

THE TAIWAN PROBLEM AS A FACTOR OF THE POLICY OF THE PEOPLE'S  
 REPUBLIC OF CHINA

*The article examines the actualization of the Taiwan problem against the background of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war. The interests that determine the importance of Taiwan in the system of national priorities of the People's Republic of China are analyzed. The key features of Beijing's policy of establishing control over the island are highlighted.*

**Key words:** PRC, Republic of China, Taiwan problem, American-Chinese rivalry, "The First Island Chain"

**Introduction.** Considering the information resources on the administrative division of the People's Republic of China (PRC), it is hard not to notice differences in the number of provinces, which varies in parameter 22-23 units. This is due to the existence of the Republic of China (ROC) recognized by the short list of countries and located on the island of Taiwan (also exists the historical term "Formosa" – the Portuguese version of the name – translated as "beautiful island") and the adjacent islands.

The emergence of the ROC was caused by the end of the civil war in China between the communist and nationalist forces. It is noteworthy that before this historical moment, the island was not particularly significant in the context of the millennia-long history of China, playing the role of the periphery of the Chinese Empire, while becoming the object of colonial encroachments in the period after the Age of Discovery by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the Japanese. However, the political and geopolitical importance of the island was significantly transformed due to the relocation here of representatives of the Kuomintang Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, this political group, thanks to comprehensive support from the United States, managed to maintain de facto independence from the encroachments of Communist China.

Meanwhile the Taiwan question could repeatedly turn into a trigger for a military clash between Beijing and Washington, but China was clearly aware of its military inability to take control over the island by force. However, the successes of the targeted military modernization of the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA), as evidenced in the Pentagon's annual report to Congress of 2020 – China has overtaken the US in such areas as shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, integrated air defense system [1] are influencing greatly on Beijing's policy towards Taipei. Therefore, achievement in the development of military technologies combined with the growth of the dependence of the international community from both economic development and trade with China, resulted that in recent years has been expressing harsh rhetoric about the possible forceful option of taking control over the island.

The option of the Taiwan problem's military solution has gained even greater importance since 2022 against the background of the Russian-Ukrainian war, because Beijing, taking into account the focus of the attention and resources of Western countries on supporting Ukraine in countering a full-scale military invasion by the Kremlin, strengthens the aggressive rhetoric towards Taipei.

**The purpose of research** is to analyze the factors determining the significance of the Taiwan issue for the PRC and specific areas of Beijing's activity in the international and domestic dimensions in order to achieve the geopolitical goal of incorporating the island.

**Main research results.** The significance of any object is determined by the value it represents for the interested subject and accordingly forms the scale of resources and efforts that can be spent on the way to achieving the desired thing. For the PRC, the value of taking control over Taiwan, which Beijing views as a breakaway province, is too high. This point is also emphasized by the fact that China's military and political leadership considers Taiwan issue not only a factor of national security, but even a destabilizing factor of the psychological state of the nation [2]. Therefore, not only military-strategic, geo-economic and geo-political components are intertwined in the value for PRC of solving the Taiwan problem, but also factors of national-historical sentiments and even personal ambitions of political leaders.

1. Security and military-strategic aspects of interests. Taiwan is in the center of so-called the First Island Chain – a geostrategic concept that marks the containment line of China's projection of power into the world ocean and, accordingly, into world politics, by the United States. It should be emphasized that control over Taiwan will allow Beijing to strengthen the possibilities of advancement in two directions within the chain: the northern – the East China Sea, where are located the other two East Asian security allies of the United States – Japan and the Republic of Korea, and the southern – the water area of the South China Sea with Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands, disputed territories between the PRC and the countries of Southeast Asia.

