either US presidential displeasure with Taiwan governmental actions, or out of concern by US policymakers for maintaining positive relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).⁴⁴

This began to change significantly during the latter half of the Trump Administration, as administration officials began to speak of a “more normal process” for arms sales to Taiwan, which by implication would be de-linked from the US-PRC diplomatic relationship.⁴⁵ This has continued under the Biden Administration, as both presidential administrations and the US Congress have become more forward-leaning not only with arms sales, but also with a host of policy shifts and new legislation—such as the *TAIPEI Act of 2019*—that heralded closer state-to-state ties between Washington and Taipei outside of the narrow scope of arms sales.⁴⁶ These policy shifts opened up a range of new weapons purchases: to include some long-delayed, like the 2019 approval of an USD \$8 billion sale of 66 F-16C/D fighter jets;⁴⁷ and others that supported Taiwan’s own defense

sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/RL30957.pdf.

45 Remarks by Randall Shriver, the serving as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, at the Heritage Foundation, June 26, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/event/the-department-defenses-indo-pacific-strategy>.

46 “S.1678 - Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019” (Public Law 116-135, enacted March 26, 2020), <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116th-congress/senate-bill/1678/text>.

47 Brad Lendon, “US Finalizes Sale of 66 F-16 Fighters to Taiwan as China Tensions Escalate,” *CNN*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/17/asia/taiwan-us-f-16-fighter-purchase-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>; DSCA press release August 20, 2019), <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-11>.

44 Shirley Kan, “Taiwan: Major U.S. Arms Sales Since 1990,” (Congressional Research Service, August 2014), pp. 43-47, <https://www.crs.org/congress/other-issues/2014/08/04/taiwan-major-us-arms-sales-since-1990>.

manufacturing, such as the reported spring 2021 US approval of export permits for unspecified technology related to Taiwan's indigenous submarine program.⁴⁸

Figure 1: Selected Major US Arms Sales to Taiwan Prior to the Ukraine War (Initiated 2015 – 2021)

Date	Weapon System(s)*	Number of Units	Cost	Contractor	Source
Dec. 2015	FGM-148 Javelin Anti-Tank Missiles	208	USD \$57 million	Raytheon /Lockheed Martin	DSCA ⁴⁹
July 2019	Block I-92F Stinger Anti-Aircraft Missiles	250	USD \$223.56 million	Raytheon	DSCA ⁵⁰
July 2019	M1A2T Abrams Tanks	108	USD \$2 billion	General Dynamics Land Systems	DSCA ⁵¹
Aug. 2019	F-16 Block C/D Fighter Aircraft	66	USD \$8 billion	Lockheed Martin	DSCA ⁵²
Oct. 2020	HIMARS M142 Launchers and Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS)	11 launchers/ 57 missiles	USD \$436.1 million	Lockheed Martin	DSCA ⁵³
Oct. 2020	Harpoon Coastal Defense System (HCDS) and RGM-84L-4 Harpoon Block II Missiles	100 launchers/ 400 missiles	USD \$2.37 billion	Boeing	DSCA ⁵⁴
Aug. 2021	M109A6 Paladin Self-Propelled Howitzers	40	USD \$750 million	BAE Systems	DSCA ⁵⁵

*Note that sale usually includes additional associated support equipment and munitions, and/or contractor technical support.

48 Lawrence Chung, "Biden Gives Taiwan a Boost with Submarine Technology It Can't Build on Its Own," *South China Morning Post*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/biden-gives-taiwan-a-boost-with-submarine-technology-sales-2021-3>.

49 Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) press release, December 16, 2015, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-3>.

50 DSCA press release, July 18, 2019, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-10>.

51 DSCA press release, July 8, 2019, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-9>.

52 DSCA press release, August 20, 2019, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-11>.

53 DSCA press release, October 21, 2020, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-15>.

54 DSCA press release, October 26, 2020, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-17>.

55 DSCA press release, August 4, 2021, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-20>.

Competing Requirements for Ukraine and Other Factors Delaying Deliveries to Taiwan

While many of the previous political roadblocks to US weapons sales have been removed in recent years, Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine once again threw a significant spanner into those works. Prior to the start of the Ukraine War, Taiwan [acting through the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO), its *de facto* embassy in Washington, and with the purchaser identified as such in US government press materials] had a series of major arms sales from the United States in the pipeline (see *Figure 1*).

Some of these purchases had faced delivery delays even prior to the war, caused by COVID-19 pandemic supply chain disruptions and other factors. The significant

The delays in the delivery of purchased weapons systems have been a subject of complaint among Taiwanese lawmakers and defense officials, and have prompted promises by US political figures to speed up the backlogged deliveries.

contributions of weapons and other defense materiel made by the United States and other NATO members to Ukraine since the start of the invasion—the US Government has officially provided approximately USD \$44 billion in military aid to Ukraine between January 2021 and early August 2023⁵⁶—have placed a significantly in-

creased strain on the routine peacetime defense industrial capacity of these states, and further contributed to delays in the delivery timelines for purchased defense systems made by Taiwan.⁵⁷ (Russia, itself a major arms supplier, has suffered severe materiel losses and parts shortfalls that have also impacted sales to its customer states, thereby creating still further shortfalls and delays in the international arms market.⁵⁸) This factor has also made the US military a competitor with Taiwan and other states for some of the weapons systems in question, as the US military's own inventories—particularly of anti-tank and artillery systems—have been drawn upon extensively in order to rapidly send weapons to Ukraine.⁵⁹

Currently, it has been estimated that approximately USD \$19 billion worth of purchased weapons systems are still awaiting delivery to Taiwan. In testimony provided in July 2023 before the US House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner stated that the delays were caused primarily by production problems within the US defense manufacturing industry, stating: "What we are facing is not a backlog as is sometimes described, but rather concerns and slowdowns within all of our industrial base that [are] affecting our military production and our defense industrial base systematically, not individually as it relates to Taiwan."⁶⁰

ment Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, August 14, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

57 Seth Robson, "Report to Congress Finds Arms Deliveries to Taiwan Have Been Slowed by Ukraine War," *Stars and Stripes*, December 1, 2022, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2022-12-01/taiwan-arms-deliveries-ukraine-war-8257865.html.

58 Rhea Mogul, "Russia Can't Meet India Arms Deliveries Due to Ukraine War, Indian Air Force Says," *CNN*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/24/india/india-russia-arms-delivery-ukraine-war-intl-hnk/index.html>.

59 Mark F. Cancian, "Is the United States Running out of Weapons to Send to Ukraine?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 16, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-running-out-weapons-send-ukraine>.

