

## Why Taiwan Matters

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### Abstract

This article explores Taiwan's multifaceted significance on the global stage. Located at a strategic point in East Asia, the island serves as a critical geopolitical, economic, and technological hub. The study analyzes several key aspects of Taiwan's importance: First, its role in the global semiconductor supply chain, where it produces over 90% of the world's advanced chips; Second, its strategic position in the "First Island Chain", making it a pivotal factor in U.S.-China regional dynamics; and Third, its democratic system, which offers an alternative governance model amid the region's predominant styles of government. The research also examines the "One China" policy and the tensions surrounding Taiwan's status, which could potentially escalate into a global conflict. In conclusion, the article emphasizes that Taiwan's future which will impact not only regional stability but also the global economy, technological innovation, and the international order.

**Keywords:** China, Taiwan, Geopolitics, U.S.-China relations, East Asia.

### Introduction

In February 2024, Foreign Affairs published an article titled "The Taiwan Catastrophe: What America and the World Would Lose if China Takes Control of the Island." The article paints an almost apocalyptic scenario in the event that Taiwan falls under the control of the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>1</sup> The Economist dubbed the island "The most dangerous place on Earth,"<sup>2</sup> while former U.S. President Joe Biden repeatedly affirmed that the United States would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack. Donald Trump's stance on the island remains unclear at this stage, though given the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry—particularly during Trump's first term—it seems unlikely that he would retreat from recognizing Taiwan's importance to the U.S.

China ceded Taiwan to Japan in 1895 following its defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War. In 1945, after Japan's loss in World War II, the Kuomintang (KMT), China's ruling power at the time, regained control of the island. However, since 1949—after the KMT's defeat by the Communists in the Chinese Civil War—Taiwan has been governed by the KMT, which fled from mainland China. The PRC has been unable to assert control over Taiwan to this day.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1949 and 1979, the PRC pursued an aggressive policy to regain Taiwan. During this period, two Taiwan Strait Crises occurred (1954–55 and 1958), when mainland China attempted to establish control over the island.<sup>4</sup> However, the deployment of U.S. naval forces in the Taiwan Strait and the existence of a mutual defense treaty between the U.S. and Taiwan prevented the Chinese Communist government from succeeding.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1979, after the U.S. recognized the PRC as China's legitimate government and severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan, the PRC softened its aggressive stance toward the island, proposing a policy of

<sup>1</sup> Erickson, A, "The Taiwan Catastrophe What America—and the World—Would Lose If China Took the Island" <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/taiwan-catastrophe> [L.s. 10.03.2025].

<sup>2</sup> Matthews, J, "The most dangerous place on Earth America and China must work harder to avoid war over the future of Taiwan" <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/01/the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth> [L.s. 05.03.2025].

<sup>3</sup> Lau, J, "Why does Taiwan matter so much to both mainland China and the US?" <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3247639/why-does-taiwan-matter-so-much-both-mainland-china-and-us> [L.s. 28.02.2025].

<sup>4</sup> Rahman, C. "Defending Taiwan, and Why It Matters" Volume 54, "Naval War College Review", 2001. p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Masters, J, "U.S. Military Support for Taiwan in Five Charts" <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-military-support-taiwan-five-charts> [L.s 25.02.2025].

peaceful reunification. This initiative offered Taiwan broad autonomy under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework. However, due to Taiwan’s growing international presence and efforts to forge its own identity, this approach was revised in 1993.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese President Xi Jinping has stated that “The Taiwan issue cannot be passed from generation to generation.”<sup>7</sup> Today, China possesses both the capability and political will to establish control over Taiwan by military force. The PRC views Taiwan as a separatist territory that must come under its control, by force if necessary. Meanwhile, the U.S. opposes any unilateral change to the status quo and views Taiwan as a vital economic and security partner whose loss could destabilize U.S. influence in the Pacific and the broader international order. Admiral Phil Davidson, former head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, suggested that China might militarily seize Taiwan by 2027.<sup>8</sup> One fact is clear: Taiwan serves as an arena of competition between China and the U.S., which, according to John Mearsheimer, the founder of offensive realism, could spark a military conflict between the two powers.<sup>9</sup>