Within the northern direction, it should also be noted two geostrategic points – the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Dao), object of contest between Beijing and Tokyo, and the island of Okinawa in the Ryukyu Archipelago, the point of the American military infrastructure concentration in the East Asia. Geographically, Taiwan's position is close to these locations, therefore control over the island will strengthen Beijing's military projection capabilities in the context of contradiction with the US and their allies in the region. In addition, the major share of trade communications of export-dependent Japan and South Korea passes through Taiwan strait, as well as the network of sea cables that provide the telecommunication infrastructure of these countries. As a result, control over the island will put the economic development of Tokyo and Seoul in a significant geostrategic dependence on relations with the PRC.

In the southern direction, control over Taiwan will make it possible to consolidate geostrategic influence in the waters of the South China Sea, that, in turn, will significantly contribute to the solution of the "Mallacca dilemma" – a key problem of China's national security, which is emphasized by the fact that at least 60% of trade flows pass through it [2].

The micro-country of Singapore which is not a military ally of the US, but allows the deployment of American military infrastructure on its strategically important territory. Given this fact, as well as the dominance of the US Navy in the World Ocean, Beijing faces the threat of blocking trade communications through the Straits of Malacca, which will have catastrophic consequences for its economy. Therefore, solving the "Mallacha dilemma" is one of the key tasks of China's geostrategy, where it is difficult to overestimate the role of Taiwan.

Beijing's dominance over the First Island Chain will contribute for the creation of a footprint for power projection within the Second Island Chain (passes through the island of Guam) and to approach the Third Island Chain (passes through the Hawaiian Islands). It should be noticed that Guam and the Hawaiian Islands are crucial points in American military infrastructure in Pacific Ocean. Thus, control over Taiwan is the "key" in the matter of national security, in the military-strategic rivalry with the United States in the Pacific area and the destabilization of its allies in East Asia.

2. From an economic perspective, the ROC is a world leader in the production of semiconductors [4], critically important element for all advanced science-intensive industries, from pharmaceuticals to military equipment. Therefore, obtaining these production capacities is a significant aspect strengthening of China on the way to global dominance, especially considering the fact that Beijing has experienced significant problems in this sector caused by the pandemic [5]. In the context of China's global economic ambitions it is important to mention about "Made in China 2025" – a strategic plan declared in 2015 with the main goal is to gain a dominant position in the global high-tech market products where microchips are crucial. Interestingly, that this program became the trigger for the US-China trade war (since 2018). Now, regarding China's growing aggressiveness in Taiwan issue, the USA has started construction of microchip production facilities on its territory [6].

3. National sentiment is associated with the term "century of shame and humiliation", historical period (1839-1949) when China was a semi-colony of Western powers and the Russian Empire. Meanwhile, this is one of the key political operational notions of Xi Jinping's administration, especially in terms of the concept of the "Chinese dream" – the goal which also involves the restoration of China's greatness on the international stage and, accordingly, the incorporation of Taiwan, the last territory lost during this period. Thus, national sentiments are intertwined with the personal ambitions of the political leader, who has already demonstrated his thirst for power by canceling the principle of elite rotation in communist China in 2018 (no more than two terms in power) and Xi Jinping was awarded a third five-year term on top-political positions in 2022-2023. Today, more and more positions are held by representatives of so-called "Xi clan" and it strengthens the possibility of a forceful option for the incorporation of Taiwan. The fact that Xi is no longer a young politician also plays a role, so he may later take the risk of using the army in the Taiwan issue.

5. In addition, it is important for the Communist Party of China (CPC) to eliminate the image of a successful Chinese statehood based on democratic principles. Indeed, it would be wrong to characterize Taiwan's political development is exclusively democratic, because of an authoritarian regime reigned on the island in 1940s -1980s. Nevertheless, in this context, today Taiwan appears as an image of an alternative political system, without the CCP's monopoly on power. This contradicts the aspirations of Chinese Communists to assert a positive image of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" on the international arena.