60 Mark F. Cancian, "Is the United States Running out of Weap-

56 "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," US State Depart-

Political Debates and Authorities Surrounding the Prioritization of Arms Shipments to Taiwan

Amidst such delays and manufacturing shortfalls, accompanied by the steadily rising PRC coercive military pressure applied against Taiwan from 2019 to the present, different voices have called for ways to prioritize the delivery of promised systems to Taiwan. One of the most controversial has been a call from some US political figures and political commentators to back away from the commitments made to Ukraine, and to prioritize instead delivery of weapons systems to Taiwan.⁶¹ (It is worth noting that senior representatives of Taiwan's current government have themselves rejected this approach, and indicated their continued support for the international effort to aid Ukraine.⁶²)

The delays in the delivery of purchased weapons systems have been a subject of complaint among Taiwanese lawmakers and defense officials, and have prompted promises by US political figures to speed up the backlogged deliveries. In April, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, led a bipartisan Congressional delegation on a trip to Taiwan, and addressed the arms sales issue in comments to members of the Legislative Yuan (立法院). Rep. McCaul told his interlocutors that “We want to do everything possible to deter a very aggressive nation, Communist China, from ever thinking about landing on the shores

of this beautiful island [...] On the weapons issue, I sign off on those deliveries and we are doing everything in our power to expedite this.”⁶³

More recently, the Biden Administration has invoked “Presidential Drawdown Authority” (PDA)—already used extensively to facilitate the transfer of equipment to Ukraine⁶⁴—to speed up weapons shipments to Taiwan. PDA is a component of the *Foreign Assistance Act*, whose operative text authorizes the president, in circumstances under which “an unforeseen emergency exists which requires immediate military assistance to a foreign country or international organization,” to order “the drawdown of defense articles from the stocks of the Department of Defense, defense services of the Department of Defense, and military education and training, of an aggregate value of not to exceed \$100,000,000 in any fiscal year.”⁶⁵

The FY2023 *National Defense Authorization Act* (signed into law December 2022), significantly expanded PDA for Taiwan, authorizing up to USD \$1 billion per year in transfers to benefit the island's defense.⁶⁶ In mid-May, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin first indicated to reporters that the administration had plans to use PDA to deliver a new package of military equipment to Taiwan, without specifics regarding the contents of

ons to Send to Ukraine?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 16, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unit-ed-states-running-out-weapons-send-ukraine>.

61 For examples of this discourse, see: “Hawley Urges Blinken to Prioritize Arms for Taiwan Over Ukraine,” press release from the office of US Senator Josh Hawley, December 6, 2022, <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/hawley-urges-blinken-prioritize-arms-taiwan-over-ukraine>; Elbridge A. Colby and Alex Velez-Green, “To Avert War with China, the U.S. Must Prioritize Taiwan Over Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/18/taiwan-ukraine-support-russia-china/>.

62 Josh Rogin, “Ukraine is Urging the U.S. Not to Abandon Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, May 10, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/10/taiwan-defense-ukraine-russia-china/>.

63 “Senior US Lawmaker Says Doing Everything Possible to Speed Up Taiwan Arms Deliveries,” *Reuters*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/senior-us-lawmaker-says-doing-everything-possible-speed-up-taiwan-arms-2023-04-07/>.

64 “Use of Presidential Drawdown Authority for Military Assistance for Ukraine,” US State Department Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, May 9, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/use-of-presidential-drawdown-authority-for-military-assistance-for-ukraine/>.

65 *Foreign Assistance Act*, Section 2318 “Special Authority” (p. 714), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2020-title22/pdf/USCODE-2020-title22-chap32-subchapII-partII-sec2318.pdf>.

66 US-Taiwan Business Council, “Taiwan in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), 2023,” December 23, 2022, <https://www.ustaiwandefense.com/taiwan-in-the-national-defense-authorization-act-ndaa-2023/>.

this package.⁶⁷ In late July, this was clarified to a limited degree, with the administration's announcement that it would be providing Taiwan with a USD \$345 million package of equipment under PDA authorities—with the package reportedly to contain four MQ-9A Reaper UAVs, as well as training support and small arms ammunition, but without other specifics provided regarding either the contents or the timetable for delivery.⁶⁸

Delays and Delivery Status for Major Purchased Weapons Systems

Delays in the Delivery of Anti-Armor Systems

From the outset of the Ukraine conflict, man-portable anti-tank systems (MANPATs) (i.e., portable, shoulder-fired anti-tank missiles) have been one of the key-stone weapons types employed by Ukrainian forces to destroy or disable Russian armored vehicles—and accordingly, have seen both high rates of expenditure by Ukrainian forces and high rates of resupply by NATO member states.⁶⁹ The high rate of expenditure



Image: ROC military personnel fire a Javelin anti-tank missile during exercises in Pingtung County (southeastern Taiwan) in September 2022.⁷⁰

in MANPATs, and the prioritization given to Ukraine as a theater of active combat, has created serious delivery delays in pre-existing FGM-148 Javelin sales to both Taiwan and other end-use purchasers. (Taiwan is not alone as a customer for Javelins: for example, Thailand, Georgia, and Lithuania all placed purchases for Javelins in 2021, for a total of 612 missiles.⁷¹)

As noted in Figure 1, Taiwan made confirmed purchases of Javelins and associated equipment in 2015, and per test-firings publicized during military training exercises, an undetermined number have been delivered (*see accompanying image*). Unconfirmed Taiwan press reporting in April 2021 indicated that a total of 400 Javelin missiles and 42 associated launch units would be delivered in a single shipment to Taiwan sometime in

67 Ashley Roque, “New Taiwan Military Aid Package Coming in ‘Near Term,’ SecDef Confirms,” *Breaking Defense*, May 16, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/05/new-taiwan-military-aid-package-coming-in-near-term-secdef-confirms/>.

68 “U.S. Announces \$345M Weapons Package for Taiwan,” *Politico*, July 28, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/28/u-s-300million-weapons-taiwan-00108811>; “US Aid Includes Four MQ-9A Drones: Source,” *Taipei Times*, August 15, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/08/15/2003804764>.

69 For example, in March 2022 the UK Government indicated that it had committed to provide Ukraine with “over 4,000 NLAW [anti-tank missiles] and Javelin anti-tank systems... and 6,000 new anti-tank and high explosive missiles.” (See: UK Ministry of Defense, “UK Convenes International Conference to Secure Military Aid for Ukraine,” press release, March 31, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-convenes-international-conference-to-secure-military-aid-for-ukraine>.) The following month, the US Government declared that it had committed 12,000 anti-tank systems (“Over 5,000 Javelin anti-armor systems [and] over 7,000 other anti-armor systems”) for delivery to Ukraine. (See: “Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine,” US Department of Defense press release, April 7, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2992414/fact-sheet-us-security-assistance-to-ukraine/>.)

70 Image source: “Taiwan Set to Start Receiving Javelin Missiles in 2023,” *Focus Taiwan*, March 31, 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202303310016>.

71 Note that this is only a partial list of Javelin MANPATs purchasers. See: DSCA press release, July 30, 2021, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/thailand-javelin-missiles>; DSCA press release, August 3, 2021, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/georgia-javelin-missiles>; DSCA press release, December 21, 2021, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/lithuania-javelin-missiles>.

2022.⁷² Whether that reporting was correct or not, the Javelin deliveries were apparently delayed by competing production and delivery requirements. More recent reporting from March 2023 has indicated that 400 promised Javelins—in addition to an unspecified number of TOW 2B anti-tank missiles⁷³—would be delivered to Taiwan in two batches: a first shipment of 200 to be delivered sometime in the latter half of 2023, and a second shipment of 200 to be delivered at an unspecified point in 2024.⁷⁴

In addition to their levels of expenditure in Ukraine and competition among international buyers, the shortage of Javelins also demonstrates the production problems—some of which are connected to supply chain issues that predated the war—that have affected defense contractors trying to catch up. One such issue has been the shortage of semiconductors experienced in the immediate wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which stymied manufacturing in a wide array of industries, from automobiles to personal electronics. White House statements pointed this out in conjunction with a May 2, 2022 visit by President Biden to a Lockheed-Martin missile manufacturing facility in Troy, Alabama, noting that each Javelin required

more than 200 chips (and asserting this as further justification for why America needed to increase its own semiconductor manufacturing capacity).⁷⁵

In response to the increased demand, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon (the two defense contractors that produce the missiles in a joint venture) promised in 2022 to nearly double Javelin production, from the previous rate of 2,100 units per year to nearly 4,000.⁷⁶ Additionally, in early May 2023 the contractors announced a new three-year deal with the US Army—one that confirmed the intent to increase production (to 3,960 units per year), and secured an initial order for an unspecified number of Javelins at USD \$1 billion, with the possibility of production valued at up to USD \$7.2 billion through 2026. Lockheed Martin executive Dave Pantano stated that the deal would allow the manufacturers to “support the increased international interest for this multi-purpose weapon system” among both US military and allied clients.⁷⁷

Delays in the Delivery of Anti-Armor Systems

Similar dynamics to those affecting Javelin deliveries have been seen in the delayed deliveries to Taiwan of FIM-92 Stinger Man-Portable Air Defense Systems

72 “美售台400枚新型標槍反裝甲飛彈 2022年一次運交台灣” (“The United States Sold 400 New Javelin Anti-Tank Missiles to Taiwan and Will Deliver Them in 2022”), *Liberty Times*, April 10, 2021, <https://def.ltn.com.tw/article/breakingnews/3495384>.