### 1. Taiwan’s International significance

Taiwan is situated opposite China’s Fujian Province. Covering nearly 36,000 square kilometers, it lies at the midpoint of the First Island Chain, stretching from southern Japan to the Philippines. It is separated from mainland China by 130 kilometers at its narrowest point and 408 kilometers at its widest. To its south lies the Luzon Strait, which includes the Bashi and Balintang Channels connecting the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Northeast of the island, Japan’s southwestern islands narrow the sea, requiring sailors to navigate these waters to reach the Pacific.

The Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, adjacent to Taiwan, constitute one of the world’s busiest maritime shipping routes, linking Northeast Asia with the Middle East and Europe. According to a 2024 study by the Washington-based “Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)”, approximately \$2.45 trillion worth of goods, about one-fifth of global maritime trade was transported through the Taiwan Strait in 2022.<sup>10</sup>

Dependence on the Taiwan Strait: BRICS VS G7					
BRICS	Import %	Export %	G7	Import %	Export %
China	32.50	14.90	Japan	32.10	25.20
UAE	20.30	24.80	USA	3.20	2.70
Iran	9.40	24.00	UK	3.20	2.40
India	14.70	13.60	Canada	3.20	1.30
South Africa	13.20	10.60	Italy	2.60	1.20
Ethiopia	9.40	12.00	Germany	1.40	1.50
Brazil	8.20	12.90	France	0.90	1.00
Russia	5.60	13.40			
Egypt	8.20	4.90			

(Source: CSIS)

<sup>6</sup> Rahman, C., see footnote 4, page 5.

<sup>7</sup> Sacks, D, “U.S.-Taiwan Relations in a New Era Responding to a More Assertive China” <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/us-taiwan-relations-in-a-new-era> [L.s. 09.03.2025].

<sup>8</sup> Matthews, J, see footnote 2, [L.s. 05.03.2025].

<sup>9</sup> Staff, U. “John Mearsheimer: Americans would ‘fight and die’ for Taiwan” <https://unherd.com/newsroom/john-mearsheimer-americans-would-fight-and-die-for-taiwan/> [L.s. 25.02.2025].

<sup>10</sup> Funairole, M. Hart, B. Peng, D. Lin, B. Verschuur, J “Crossroads of Commerce: How the Taiwan Strait Propels the Global Economy” <https://features.csis.org/chinapower/china-taiwan-strait-trade/> [L.s. 10.02.2025].

Any disruption to trade through the Taiwan Strait would force shipments through alternative routes, such as the Luzon Strait or, in a worst-case scenario, the Miyako Strait, extending routes by approximately 1600 kilometers. This would increase transportation costs and time. Moreover, bypassing Chinese and Taiwanese ports would pose logistical challenges for carriers, further driving up expenses. Consequently, many countries—especially U.S. allies in East Asia like South Korea and Japan—would suffer significant economic losses.

Beyond its geographic significance, Taiwan's global importance is amplified by its semiconductor and chip industry. Taiwan produces nearly 70% of the world's semiconductors and about 90% of its most advanced chips.<sup>11</sup> Any disruption in this production would lead to shortages of all technology-containing products, from smartphones to computers and automobiles. Companies across industries would face production cuts or shutdowns. Notably, no company currently exists worldwide that could replace Taiwanese firms in chip and semiconductor production in the short term.

A Chinese attack on Taiwan, regardless of its success, would trigger a global economic depression and inflict severe damage on the international economy.

