

The ghosts of 1938 are haunting the Taiwan Strait

History has a voice, and it is warning us

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The following has been adapted from a speech by Joseph Wu, secretary general of Taiwan's National Security Council, at an event hosted by the International Ocean Forum earlier this month in Taiwan. As Taiwan's national security adviser, I do not have the luxury of treating geopolitical risk as an abstraction. The tensions shaping the Indo-Pacific cross my desk every morning. Tonight, standing before so many friends of Taiwan who have chosen to be here at a time of real regional tension, I feel something closer to reassurance than alarm, because your presence itself is a form of deterrence.

Still, we should not mistake calm for safety. History has a voice, and it is warning us.

In 1938, the international community looked away as a revisionist power demanded the Sudetenland. Leaders convinced themselves that appeasement would buy peace. They chose comfort over confrontation. We know how that story ended: Silence did not prevent war. It merely smoothed the path for aggressors to march through.

Today, we must ask whether we are learning from the ghosts of 1938 or repeating them.

The world is neither peaceful nor stable. Russia's war on Ukraine shows that revisionist powers will still use force to redraw borders. The Middle East shows how fast regional conflict can metastasize.

Closer to home, the Taiwan Strait is routinely called the world's most dangerous flash point. There is no hot war today, but the scale and regularity of Chinese military activity around Taiwan make complacency impossible.

The real question is not whether the threat exists. It is how long we can collectively deter it.

Consider the facts. On any given day, China maintains five to six naval vessels and two to three coast guard vessels near Taiwan. Weekly "joint combat readiness patrols" probe our 24-nautical-mile contiguous zone, backed by People's Liberation Army aircraft rehearsing coordinated air and sea strikes.

Several times a year, Beijing escalates into exercises involving up to 100 aircraft and three dozen warships.

In December, the PLA fired 27 long-range rockets into waters north and south of Taiwan, some landing inside our contiguous zone. This is not hypothetical.

Nor is Taiwan an isolated target. The Philippines faces 40 to 50 Chinese military and coast guard vessels daily in the South China Sea, backed by hundreds of maritime militia craft. Japan endures near-daily incursions into its air and maritime zones.

The pattern is unmistakable: China is rehearsing a simultaneous offensive against Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines while positioning naval assets in the Western Pacific to simulate anti-access operations against the United States.

An unannounced PLA mobilization in May deployed more than 100 vessels across four seas at once. Beijing has rehearsed such a scenario repeatedly since December 2024, effectively turning the First Island Chain into a single integrated theater.

This military pressure is paired with cognitive warfare — disinformation questioning whether Okinawa truly belongs to Japan, or Batan Island to the Philippines — designed to test whether the world will look away as history is weaponized to justify territorial change.

The pattern of creeping expansion is not new. In 2012, the pretext for nationalizing the Senkaku Islands was raised. The next year, a unilateral East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone. In 2015, the M503 flight route was announced, just after Chinese President Xi Jinping promised President Obama in the Rose Garden that he would do no such thing.

In 2022, Beijing declared the Taiwan Strait median line nonexistent, using House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit as a pretext. Then, in 2024, the erosion of maritime boundaries around Kinmen and Matsu began. Each step tests our resolve before the next.

The parallels to Russian leader Vladimir Putin's playbook are not coincidental. Russia blamed NATO and "extremists" in Kyiv for a war it started. China blames Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines for the tensions it manufactures. Different targets, identical logic: Rewrite reality to legitimize coercion, then blame the victim for provoking the aggressor.

The two powers increasingly coordinate militarily in the Western Pacific, and Russian naval vessels routinely appear near Taiwan during major PLA exercises, a signal that authoritarian expansionism is no longer confined to one region.

This is why pressure on Taiwan cannot be treated as someone else's problem. When coercion succeeds without consequence, every nation that depends on international law becomes less secure. Both Beijing and Moscow face mounting internal economic pressure. Whether that produces external diversion is an open question we cannot afford to ignore.

Democratic solidarity is not a slogan; it is a strategic necessity. It means deeper cooperation, reduced strategic dependencies and more resilient supply chains among like-minded nations.

History has shown, from Munich onward, that ignoring incremental aggression does not preserve peace; it only raises the cost of the confrontation we eventually have anyway. The lesson is not to seek conflict. It is to recognize reality early enough to keep it from becoming irreversible.

Your presence here is already part of that commitment.

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