6. As a result, the Taiwan problem is becoming more and more significant in world politics, turning into one of the key indicators of the American-Chinese geopolitical rivalry. Moreover, the fate of Taiwan will become an indicator of the direction of the transformation of the world system, because in a broader context, this problem, along with the Russian-Ukrainian war, are the most hot points of confrontation between democracies and authoritarian states in world politics. It can be recalled that Beijing is a supporter of the idea of multipolarity, although under this term, which seems to sound with a tinge of democratization of international relations, it de facto hides behind this screen the desire for global dominance. Multipolarity is an obvious trend of international relations caused by significant changes in regional power balances in the 21st century. Unfortunately, in practice, multipolarity can mean that regional geopolitical powers will be given the opportunity to use force to strengthen its dominant position and such situation, beyond a doubt, poses a threat to small and medium-sized states. Also it is could be used as a conceptual legitimization of territorial encroachments by Beijing, as well as other regional authoritarian geopolitical power like Russia.

The value of Taiwan outlined above determines Beijing's multifaceted policy of taking control over the island. Notably, that for a long time Beijing has been trying to incorporate the ROC, using the approach of "One country – two systems", a formula proposed by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s as a model of an integration of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. It was assumed that these entities would administratively become part of the PRC, but at the same time would retain a significant degree of autonomy in matters of the political system, jurisdiction, economy, and financial system. This formula had hopes of success in the 1990s and early 2000s, when China was showing tremendous economic success and Western analysts and politicians mistakenly believed that economic transformations would lead to political changes in the direction of democratization. However, with the re-election of Xi Jinping, these misconceptions were finally dispelled. Interestingly, there is a similar view regarding the Russian Federation under Putin's leadership. To day, the use of this formula is unrealistic, which is emphasized by the official refusal by Taipei in 2022 amid China's increasing aggressiveness [7]. However, for Beijing, this option would be the most acceptable, as it does not carry significant risks for internal stability and international image.

Noticeably, in order to realize the "soft option" of taking control over Taiwan, Beijing systematically implements a policy aimed to nullify Taiwan's independence by an international community. In this direction, Beijing is actively implementing a "checkbook diplomacy" and using dependence on economic cooperation, buying the refusal to recognize the ROC. The latest example of China's success in this field is Honduras, which severed diplomatic relations with Taipei in 2023. It must be added that this event was a continuation of the trend of loss of international recognition of Taiwan by Latin American countries, where such countries as Nicaragua, El Salvador, Panama, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica have established diplomatic relations with the PRC in recent years [8].

Currently, only 13 states recognize independence of the ROC, and most of them are small states (Palau, Belize, Eswatini, etc.) [9], whose political loyalty was bought by Taipei amid the background of the economic successes of the 20th century that is the usage of the same approach of "checkbook diplomacy". However, at present, the capabilities of Taipei and Beijing in this direction and international weight in general are too disproportionate, so the number of international supporters of the independence of the ROC will decrease. Interestingly, the newest supporter of the "one China" idea – Honduras wanted about 2.5 billion US dollars for continuing to support diplomatic relations with

Taiwan [10]. However, Taipei refused and after the rupture of diplomatic ties with Tegucigalpa the president of Taiwan Tsai Ing-wen declared its reluctance to compete in the "dollar diplomacy" with China [10].

Despite problems with official recognition, Taiwan has an extensive network of Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in more than 70 countries [11], which de facto play the role of embassies.

It is interesting that the Vatican is the only state in Europe that has diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The severing of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the PRC took place in 1951. After this, adherents of Catholicism were forced for decades to carry out religious cults in secret, until the liberalization of the regime under Deng Xiaoping [12]. However, the number of Catholics in China was growing all the time.

After braking off the diplomatic ties, it was a set of unsuccessful attempts to establish contacts between the Vatican and Beijing. However, in 2018, the sides managed to reach a historic Agreement, the most important point of which is that the Catholic Church will appoint bishops from persons proposed by the Chinese authorities. The agreement caused a negative reaction of different groups – Catholics in China, the Western establishment and even part of the Catholic clergy [13]. It should be noted that the Agreement is renewed every two years and in October 2022 the sides once again extended its validity without publicly disclosing its details [14]. Despite the Agreement, the Vatican continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, for which the Holy See is the most important official diplomatic partner. Regarding this, it would be a significant success for Beijing to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican, which has significant international standing due to its large Catholic congregation around the world.