73 The weapons in question appear to be part of an arms sale first announced in 2015: that of 769 TOW 2B Aero, Radio Frequency (RF) Missiles (BGM-71F Series), and 14 TOW 2B Aero, Radio Frequency (RF) (BGM-71F-Series) Fly-to-Buy Missiles, and associated equipment. (See: DSCA press release, December 16, 2015, <https://www.dscamilitary.com/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-tow>.) It is unclear from public reporting how many of these missiles, if any, may have already been delivered. Taiwan press reporting in March 2018 indicated that the TOW 2B missiles would be delivered in sequential annual batches through summer 2024. (See: “US, Taiwan Sign Missile Deal: Source,” *Taipei Times*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/03/31/2003690383>.)

74 “Taiwan Set to Start Receiving Javelin Missiles in 2023,” *Focus Taiwan*, March 31, 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202303310016>.

75 “President Biden Thanks Employees at Javelin Production Facility in Troy, AL,” Lockheed-Martin press release, May 4, 2022, <https://lockheedmartin.com/en-us/news/features/2022/president-biden-thanks-lockheed-martin-troy-employees-javelin-facility.html>; Rebecca Shabad, “Biden Emphasizes Need to Keep Arming Ukraine in Tour of Alabama Weapons Plant,” *NBC News*, May 3, 2022, <https://news.yahoo.com/biden-heads-deep-red-alabama-135430202.html>.

76 “Ramping Up Javelin Production to Support Increased Demands,” Lockheed-Martin press release, October 11, 2022, <https://www.lockheedmartin.com/en-us/news/features/2022/ramping-up-javelin-production-to-support-increased-demands.html>.

77 Ashley Roque, “Army and Javelin Joint Venture Ink 3-Year Deal Valued Over \$7 Billion,” *Breaking Defense*, May 4, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/05/army-and-javelin-joint-venture-ink-3-year-deal-valued-over-7-billion/>.

(MANPADS). A weapon that first gained fame in its successful use by Afghan guerillas against occupying Soviet forces in the 1980s, the Stinger has reaffirmed its value in the ongoing Ukraine conflict—where it has been used extensively against Russian aircraft, particularly in terms of destroying both rotary-wing and fixed-wing aircraft engaged in low-flying logistics or close-air support (CAS) operations. The United States has currently committed to provide Ukraine with 1,600 Stingers.⁷⁸

Taiwan's own purchased Stingers were reportedly originally scheduled for delivery by 2026, but concerns were raised in spring 2022 by Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部) that competing demands might delay the promised delivery timetable.⁷⁹ However, in late May 2023 Taiwan media reported that a shipment of Stingers had arrived on board a cargo aircraft at Taoyuan International Airport, and had been turned over to the MND. This same reporting also indicated that the shipment was part of a promised USD \$500 million arms package to be delivered under PDA, as reported earlier in the month.⁸⁰ The number of Stinger systems was not reported, and it is unclear how many remain to be delivered, or on what timetable.

Delays in the Delivery of Artillery Systems

Artillery has proven to be a key factor in the Ukraine war, and NATO countries sympathetic to Ukraine have either delivered, or pledged to deliver, a myriad of artillery systems from their own inventories. From the early months of the conflict the United States has

been providing advanced artillery systems to Ukraine, including an unspecified number of units of the M177 155mm howitzer.⁸¹ There has also been media speculation over the past year that the United States would supply Ukraine with units of the M109A6 Paladin 155mm self-propelled howitzer, and in May 2023 Ukrainian military media indicated that some of these units had arrived in the country.⁸²

Such commitments have inevitably impacted planned sales to Taiwan. As noted in *Figure 1*, in summer 2021 Taiwan made an agreement to purchase 40 M109A6 Paladin self-propelled howitzers and associated equipment from the United States, at a cost of USD \$750 million.⁸³ However, in May 2022 Taiwan's MND indicated that the Paladin delivery would likely be delayed until at least 2026, due to limited manufacturing capacity and the prioritization of production for Ukraine.⁸⁴ Subsequently, in September the MND announced that the Paladin sale had been canceled; in its stead, Taiwan would add additional units to its 2020 purchase of eleven M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) (*see*

78 "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," US State Department Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, May 9, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

79 Matthew Strong, Taiwan military sees possible delay in Stinger deliveries from US, *Taiwan News*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4526448>.

80 Wu Che-yu, Su Yung-yao and Jonathan Chin, "US Stinger Missiles Delivered: Report," *Taipei Times*, May 27, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2023/05/27/2003800503>.

81 David Vergun, "M777 Artillery Deliveries Should Help Ukraine in the Donbas, Says Official," DoD press release, April 29, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3015463/m777-artillery-deliveries-should-help-ukraine-in-the-donbas-says-official/>. As of May 2023, the US had committed to Ukraine "Over 160 155mm Howitzers and over 2,000,000 155mm artillery rounds," and "72 105mm Howitzers and over 450,000 105mm artillery rounds," in addition to other artillery ammunition. (See: "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," US State Department Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, May 9, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.)

82 "Servicemen of Ukraine Trained with Paladin Self-Propelled Howitzers," *Militarnyi*, May 6, 2023, <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/servicemen-of-ukraine-trained-with-paladin-self-propelled-howitzers/>.

83 DSCA press release, August 4, 2021, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/taipei-economic-and-cultural-representative-office-united-states-20>.

84 Christian Shepherd and Vic Chiang, "Howitzer Delivery to Taiwan Delayed by Strained U.S. Supply Chain," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/03/taiwan-ukraine-howitzers-paladins-weapons/>.