## 2. Taiwan's Importance for the People's Republic of China

In China, the events of 1839–1949—including the First and Second Opium Wars, the First and Second Sino-Japanese Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, the Xinhai Revolution, and the Civil War—are collectively framed by Chinese historiography as the “Century of Humiliation” under colonial powers. The term “Century of Humiliation” has been and remains a tool used by the Communist Party for national consolidation. This anti-colonial narrative plays a significant role in modern China's foreign policy. The outcome of the Civil War—the final event of this “Century of Humiliation”—is why the PRC cannot control Taiwan today, lending the issue emotional weight and making it a matter of national dignity for mainland China.

The Chinese government views Taiwan's separation as an injustice borne from China's historical weakness. In its 2022 “White Paper” on Taiwan, China stated: “Since the mid-19th century, due to Western aggression, China endured unprecedented suffering and humiliation... Japan's 50-year occupation of Taiwan epitomized this humiliation... The fact that Taiwan remains outside the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China is a scar left by history on the Chinese nation.”<sup>12</sup> This emotional stance precludes any concessions by the PRC regarding Taiwan's future.

Beyond its emotional significance, Taiwan holds strategic value for China. Its physical location restricts mainland China's unimpeded access to the Pacific Ocean. If controlled by an adversary, Taiwan could threaten both China mainland and its maritime routes to the Pacific and South China Sea. Taiwan represents a ticket for China's unhindered access to the western part of the Pacific Ocean. Additionally, the Taiwan Strait connects the East and South China Seas, key pathways to the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This vital shipping route links Northeast Asia's economies to European markets and it is crucial to China's trade.

Currently, the East and South China Seas are separated by the Taiwan Strait, fragmenting China's naval forces and reducing their operational capacity. Control over the strait would unify these waters, enhancing the maneuverability of China's eastern, northern, and southern fleets. Thus, controlling Taiwan has military significance for China.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the Taiwan Strait could become China's “strategic lake,” increasing its influence over the Bashi Channel to the south and the Miyako Strait to the north. This would ensure unobstructed access to the western Pacific and strengthen China's position along the First Island Chain. Consequently, China's naval reach would expand in the western Pacific,

<sup>11</sup> Yoshihara, T. “Chinese Views of Taiwan's Geostrategic Value” <https://www.spf.org/spf-china-observer/en/document-detail045.html> [L.s. 12.02.2025].

<sup>12</sup> Sacks, D, see footnote 2, [L.s. 09.03.2025].

<sup>13</sup> Yoshihara, T. see footnote 11, [L.s 12.02.2025].

potentially disrupting U.S. naval and air operations in the Philippine Sea. Washington's regional allies could become militarily isolated, surrounded by Chinese-controlled islands.

If China gains control of Taiwan, the First Island Chain—forming the U.S. defensive perimeter in East Asia—would collapse, rendering U.S. access and influence in the western Pacific a complex, nearly impossible task.

The term “First Island Chain” was coined by Australian researchers in 1991.<sup>14</sup> Three years later, Alexander Huang (1994) specifically defined its geographic scope: the Aleutian Islands, Kuril Islands, Japanese archipelago, Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, Philippine archipelago, and Greater Sunda Islands. Over three decades later, the term is widely established in mainstream academic discourse.

The territory encompassed by the First Island Chain includes China's exclusive economic zones, parts of the South China Sea claimed by China, and critical straits and channels. Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines are key U.S. strategic partners along the chain which makes China's position vulnerable. In a conflict over Taiwan or the South China Sea, China would struggle to defend its positions.

John Mearsheimer argues that sufficient evidence exists to suggest China intends to expel U.S. naval forces from the First Island Chain.<sup>15</sup> This cannot occur without seizing Taiwan, further elevating the island's strategic importance to China.

In mainland China, there is no debate over Taiwan's role in controlling the First Island Chain. The Science of Military Strategy, a widely respected text among those studying Chinese policy, asserts that Taiwan's control by other powers would not only deprive China of its natural maritime defense system but also transfer vast oceanic resources to others. China's vital foreign trade and transport routes would fall under the surveillance of separatist or hostile forces, perpetually threatening Chinese interests. China would remain confined behind the First Island Chain in the western Pacific, placing its national security under constant, severe threat.