Interestingly, that in contradistinction to other regions of the world, where the PRC is gaining diplomatic victories, the European space was marked by the pro-Taiwan position of the small Baltic country – Lithuania. This situation is a unique international case after that in 2021 the official representation of Taiwan was opened on the territory of Lithuania [15]. The point is that in the title of such representative offices is used the name of capital (Taipei), but in case of Lithuania was used the term "Taiwanese" [16]. Despite Vilnius's explanation that the representative office does not have the status of a diplomatic institution, it leads to a conflict. Beijing reacted harshly by reducing the level of diplomatic representation, public threats, and what is especially noteworthy – economic means of pressure. China excluded Lithuania from its customs system, blocked all exports and imports to Lithuania, canceled direct container trains and limited transit. However, what was most alarming was the use of unofficial secondary sanctions – in pressure by reducing contacts with European companies that cooperate with Lithuania.

The EU delayed its reaction, but it could not stay away, as it would mean admitting weakness before China's pressure. Thus, the EU filed a lawsuit within the World Trade Organization regarding the legality of PRC's trade restrictions [17].

In the context of the Chinese-Lithuanian tensions, the logical question is why a country with a small power decided to provoke a conflict with the geopolitical giant China. Most analysts guesses are about the desire to get support from the US and low trade turnover with the PRC.

Thus, the case of Lithuania pushes to the broader aspects of the Taiwan problem for Beijing – as a factor in relations with the EU and the USA, where the role of Washington is traditionally of the greatest importance. It should be remembered that as a result of H. Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy", China-US official diplomatic relations were established against the background of the development of the anti-Soviet alliance in 1979. However, this did not mean that Washington left the ally to its own devices, because the same year it was adopted the Law on relations with Taiwan, where one of the points fixed the provision of military and technical support to Taipei "so that Taiwan can maintain a sufficient self-defense potential" [18]. The document also noted that the establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC does not mean the severing of actual relations with Taiwan in various spheres, but emphasizes the hope that Taiwan's future will be determined by peaceful means. These aspects became the basis of the American "one China policy".

At the same time, the military-technical cooperation with or political steps that emphasized the de facto independent status of Taiwan became drivers of the worsening of American-Chinese relations and the tension of the situation around the island. The most high-profile event was the visit of the "third person" of the American vertical of power – the speaker of the United States House of Representatives N. Pelosi to Taiwan in the summer of 2022. This political step caused significant international and regional tensions with harsh threats from the PRC. It was obviously a provocative move by Washington aimed at "playing on the nerves" of Beijing, especially considering that the visit took place on the eve of the resolution of the political leadership of the PRC (autumn 2022). Additionally, the demarche was a demonstration that China's ambitions have limits, and Washington is ready to curb them, as an illustration of that point was a confirmation made by the US President J. Biden in autumn of 2022, that Washington would defend Taiwan in the event of an attack by the PRC [19]. Also the US continue to expend expand the military aid to Taiwan.

It should also be noted that the traditional diplomatic rhetoric of the PRC is that the problem of Taiwan is an internal issue of China and the interference of external players in it is unacceptable. Using this point, Beijing emphasizes a tough attitude towards the US support for the de facto independence status of Taiwan. Under the conditions of decisive and provocative actions of the US, Beijing seeks to exploit the differences within the framework of the collective West, that is, between the US and the EU countries. It should be emphasized that in this context the PRC is trying to use a trade and economic interdependence formed by the key Chinese project "One Belt, One Road", in terms of which the EU market is the final point for selling of Chinese goods. Additionally, China exploits the geopolitics peculiarities of some countries and the personal ambitions of their leaders. A vivid example is French President E. Macron and his expression after visit to China in April 2023, that Europe should not become a "vassal" and must avoid being drawn into any conflict between the US and China over Taiwan [20]. Obviously, such statement undermines the unity of Western countries and the possibility of military aggression by the PRC.