Figure 1), a vehicle-mounted artillery system with an estimated range of 300km. The new sale would purchase an additional 18 launchers (for a total of 29), and increase the HIMARS munitions purchases to 84 Army Tactical Cruise Missiles (ATACMS) and 864 long-range rockets. The increased HIMARS package was reported to cost NTD \$32.5 billion (USD \$1.06 billion), with the first batch of 11 launch vehicles (matching the original order) reportedly scheduled for delivery sometime in 2024.⁸⁵

The field of artillery sales has also provided one example in which Taiwan could, for the first time in many years, make a major weapons purchase from a country other than the United States. Among European countries, the Czech Republic has shown itself over the past year to be one of the most forward-leaning in terms of engaging with Taiwan, despite intense PRC pressure. In late March, Taiwan media reported that the government was near agreement with a Czech delegation to purchase a large but unspecified number (given at between 200 to 400) of large, 12-wheel semi-trailer trucks for use in heavy weapons transport; an unspecified number and model of 155m self-propelled howitzers; and additional possible military drone sales.⁸⁶ If such a sale does indeed come to fruition, it would break what has been a *de facto* arms embargo on Taiwan kept in place by European states for roughly the past two decades.⁸⁷



Image: An ROC Air Force F-16 fighter (foreground) escorting a PLA Air Force H-6 bomber at an unspecified location near Taiwan (February 2020).⁸⁸

Delays in the Delivery of Artillery Systems

The largest arms sale by far from the United States to Taiwan in recent years is the 2019 agreement for Taiwan to purchase 66 F-16 Block C/D fighter aircraft at a cost of USD \$8 billion (see Figure 1), a purchase that would raise the ROC Air Force's F-16 inventory to over 200 planes. This purchase exists in tandem with an earlier and ongoing program to upgrade 141 of the ROC Air Force's existing fleet of F-16s with more advanced avionics, to include the AN/APG-83 agile beam radar, a new onboard computer, and upgraded electronic warfare gear.⁸⁹

In addition to being the largest pending arms sale to Taiwan, the F-16 purchase is also one of the most complex in terms of factors complicating delivery of the aircraft. The contractor for the F-16 program, Lockheed-Martin, manufactures the airframes at only one facility in Greenville, South Carolina (with parts manufacturing

85 Lo Tien-pin and Jonathan Chin, "Military Allocates Funds for HIMARS," *Taipei Times*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2022/09/01/2003784535>.

86 Keoni Everington, "Taiwan Nearing Deal on Missile Trucks, Self-Propelled Artillery from Czech Republic," *Taiwan News*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4848774>.

87 Oliver Bräuner, "How Europe Shies from Taiwan," *The Diplomat*, March 20, 2012, <https://thediplomat.com/2012/03/how-europe-shies-from-taiwan/>.

88 Image source: "Chinese Bomber Flies Over Taiwan Strait as Tensions Rise," *Straits Times*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/chinese-bomber-flies-over-taiwan-strait-as-tensions-rise>.

89 Mike Yeo, "Taiwan to Deploy Upgraded F-16 Jets, Says Air Chief," *Defense News*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2021/03/22/taiwan-to-deploy-upgraded-f-16-jets-says-air-chief/>.

also conducted at a facility in Johnstown, Pennsylvania).⁹⁰ This limited manufacturing capacity has been strained by orders from multiple foreign purchasers for both new aircraft and sustainment services.⁹¹ And once again, the Ukraine War could introduce further competition into this process: although no commitments have yet been made to provide Ukraine with F-16 fighters, in late May US and G7 leaders reached agreements to provide Ukrainian pilots with training on the F-16 airframe, presumably as part of a longer-term program to provide the aircraft to the Ukrainian Air Force in the future.⁹²

Taiwan's F-16s from the 2019 purchase were reportedly originally scheduled for phased deliveries between 2023 and 2026, but have been delayed. (Somewhat ironically, prior to the Ukraine War, there was discussion in January 2022 to the effect that F-16 deliveries to Taiwan would be expedited in reaction to increasing PRC coercive military pressure.⁹³) In May, ROC Defense Minister

Chiu Kuo-cheng (邱國正) indicated that F-16 deliveries had been delayed due to supply chain issues, as well as bugs in the aircraft's flight control software. Despite this, Chiu indicated that the promised aircraft were still expected for delivery by 2026.⁹⁴

Conclusions

As discussed in a previous *Global Taiwan Brief* article,⁹⁵ significant delays in the delivery of expected weapons systems to the ROC armed forces could prompt Taiwan's MND to consider a variety of stop-gap options, to include the redeployment of existing artillery systems to offshore islands and coastal areas, and renewed maintenance efforts to keep older systems active in the military's order-of-battle. The delays in F-16C/D delivery could arguably be the most impactful of all, by limiting the capacity of the ROC Air Force to respond to steadily advancing PRC encroachments into the airspace near and around Taiwan, and possibly forcing a still-further reliance on ground-based air defense assets for tracking and contingency response operations.⁹⁶ In connection with the delayed F-16C/D deliveries, Taiwan defense officials are reportedly considering steps to extend the service life of existing aircraft. In late July, Taiwan's MND revealed that it was evaluating measures for potentially extending the service lives of nine Dassault Mirage-2000 fighter aircraft, intended to determine the feasibility of keeping these airframes in service for an

90 "Lockheed Martin Inaugurates F-16 Production Line in Greenville, South Carolina," Lockheed-Martin press release, April 23, 2019, <https://news.lockheedmartin.com/2019-04-23-Lockheed-Martin-Inaugurates-F-16-Production-Line-in-Greenville-South-Carolina>; "Johnstown Facility to Build Parts for New F-16s," Lockheed-Martin press release, September 2, 2021, <https://news.lockheedmartin.com/johnstown-facility-build-parts-new-f-16>.

91 The F-16 is operated by multiple NATO member states, Singapore, Israel, and Egypt, among many other countries. For just one example of F-16 production for foreign states, see recent US sales of F-16 aircraft and parts/sustainment service to Pakistan: DSCA press release, February 12, 2016, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/government-pakistan-f-16-block-52-aircraft>; DSCA press release, September 7, 2022, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/pakistan-f-16-case-sustainment>.

92 "F-16 Training, Aircraft, to Fill Ukraine's Mid-Term, Long-Term Defense Needs," Dept. of Defense press release, May 23, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3405085/f-16-training-aircraft-to-fill-ukraines-mid-term-long-term-defense-needs/>.

93 "U.S. to Expedite Delivery of F-16V Block 70 to Taiwan," *Global Defense Corp*, January 23, 2022, <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/2022/01/23/the-u-s-to-expedite-delivery-of-f-16v-block-70-to-taiwan/?msclkid=365332a4cbca11ec806b645d-d591a4ea>.

d591a4ea.

94 "Taiwan Says Software Problems Delaying New F-16 Deliveries," *Reuters*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/taiwan-says-software-problems-delaying-new-f-16-deliveries-2023-05-25/>.

95 John Dotson, "The Implications of Delivery Delays in Purchased Arms for Taiwan's Defense Planning," *Global Taiwan Brief*, May 18, 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/05/the-implications-of-delivery-delays-in-purchased-arms-for-taiwans-defense-planning/>.

96 John Dotson, "Amid Growing Chinese Threats, Taiwan Seeks to Bolster Its Air Defense Capabilities," *Global Taiwan Brief*, April 20, 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/04/amid-growing-chinese-threats-taiwan-seeks-to-bolster-its-air-defense-capabilities/>.

additional 20 years.⁹⁷

The most likely impacts, however, will most likely be two-fold. The first of these is a significant delay in training. Newer, advanced weapons systems cannot be simply thrown into a military organization and be immediately useful—extensive training and familiarization is often necessary in terms of the human “software” required to reach operating efficiency with new “hardware.” The longer that delivery of new systems is delayed, the longer it will take ROC military personnel to reach proficiency in their use, and for the ROC service branches to effectively incorporate them in terms of maintenance and other routine—but vitally important—requirements.

Extended delays are also likely to give further impetus to an ongoing and increasing emphasis in Taiwan on indigenous defense production.⁹⁸ Long dependent on foreign arms purchases, in recent years Taiwan’s defense establishment and government-backed research institutes—in particular, the National Chung-shan Institute of Science and Technology (國家中山科學研究院)—have made extensive progress in developing and manufacturing indigenous defense systems, especially in the areas of shipbuilding and of anti-ship and surface-to-air missile systems.⁹⁹

The projected delays in weapons deliveries to Taiwan

provide yet another example as to how Russia’s war of naked aggression in Ukraine is having secondary effects far beyond Europe—and significantly impacting Taiwan’s efforts to bolster its defenses in the face of gradually accelerating PRC coercive military pressure.