### 3. Taiwan's Importance to the United States and Its East Asian Allies

The current U.S.-Taiwan relationship traces back to 1949, when U.S.-backed Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek, fled to the island after their defeat in the Chinese Civil War. To protect Taiwan, the U.S. deployed its navy to the Taiwan Strait from 1950 to 1953. From 1954 to 1979, a mutual defense treaty existed between the U.S. and Taiwan, which ended in 1979 when the U.S. recognized the PRC as China's legitimate government. That same year, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, establishing the legal basis for U.S.-Taiwan ties, including arms sales to bolster Taiwan's defensive capabilities.

In some respects, Taiwan resembles West Berlin in the emerging Cold War between China and the U.S., potentially serving as a trigger for a Thucydides Trap between the two powers.<sup>16</sup> Notably, on February 17, 2025, the U.S. State Department removed the phrase “We do not support Taiwan's independence” from its website, prompting irritation from China and calls for the U.S. to correct its “mistake.”<sup>17</sup>

Maintaining the status quo regarding Taiwan is crucial for the United States and its East Asian allies for several reasons:

#### Security

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<sup>14</sup> Yoshihara, T. “China's Vision of Its Seascape: The First Island Chain and Chinese Seapower” <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01349.x> [L.s. 02.03.2025].

<sup>15</sup> Mearsheimer, J. “The tragedy of great power politics”. Publisher “W. W. NORTON & COMPANY”, 2014. p. 362.

<sup>16</sup> Allison, G. “Destined for war: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?”. Publisher “HarperCollins”, 2013. p. 225.

<sup>17</sup> The Guardian. “China berates US for changing state department language on Taiwan” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/17/china-taiwan-us-state-department> [L.s. 17.02.2025].

Taiwan's return to Chinese control could erode U.S. influence in the region, weakening its alliances. If the U.S. fails to defend Taiwan, regional allies—particularly South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines may lose trust in America, potentially pushing them toward Bandwagon with China.

For Japan, a friendly Taiwan is vital for ensuring free navigation through the Bashi Channel, the northern gateway to the South China Sea. Cargo from the South China Sea must pass through this channel to reach Japan. As an energy-poor nation, Japan imports over 99% of its crude oil and about 98% of its natural gas. The South China Sea and Bashi Channel are critical maritime routes for Japan, especially for energy imports. Approximately 90% of Japan's crude oil imports and 60% of its natural gas travel this route.<sup>18</sup>

As long as Taiwan remains outside China's control, China's access to the western Pacific is constrained by the Bashi Channel and the Miyako Strait from the East China Sea, and other channels near Japan's Nansei Islands. From the Sea of Japan, access is limited to the Tsugaru or Soya Straits. Currently, these routes are controlled by Japan and the U.S. Thus, Taiwan's separation from mainland prevents China from exerting pressure on Japan via the western Pacific or accessing U.S. military bases in Guam and Hawaii, which are critical for peace and security in the region, including Japan. It should be mentioned that, the historical tensions between China and Japan, rooted in the Sino-Japanese Wars, fuel strong anti-Japanese sentiment in China. The disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea further complicate matters, posing another risk of destabilization in East Asia. Japan thus has ample reason to be concerned about Taiwan's future, tying the Tokyo-Washington alliance's fate to Taiwan's outcome. For Japan's security, the First Island Chain must remain under the control of allies.

The Philippines, the next U.S. ally along the First Island Chain, faces direct threats if the chain collapses. Located just 140 kilometers from Taiwan at its closest point, the Philippines has territorial disputes with China over the South China Sea. China claims about 80% of the South China Sea, overlapping with areas assigned to the Philippines under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Philippines won a case against China at The Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016, but China rejects and refuses to implement the ruling.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. is the Philippines' primary defender in this dispute, backed by a mutual defense treaty since 1951, renewed and expanded in 2014 and 2023. If the U.S. fails to protect Taiwan, doubts about U.S. reliability could push the Philippines toward territorial concessions, sharply reducing U.S. influence over one of the world's busiest maritime routes.