Also it should be underlined, that the Russian-Ukrainian war caused a lot of problems for Beijing in the context of solving the Taiwan issue by force, in particular, in terms of consolidation of the West, notably in working out a countermeasure mechanism in the case of aggression by authoritarian states. Moreover, the issue of Taiwan has become closely tied to the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, Western countries are using the possible factor of providing support to Moscow, especially military-technical, as a reason to apply sanctions against Beijing, which is critically dependent on trade with the EU and the US. Moreover, the failure of Putin's military adventure puts China at a disadvantage and forces it to spend additional resources on the Western countries activity generated by the Russian

threat, including necessity to respond to criticism of Beijing's irresponsibility as a global superpower in the context of the war in Ukraine.

In addition, in connection with the increasing aggressiveness of China towards Taiwan against the background of Russian aggression, the tendency of militarization and cooperation of the Western countries of the Indo-Pacific region continues to increase. Among such steps, it can be admitted: 1. Japan has officially announced its intention to increase defense spending to 2% by 2027, which will eventually turn it into the third largest military spending country in the world [21]; 2. cooperation within the framework of the anti-Chinese AUKUS format is strengthening, in particular, in the aspect of Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. Moreover, Canberra expressed the need to boost long-range strike capabilities and improve the functioning of northern bases – elements of the largest military reform since World War II [22]; 3. it is interesting that amid the growing threat from China and its proxy North Korea, the bilateral security dialogue, which was not functioning because of the trade war between Tokyo and Seoul on the basis of historical issues, has even been resumed [23]. Trilateral military cooperation involving the United States is also increasing, as well as the purchase of American weapons by East Asian democracies.

It is noteworthy that the 2022 Taiwan crisis led to the rapprochement of other non-Western countries in the region with Washington. An illustration is a permission of the Philippines to expand the American military presence by four bases on its territory, while most of them will be located near Taiwan [24]. Moreover, for the first time, trilateral exercises of the coast guard of the United States, Japan and the Philippines were held in the South China Sea at the beginning of June 2023. India also expresses its desire to deepen military cooperation, in particular, in the format of The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Australia, India, Japan and the US) and arms trade. It also draws attention that the aggravation of the Taiwan problem has significantly raised the international status of India, especially for Western countries, as a partner in countering Chinese ambitions. However, New Delhi is in no hurry to take drastic steps, adhering to the concept of "strategic remoteness".

Besides the global and regional dimension, the Taiwan problem should be noted for its bilateral aspect of Beijing's pressure on Taipei. Indeed, the very statements about the admissibility of the use of force in the case of the implementation of the course for independence act as a tool of pressure. So that the threats are not verbal, Beijing reinforces them with a "play of muscles" – a conduction of military exercises with the scenarios of a capture of the island including by encircling Taiwan. The practice of violating the airspace of the ROC by Chinese military planes has become popular and it forces Taipei to raise its own fighter jets in response. Such maneuvers are an expensive thing, and therefore in this way Beijing is trying to financially exhaust Taipei. In addition, it should be taken into account that China has a "fifth column" within the Taiwan establishment, represented by the Kuomintang Party, which advocates a compromise approach in relations with the PRC. The ruling pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party is currently on the decline, as evidenced by its defeat in the 2022 local elections to the Kuomintang [25]. Accordingly, for Beijing there is a possibility of a more peaceful version of the incorporation of the island. In this context the presidential elections in 2024 will be important event. Regarding this, the PRC seeks to strengthen the position of supporters of softening the confrontation through systematic intimidation. Moreover, Beijing systematically manages informational and psychological operations with the aim of destabilizing Taiwanese society for its own favorable perception of events [26].