97 “Air Force to Assess Extending Service Life of Mirage Fighter Jets,” *Central News Agency*, July 31, 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202307310026>.

98 John Dotson, “Taiwan’s New Special Defense Budget Emphasizes Indigenous Anti-Ship Weapons Production,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, November 3, 2021, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2021/11/taiwans-new-special-defense-budget-emphasizes-indigenous-anti-ship-weapons-production/>.

99 John Dotson, “Taiwan Pursues Upgrades to Its Tactical Missile Systems,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, May 5, 2021, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2021/05/taiwan-pursues-upgrades-to-its-tactical-missile-systems/>; John Dotson, “Taiwan’s Naval Shipbuilding Programs Point towards an Evolving Direction in Defense Policy,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, November 30, 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/11/taiwans-naval-shipbuilding-programs-point-to-towards-an-evolving-direction-in-defense-policy/>.

Implications of the Growing Nexus between China, Russia, and North Korea for the Taiwan Strait

By: Russell Hsiao and Eric Jung

The July gathering between senior leaders from the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Russian Federation, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to mark the 70th anniversary of the armistice that halted fighting in the 1950-53 Korean War was not simple pageantry. The presence of the three senior leaders—who represent nations that were military allies during the Korean War—was extraordinary not least for the optics, but also for what it signaled for geopolitics in East Asia.

Despite limits to the trilateral relationship's current growth to a genuine military alliance, the acceleration in the deepening of political, economic, and military ties between Beijing and Moscow—as reflected by the March 2023 nine-point joint statement that “explicitly identified the United States as their common adversary and clearly articulated the strategic logic of their geopolitical alignment”¹⁰⁰—coupled by their simultaneous increased engagement with Pyongyang, have under-examined implications for regional security and the Taiwan Strait.

While most international media outlets and commentators focused on Pyongyang's hosting of the 70th-anniversary commemorative event as marking the reopening of North Korean borders following the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting between the three allies are significant for their political overtones. Against the backdrop of US-China strategic competition, Chinese support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the growing alignment between Beijing and Moscow, an increased engagement with Pyongyang harkens the nascent re-emergence of a major bloc in a new Cold War.

A Brief Historical Context of the Trilateral Relationship

The appearance of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo Member Li Hongzhong (李鴻忠) and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu—the first by a Russian defense minister to North Korea since the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union—together at North Korea's celebration¹⁰¹ of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Korean War was striking. Shoigu's presence was aimed at securing North Korean military aid, whereas the presence of Li would appear politically incongruous to the occasion, if not for the fact that Li is a member of

100 Heather Ashby, Mary Glantz, Jennifer Staas, and Andrew Scobell, “Xi and Putin Flaunt Deepening Ties, Flout the U.S.-led Order,” USIP, March 24, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/xi-and-putin-flaunt-deepening-ties-flout-us-led-order>.

101 Hyunsu Yim and Josh Smith, “North Korea's Kim shows off banned missiles to Russian minister,” *Reuters*, July 27, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-meets-russian-defence-minister-2023-07-27/>.

the powerful 25-member CCP Politburo. According to *Foreign Policy*, the summit was intended by Pyongyang “to bolster ‘militant friendship and cooperation’ among the three nuclear powers as a deterrent against growing Western strength.”¹⁰²

To be sure, Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang fought alongside one another during the Korean War with the newly created PRC—which was then aided by the Soviet air force—while South Korea, the United States, and troops from various countries fought together to repel the communist encroachment. Since the end of the Korean War, the PRC-Soviet Union-DPRK has maintained a close if uneasy relationship with one another during most of the Cold War and even through the collapse of the Soviet Union—with Pyongyang aligning ideologically more closely with its Soviet comrades.

After ideological fissures between Mao and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev spilled out into the open in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the three military allies never regained the trust necessary to forge a genuine trilateral alliance, and the strength of the “bloc” hinged primarily on bilateral ties between Moscow-Pyongyang and Beijing-Pyongyang. However, these ties frayed in the 1990s at the end of the Cold War when both Russia and China normalized relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1990 and 1992, respectively.

Since the 2010s, with the rise of Xi Jinping (习近平) and both Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un as presidents, prior ideological differences have been set aside in favor of a geopolitical confrontation with the West. Compounded by the Ukraine war, the ties between these three countries appear to be reconstituting.

102 Alexandra Sharp. “North Korea Strengthens Ties With Russia, China,” *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/28/north-korea-russia-china-missile-defense-cooperation/>.

China-Russia-North Korea Ties under Xi Jinping

Since Xi Jinping ascended to the post of general-secretary of the CCP in 2012, China and Russia have signed seven sanctions against North Korea imposed by the United Nations (all between 2013-2017). Although previous sanctions did not elicit strong responses from the DPRK, there was a sharp—albeit brief—deterioration in ties after 2017 when Beijing and Moscow agreed to the latest and strongest set of UN sanctions imposed during the Trump Administration.¹⁰³ Whether China or Russia dutifully enforced the sanctions, in addition to previous sanctions, remains unknown; Beijing was alleged to be making oil shipments in contravention of the 2017 sanctions to North Korea less than a couple of months after its passage.¹⁰⁴

Despite the noticeable but brief downturn in relations after 2017 when China and Russia signed the latest UN sanctions, China, Russia, and North Korea soon increased their political support for one another in the following years. While this strengthening of ties may have appeared to happen quickly, it did not happen overnight and, in fact, began as early as 2018 and perhaps even earlier.

It is worth remembering how in 2018, Xi and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un engaged in a remarkable set of shuttle diplomacy through a series of closely guarded but high-profile meetings in March, May, June, and then January 2019. In April 2019, after meeting President Donald Trump in Vietnam, Kim Jong Un also traveled by armored train to Vladivostok to meet Putin.¹⁰⁵

103 Zeeshan Aleem, “Why Russia and China watered down the UN’s new North Korea sanctions,” *Vox*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/12/16294020/russia-china-water-un-sanction-north-korea>

104 Yong-weon Yu and Jin-myung Kim, “Chinese Ships Spotted Selling Oil to N.Korea,” *Chosun Media*, December 26, 2017, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2017/12/26/2017122601156.html.

105 Reuters Staff, “Putin and Kim end summit in Russia,” *Reuters*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nort->

In September 2023, Kim and Putin held another summit in Moscow following the Russian defense minister's visit to Pyongyang. The summitries culminated in Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang in June 2019,¹⁰⁶ which was Xi's first state visit to the PRC since becoming the paramount leader. Xi visited North Korea in 2008 as vice president.¹⁰⁷ The last visit by a Chinese head of state was in 2005.

Less than two years after the imposition of UN Resolution 2375, by the end of 2019, both Beijing and Russia had been actively seeking to ease the sanctions that they had previously agreed to implement.¹⁰⁸ After two years of closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in the lead-up to and especially after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, there has been a clear upgrade in bilateral ties between China and Russia.

It is within this context that the significance of the joint appearance by the senior Russian and Chinese delegations at the 70th-anniversary event in July 2023 snaps into view. The event marks not only the second known time foreign government officials were invited to enter North Korea since the start of the pandemic in late 2019 (the first being the arrival of the PRC ambassador to Pyongyang, Wang Yajun (王亞軍), in March 2023), but also the first time that the Russian defense minister visited North Korea since the end of the Cold War (the last Chinese defense minister to visit Pyongyang was

in 2009),¹⁰⁹ and the first such joint appearance between senior Chinese and Russian leaders. Moreover, this momentous meeting shows strong political and,—in the case of Moscow—military support for the DPRK.