It is obvious that the power option requires a solid military foundation, therefore the PRC continues modernization in order to increase the capabilities of the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), in particular, developing, first of all, air, sea and missile capabilities, as well as the potential of landing forces. Accordingly, the Taiwan problem causes the reduction of ground forces in the PLA. However, there is a significant problem for realizing military scenario, which consists of a number of factors: 1. there is a high probability of a collision with the US army, and perhaps even with their allies. At the same time, there is a problem of the uncertainty of the efficiency of Chinese equipment, created mostly on Russian analogues, which proved to be backward compared to Western models; 2. a military confrontation can lead to an inhibition of Chinese trade and, accordingly, an economic collapse; 3. Taiwan is also systematically updating the technical and human capabilities of the armed forces; 4. the Chinese army has no experience of conducting such kind of military operations, and, moreover, the historical practice of China's military actions demonstrates weakness in wars in general; 5. one of the options is to carry out an amphibious operation, the difficulty of which is the need for clear coordination between the military branches. The next problem in conducting this type of operation is the territory of Taiwan is mountainous, that is, the list of possible amphibious landing sites is small. In addition, in the case of war, the reaction and behavior of Chinese society, which is used to "fighting" in the socio-economic dimension, and not on the battlefield, seems incomprehensible. Therefore, the force option for Beijing must be fast-moving and necessarily victorious, because otherwise the positions of the CCP may be significantly shaken.

**Conclusions.** The importance of Taiwan in the context of Beijing's geopolitical interests was significantly transformed with the relocation of the Kuomintang Nationalist Party to the island. For today, the PRC is increasingly asserting claims to the island, because Beijing has significant military, economic and technical resources. The trigger for the actualization of Taiwan issue was the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war and the aggravation of the issue of further transformation of the international order.

Among the factors determining the high degree of Beijing's interest in taking control of the island, several subgroups can be distinguished: security and military-strategic (establishing the dominance of the PRC within the framework of the "First Island Chain", which will allow to undermine the containment of the projection of Chinese power in the World Ocean by the United States, as well as the formation of opportunities to solve the "Malacca dilemma"), economic (gaining control over the extremely important semiconductor production facilities in the leading sectors, where Taiwan is the world leader), historical and national sentiments and political ambitions (the Taiwan issue is the last territory lost by China during the "century of shame and humiliation" – the problems of China's historical development, which is one of the key postulates of Xi Jinping's authoritarian rule, while the CCP considers the existence of another Chinese state based on democratic principles as a challenge).

As a result, the Taiwan problem turned into an indicator of the realization of China's geopolitical ambitions for global leadership in the context of rivalry with the US. In order to achieve the goal of establishing control over Taiwan, Beijing implements a multifaceted policy: 1. reducing the number of countries that officially recognize Taiwan's independence. Due to its significant economic power, the PRC is gaining more and more victories and also using economic pressure; 2. the application of increasingly tough rhetoric with an emphasis on the military option, which vividly

illustrated the rise of tension against the background of the visit of the speaker of the House of Representatives of the Congress N. Pelosi to Taiwan in the summer of 2022; 3. efforts aimed at undermining the unity of the collective West regarding the Taiwan issue, in particular, playing the "French card"; 4. steps to undermine Taiwan's economic stability – obstruction of transport communications in the context of military exercises, systematic violation of airspace; 5. conducting informational and psychological operations regarding the destabilization of Taiwanese society and intimidation by the consequences of a military conflict; 6. support for the currently pro-Beijing Kuomintang party, whose popularity is growing more and more, which may bring it to power in the 2024 presidential elections.

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#### ТАЙВАНСЬКА ПРОБЛЕМА ЯК ЧИННИК ПОЛІТИКИ КИТАЙСЬКОЇ НАРОДНОЇ РЕСПУБЛІКИ

У статті розглянута актуалізація Тайванської проблеми на тлі повномасштабної російсько-української війни. Проаналізовані інтереси, які детермінують значення Тайваню у системі національних пріоритетів КНР. Висвітлені ключові риси політики Пекіну щодо встановлення контролю над островом.

Ключові слова: КНР, Республіка Китай, Тайванська проблема, американо-китайське суперництво, "Перший острівний панцюг"