With China already knowingly providing critical military support to Russia through the provision of drones¹¹⁰ and other dual-use technologies—not to mention material economic support—North Korea's provision of arms to Russia only strengthens comprehensive ties between the three sides. (Also of note is the role that third parties such as Iran and Cuba play in facilitating military support to Russia.¹¹¹) A July 2023 assessment published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) also verified that China is providing defense materiel for Russia in its Ukraine war.¹¹² According to Congressman Jim Himes: this report “details the extent of China's support for Putin's ongoing invasion. Russia's war against Ukraine has been enabled in no small part by China's willingness to support them, in direct and indirect ways.”¹¹³

hkorea-russia-farewell/putin-and-kim-end-summit-in-russia-idUSKCN1S10Y4.

106 Soo-hyang Choi, “China's top diplomat returns home after Pyongyang visit,” *Yonhap News Agency*, September 5, 2019, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20190905001800325>.

107 Joshua Berlinger, “Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un pledge ‘peace and stability’ during historic Pyongyang visit,” *CNN*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/19/asia/xi-jinping-pyongyang-hnk-intl/index.html>.

108 Pamela Falk, “China and Russia propose easing some United Nations sanctions against North Korea,” *CBS News*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-and-russia-propose-easing-some-united-nations-sanctions-against-north-korea/>.

109 It may be worth noting that that China's defense visited as early as 2006 and then in November 23, 2009, Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie (梁光烈) visited Pyongyang, the first defense chief to visit since 2006. (See: Reuters Staff, “China defence chief vows closer ties with North Korea,” *Reuters*, November 24, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-44203220091124>.)

110 Paul Mozur, Aaron Krolik, and Keith Brasher, “As War in Ukraine Grinds on, China Helps Refill Russian Drone Supplies,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/21/business/russia-china-drones-ukraine-war.html>.

111 Dion Nissenbaum, “Chinese Parts Help Iran Supply Drones to Russia Quickly, Investigators Say,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-helps-iran-supply-drones-to-russia-quickly-investigators-say-dd492264>.

112 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Support Provided by the People's Republic of China to Russia,” July 2023, https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/UploadedFiles/ODNI_Report_on_Chinese_Support_to_Russia.pdf.

113 House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, “Himes Statement on ODNI Report Regarding Chinese Support to Russia,” July 27, 2023, <https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=1274>.

Indeed, the IC assessed that “the PRC has become an even more critical economic partner for Russia since its invasion of Ukraine [...] The PRC has also become an increasingly important buttress for Russia in its war effort, probably supplying Moscow with key technology and dual-use equipment used in Ukraine.”¹¹⁴

With Russia now receiving material support from North Korea, and China providing political cover for their relationship, the three sides appear in recent decades to be working more closely together than ever. These trends have also coincided with more vocal support for the Chinese position on Taiwan from North Korea and Russia.

*Trilateral Cooperation between the DPRK, PRC and Russia*¹¹⁵

Date	Event
Aug. 10, 2023	In response to the recent arms development in North Korea, the United States requested a UN Security Council meeting to discuss North Korea’s weapons development and humanitarian violations. However, China and Russia challenged that request and called for a vote to not have the meeting. ¹¹⁶
July 26, 2023	Russian and Chinese delegates, which included Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Politburo member Li Hongzhong, came to North Korea to join the 70th anniversary commemorations of the Korean War. This delegation marked the first delegation since the COVID-19 pandemic began. ¹¹⁷
June 2, 2023	China and Russia ignored a US call to condemn North Korea in the UN Security Council for its attempts to launch a satellite. ¹¹⁸
Mar. 20, 2023 and Nov. 4, 2022	The United States accused Russia and China of shielding North Korea from any action by the UN Security Council for its activity with intercontinental ballistic missile launches. ¹¹⁹
Dec. 17, 2019	Russia and China proposed easing UN sanctions on North Korea. ¹²⁰
Oct. 12, 2018	Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov, China’s Foreign Affairs Vice-Minister Kong Xuanyou, and North Korea’s Foreign Vice-Minister Choe Song-hui met in Moscow to discuss cooperation during the denuclearization process. ¹²¹

114 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Support Provided by the People’s Republic of China to Russia.”

115 Table compiled by Eric Jung.

116 Margaret Besheer, “Link Between North Korea Rights Violations and Missile Program to Be Focus at UN,” VOA, August 10, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/link-between-north-korea-rights-violations-and-missile-program-to-be-focus-at-un-/7219841.html>.

117 Josh Smith, “North Korea to welcome China and Russia with military display after pandemic isolation,” Reuters, July 26, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/north-korea-welcome-china-russia-with-military-display-after-pandemic-isolation-2023-07-26/>.

118 Manas Joshi, “UNSC: China, Russia join forces to ignore US call to condemn North Korea,” WION, June 3, 2023, <https://www.wionews.com/world/unsc-china-russia-join-forces-to-ignore-us-call-to-condemn-north-korea-599864>.

119 Edith M. Lederer, “US says China and Russia blocking UN action on North Korea,” AP News, March 20, 2023, <https://ap-news.com/article/north-korea-missiles-us-china-6ce477f7e6267aba412cd4020f0bd263>; Michelle Nichols and David Brunnstrom, “U.S. accuses Russia, China of abandoning U.N. responsibility over North Korea,” Reuters, November 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-chief-urges-north-korea-resume-denuclearization-talks-2022-11-04/>.

120 Falk, “China and Russia propose easing some United Nations sanctions.”

121 Jeong-ho Lee, “China, Russia, North Korea call for adjusted sanctions ahead of denuclearization,” South China Morning Post,

Sept. 11, 2017	The UN Security Council adopted UN Resolution 2375 Strengthening Sanctions on North Korea. ¹²²
Aug. 2017	Resolution 2371, passed in August 2017, banned all exports of coal, iron, lead, and seafood. The resolution also imposed new restrictions on North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank and prohibited any increase in the number of North Koreans working in foreign countries. ¹²³
July 3, 2017	Xi Jinping visited Russia where both countries showed their support for North Korea and expressed the threat that the THAAD missile system presented. ¹²⁴

Subtle Cues on Shifting Russian and North Korean Positions in Taiwan

Against a backdrop of increased military tensions in the Taiwan Strait and renewed frictions with the United States after Joseph Biden became president, when asked about the possibility of China using force against Taiwan in October 2021, a usually tight-lipped Putin responded that China “does not need to use force” to achieve its desired “reunification” with Taiwan. “I think China does not need to use force. China is a huge powerful economy, and in terms of purchasing parity, China is the economy number one in the world ahead of the United States now,” the Russian president said. “By increasing this economic potential, China is

Many official assessments still cling to the notion that the state of Sino-Russian relations is one of an “axis of convenience.”

capable of implementing its national objectives. I do not see any threats,” Putin concluded.¹²⁵

In February 2022—a month before Russia invaded Ukraine—China-Russia announced their “no-limits”¹²⁶ friendship. In their joint statement: “The sides call for the establishment of a new kind of relationship between

world powers on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial co-operation. They reaffirm that the new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to the political and military alliances of the Cold War era. *Friendship between*

the two States has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic co-operation is neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries” (emphasis added).¹²⁷ Finally, the statement noted: “The Russian side reaffirms its support for the One-China principle,

October 10, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/10/10/china-russia-north-korea-sanctions-891640>.

122 United States Mission to the United Nations, “FACT SHEET: Resolution 2375 (2017) Strengthening Sanctions on North Korea,” September 11, 2017, <https://usun.usmission.gov/fact-sheet-resolution-2375-2017-strengthening-sanctions-on-north-korea/>.

123 Rick Gladstone, “U.N. Security Council Imposes Punishing New Sanctions on North Korea,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/05/world/asia/north-korea-sanctions-united-nations.html>.

124 Reuters Staff, “China, Russia share opposition to U.S. THAAD in South Korea: Xi,” *Reuters*, July 3, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-thaad-russia-idUSKBN19O0N8>.

125 Elliot Smith, “President Putin on Taiwan: ‘China does not need to use force,’” *CNBC*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/13/president-putin-on-taiwan-china-does-not-need-to-use-force.html>.

126 Office of the President of Russia, “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

127 Ibid.

confirms that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and opposes any form of independence of Taiwan.”¹²⁸

In August later that same year when then-US Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan, Russia’s Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova made an unusually blunt statement that the United States is a “state provocateur” and that Russia supports and reaffirms the One-China Policy. A few months later, Russia’s top diplomat Sergei Lavrov, clearly taking the side of Beijing, accused the United States of “playing with fire” around Taiwan while China was working towards a “peaceful reunification.” In February 2023, Igor Sechin, the CEO of Rosneft, said that the United States’ attempts to create its own complex microchip industry showed that “Taiwan’s return to its native harbor” was “on schedule.”¹²⁹

Many official assessments still cling to the notion that the state of Sino-Russian relations is one of an “axis of convenience.”¹³⁰ These conclusions still tend also to focus on the relative power of the two countries as an obstacle to the formation of a deepening partnership. However, these analyses overlook the deep personal and ideological affinity between the Chinese and Russian leaders. Following Russia’s re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in December 2022, Chinese President Xi recently made headlines by saying to Russian President Putin: “I have a similar personality to yours.”¹³¹ Moreover, it is very telling that in March 2023, at the door of the Kremlin, following a meeting between Xi

and Putin that Xi stated: “Right now there are changes —the likes of which we haven’t seen for 100 years— and we are the ones driving these changes together.” To which the Russian president responded: “I agree.”¹³²

To cap off the systematic upgrade in bilateral relations and repeated reinforcement of political support, Russia stated again in the Joint Statement issued by the two sides in March 2023 that it “reaffirms its adherence to the one-China principle, recognizes Taiwan as an inalienable part of China’s territory, opposes any form of Taiwan independence, and *firms supports measures taken by China to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity*” (emphasis added).¹³³ This last clause, which was added to the 2022 joint statement, may have been intended to demonstrate Moscow’s support for the provocative military exercises that the PRC staged in August 2022 and also in April 2023 following the meetings between the Taiwanese president and the speakers of the US Congress.

North Korean Statements on cross-Strait Issues

While Pyongyang has seldomly commented on the Taiwan issue, there was also a string of comments after 2020 concerning Taiwan that coincided with the upgrade of ties between Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang circa 2018.

On October 23, 2021, North Korea Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho criticized the United States for sending ships to Taiwan and supplying advanced weapons. In his words, the United States’ “indiscreet meddling” in issues regarding Taiwan threatened to touch off a “delicate situation on the Korean Peninsula.”¹³⁴ A year lat-

128 Office of the President of Russia, “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.”

129 Reuters Staff, “Russia’s Sechin says Taiwan will return to China ‘on schedule,’” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-720743>.

130 Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, Brookings Institution Press, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt6wphdn>.

131 Lingling Wei and Marcus Walker, “Xi Jinping Doubles Down on His Putin Bet. ‘I Have a Similar Personality to Yours.’” *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/xi-jinping-putin-china-russia-relations-11671030896>.

132 Al Jazeera English, “Xi tells Putin of ‘changes not seen for 100 years’ | Al Jazeera Newsfeed,” YouTube video, 0:31, March 22, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEpTRr7QcWg>

133 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan), “MOFA response to China-Russia joint statement on their strategic partnership,” March 22, 2023, https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1328&s=99946.

134 Tong-hyung Kim, “N Korea slams US for supporting

er in August 2022, Jo Yong Sam, director general at the North Korean Foreign Ministry's press and information affairs department, condemned Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and South Korea, calling her the "destroyer of international peace."¹³⁵

Most recently in August 2023, in response to the recent \$345 million aid package, Maeng Yong Rim, director general of the North Korean foreign ministry's Chinese affairs department, called the package and US aid a "dangerous political and military provocation."¹³⁶ Indicating a more pronounced political interest in the Taiwan Strait.

Sino-Russian Military Exercises in the Region

Russia and China have had strong cooperation politically and economically, but their cooperation also extended even more deeply in the military sphere since at least the mid-2000s. According to Dr. Richard Weitz of the Hudson Institute:

"Since the mid-2000s, China and Russia have conducted an increasingly frequent number and more diverse range of Sino-Russian bilateral and multilateral military exercises. These have included a long-standing series of land drills and, somewhat later, novel maritime maneuvers. Recent years have also seen joint aviation patrols in the Asia-Pacific region, Chinese participation in Russia's annual strategic exercises, and command post exercises

*simulating combined missile defense tasks."*¹³⁷

Whereas past exercises focused on their continental borders, the two militaries began to increase their military training exercises in the Pacific arena and press further down to the South China Sea.

Since 2019, there have been a noticeable uptick in Russia-China joint patrols in the Indo-Pacific region. There have already been three military patrols/exercises conducted in the Sea of Japan and China Sea so far this year. There appears to be at least two reasons for an increase of Russian involvement in the region and in cooperation with China. First, Russia's involvement with China was intended to pressure the United States and its allies by creating a narrative of possible Russian support in the case of a contingency. In essence, these cooperative activities and actions served more as a symbolic measure. By demonstrating solidarity, Russia showed that China was not alone and raised the perceived opportunity cost of a war. Second, Russia's involvement intended to amplify and perpetuate the narrative of imminent conflict over Taiwan. In this regard, China aimed to amplify the narrative of an inevitable conflict. By doing so, both China and Russia created fear and pressure on domestic politics in Taiwan, the United States, and its allies.

In addition to the sheer number of exercises, Russian and Chinese frontline forces are also increasingly engaging in "high-risk activities," which risk serious escalations.¹³⁸ According to Admiral Michael Studeman, who was then serving as commander of the Office of Naval Intelligence: "Russia is not alone in playing with fire in the international commons and risking serious escalation. Like its close friend, China seems to think it's also okay to conduct

Taiwan in nod to ally China," *AP News*, October 23, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-united-states-china-south-korea-taiwan-f35373987bfe3c46000a76d435929e93>.

¹³⁵ Hyung-jin Kim, "North Korea calls Pelosi 'destroyer of international peace,'" *AP News*, August 5, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-asia-south-korea-nancy-pelosi-north-7cacb7e-de6b6c4baa803531976cc10fa>.

¹³⁶ Soo-Hyang Choi, "North Korea denounces US arms aid to Taiwan as 'dangerous' provocation," *Reuters*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-denounces-us-arms-aid-taiwan-dangerous-provocation-2023-08-03/>.

¹³⁷ Richard Weitz, "Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises: Past Progress and Future Trends," CSIS, July 9, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-chinese-russian-military-exercises-past-progress-and-future-trends>.

¹³⁸ Mike Studeman, "Dangers Posed by China's Frontline Forces," April 05, 2023, [https://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Media/Speeches/SAS%20Conference%20\(Apr%202023\).pdf?ver=1W7JuU-Wvq4NenmyAC-zmvg%3D%3D](https://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Media/Speeches/SAS%20Conference%20(Apr%202023).pdf?ver=1W7JuU-Wvq4NenmyAC-zmvg%3D%3D).

high-risk activities with its frontline forces.”¹³⁹

*Russia-China Military Exercises in East Asia since 2020*¹⁴⁰

Date	Incident
Dec. 1, 2020	China and Russian air forces held a joint patrol and an aircraft exchange. ¹⁴¹
Dec. 22, 2020	China and Russia participated in the “Joint Aerial Strategic Patrol 2020” in the Sea of Japan and East China Sea. ¹⁴²
May 24, 2022	China and Russia held their first joint military exercise since the invasion of Ukraine. The countries sent bombers over the seas in the Sea of Japan, East China Sea, and the Philippine Sea. ¹⁴³
Sept. 1-7, 2022	Called the Vostok 2022 (East 2022), Russia and China launched a large-scale military exercise, both air and sea, in the Russia far east and the Sea of Japan. ¹⁴⁴
Nov. 30, 2022	China and Russia sent strategic bombers in a joint patrol over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea. ¹⁴⁵
Dec. 21, 2022	China and Russia held a weeklong joint live-fire naval exercise in the East China Sea. ¹⁴⁶
June 6, 2023	China and Russia conducted a joint air patrol over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea. ¹⁴⁷
June 27, 2023	Taiwan detected two Russian warships off the island’s eastern coast. ¹⁴⁸
July 20-23, 2023	China and Russia held a joint military sea and air exercise in the Sea of Japan. ¹⁴⁹

While joint military exercises between China and Russia have increased in frequency and extended further into the Pacific theatre, these exercises have also coincided with notable upticks in North Korean missile tests espe-

139 Studeman, “Dangers Posed by China’s Frontline Forces.”

140 Table compiled by Eric Jung.

141 AP News, “Russian, Chinese bombers fly joint patrols over Pacific,” *AP News*, November 30, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-china-beijing-moscow-europe-3d694c61d318e083076b681cd913102d>.

142 Weitz, “Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises.”

143 Edward Wong, “Russia and China Held Military Exercise in East Asia as Biden Visited,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/us/politics/russia-china-bombers-biden.html>.

144 Associated Press, “Russia and China launch large-scale military drills amid tensions with US,” *The Guardian*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/01/russia-and-china-launch-large-scale-military-drills-amid-tensions-with-us>; Reid Standish, “Russia To Launch Military Exercises With China, India Amid Heightened Tensions,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-military-exercises-china-india/32011191.html>.

145 AP News, “Russian, Chinese bombers fly joint patrols over Pacific.”

146 Brad Lendon, “Russia and China unite for live-fire naval exercises in waters near Japan,” *CNN*, December 19, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/19/asia/russia-china-naval-exercises-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

147 Reuters, “Russia launch joint air patrol, alarms South Korea,” *Reuters*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-russia-launch-joint-air-patrol-amid-asia-pacific-tensions-2023-06-06/>.

148 Al Jazeera, “Taiwan detects two Russian warships near its waters,” *Al Jazeera*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/28/taiwan-detects-two-russian-warships-near-its-waters>.

149 Agence France-Presse, “Russia, China End Military Exercises in Sea of Japan,” *VOA*, July 23, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-china-end-military-exercises-in-sea-of-japan/7192837.html>; Yukio Tajima, “China and Russia kick off Military Exercises in Sea of Japan,” *Asia Nikkei*, July 21, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/China-and-Russia-kick-off-military-exercises-in-Sea-of-Japan>.

cially in 2022—with 11 already counted in 2023.¹⁵⁰ This trend—taken in conjunction with the increased ties between China, Russia, and North Korea—gives rise to the possibility that North Korea could take advantage of a Taiwan contingency to advance its political objectives *vis-à-vis* South Korea. It will be important to observe if there is greater synchronization of the three countries' frontline activities.

North Korea in Taiwan Strait Security

While there appears to be a lack of formal trilateral cooperation or exercises at this point between the DPRK, PRC, and Russia, Beijing and Moscow's vocalized support for North Korea creates a sense of unity—especially when their shared support concerns denuclearization and sanctions from the United States. Due to the tempestuous relationships China and Russia have with North Korea, the bulk of the cooperation occurring between the three parties has been through bilateral reinforcement and cooperation rather than a collective. However, it seems that the three nations have started and are prepared to further align themselves together to create a collective to challenge the US-led democratic bloc.

At the same time, however, the missile launchings conducted by North Korea do not appear to be a direct result of the PRC's influence nor caused by growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Instead, they are likely driven by Pyongyang's need for relevancy and legitimacy. Additionally, the launchings are likely intended to test newly elected presidents—seeing as many of the launchings are concentrated during the US and South Korean elections cycles—and serve as retaliation against sanctions and military cooperation between the United States and South Korea. Yet, Pyongyang's potential involvement in a Taiwan contingency, directly or indirectly, raises the stakes for South Korea and Japan, and appears to be

prompting Seoul to take more actions.

Conclusion

Overall, the maritime domain will become increasingly contested by a combination of Chinese, Russian, and North Korean activities. The former top US Commander in Korea, General Robert Abrams, said there has been “a 300% increase in the violation of the Korean air defense identification zone (KADIZ)” by Chinese military planes from 2019 to 2021.¹⁵¹ As a result, there are at least three features emerging from this new maritime environment: 1) Increased presence of joint Chinese-Russian patrols around Korea/Japan, 2) Increased Russian naval presence in East China/South China Seas, and 3) Increased North Korean provocations.

The current military actions and initiatives by these three regional partners have added greater complexity to the security of the Taiwan Strait and the broader Indo-Pacific region. China is most likely rekindling more cooperation with the DPRK to destabilize the region and create further complications, much like Belarus is doing for Russia. The juxtaposition of the Chinese defense minister visiting Russia and Belarus in August, following the Russian defense minister's visit to Pyongyang and then by Kim-Putin summit, is instructive.¹⁵² If North Korea and China decide to cooperate more, there may be instances of the PRC influencing North Korea to launch and test missiles at strategic times to intimidate players involved or react to issues within the Taiwan Strait. Additionally, there is the chance that allies and proxies of Russia and China may also be enlisted and countries like Iran, Pakistan, and Cuba could further complicate US-led coordination and responses. While

150 Missile Defense Project, “North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present,” April 20, 2017, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>.

151 Christy Lee, “Former Top US Commander in Korea Urges Allies to Include China in War Plans,” VOA, January 11, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-top-us-commander-in-korea-urges-allies-to-include-china-in-war-plans/6391856.html>.

152 Yuras Karmanau, “China's defense minister promises to boost cooperation with Russian ally Belarus,” AP News, August 17, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/china-belarus-li-shangfu-defense-russia-914a06969ea01ce45b518c4ddda13955>.

the likelihood of an imminent military conflict remains low, these activities will lead to a heightened probability of accidents occurring due to miscalculations and high-risk activities.

While the trilateral relationship between Russia, North Korea, and China has historically been insecure and turbulent, the actions and steps taken by the three nations in recent years have taken on a new form and appear to extend beyond mere symbolic gestures to signal a perceived unity as a bloc against the United States. There is no clear indication of coordination on military exercises yet, but there appears to be growing alignments in the three countries' military and political interests and it will be important to observe if there is greater synchronization of their frontline activities. A growing bloc led by China and Russia is emerging as old—although not identical—geopolitical fault lines are re-emerging. The implications for the Taiwan Strait are that planners must also seriously consider the potential for simultaneous conflict.