As for South Korea, Taiwan's fall to China would leave it increasingly encircled by three nuclear powers—China, Russia, and North Korea (allied with one another)—plus Japan, with whom it has historical disputes. If the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute between Japan and China escalate, South Korea's vital maritime routes could be jeopardized. Additionally, a dispute with China over the Suyan/Ieodo rock in the East China Sea could intensify. China's control of Taiwan, shifting the East Asian order in its favor, could mark a significant U.S. defeat in great power competition, potentially signaling the end of its global dominance—especially as U.S.-European relations are far from ideal.

### Ideology

In his book "The World Needs the West: A New Start for a Liberal Order", Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff recounts a meeting between former German President Joachim Gauck and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Gauck raised the apparent contradiction between the Chinese Communist Party's one-party rule and the rule of law, but Xi avoided the topic, asking Gauck whether he could imagine governing 1.3 billion people and maintaining their unity. Xi followed with a brief lecture on absolute power as a means of national cohesion.<sup>20</sup> This exchange highlights that Chinese leaders and the Communist Party do not view liberal democracy as an effective mechanism for governing a nation of 1.3 billion. This perspective is shared by figures like Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, an unparalleled expert on

<sup>18</sup> Mataka Kamiya. "China's Takeover of Taiwan Would Have a Negative Impact on Japan". Volume 23, "Pacific Forum International" 2023. p.35.

<sup>19</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration award PCA case number 2013-19, "South China Sea Arbitration (Philippines v. China)", July 12, 2016. p. 153-617.

<sup>20</sup> Kleine-Brockhoff, T. "Die Welt braucht den Westen: Neustart für eine liberale Ordnung", Publisher "Edition Körber", 2019. p. 4.

China. In Graham Allison's book, Lee argues that introducing liberal democracy in China would lead to its collapse, predicting no revolution will ever arise there demanding it. He deems liberal-democratic values incompatible with China and its people.<sup>21</sup> Taiwan, however, is an exception. Influenced by American (Western) ideals, Taiwan ranks 10th among 167 countries in terms of democracy.<sup>22</sup> This bolsters the U.S. and its allies' ideological argument in their rivalry with China. If China regains control of Taiwan—even under the “One Country, Two System” model, elements of Chinese governance could take root, marking a defeat for the U.S. in its ideological competition with China. This would further damage America's reputation as a global enforcer of human rights standards and a defender of liberal values.

Graham Allison, in his book “Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?”, notes cultural similarities between China and the U.S. that could fuel their rivalry over Taiwan.<sup>23</sup> Both nations exhibit a superiority complex, viewing themselves as exceptional. Reconciling these clashing visions peacefully requires mutual adjustment, which Lee Kuan Yew deems nearly impossible. If Taiwan is critical to U.S. dominance in East Asia, its loss would weaken America regionally and globally, leading to international humiliation among other consequences.

In the same book, Allison discusses the “Thucydides Trap”. The Greek historian Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, described the conflict between Athens and Sparta (431–404 BCE), writing: “It was the rise of Athens and the fear this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.” Applied to today, the rivalry between the Great Power (USA) and the Rising Power (China)—with Taiwan as a flashpoint—fits this pattern. Allison and his team studied 16 historical cases of Great Power versus rising power conflicts. In 12 (75%), war resulted, suggesting the Thucydides Trap was triggered. Given this statistic and current global dynamics—especially the fraying of the post-World War II Liberal International Order—a U.S.-China war over Taiwan remains a plausible risk.

## Conclusion

Amid strained relations between the current U.S. administration and its European allies, Taiwan is vital to America's credibility and position in East Asia. U.S. defense of Taiwan is a key indicator of its commitment to regional alliances. Today, the U.S. is a major player in the region, with friends, allies, and defense agreements. Losing Taiwan would undermine trust in America, potentially leading to events such as a remilitarized Japan.

Conversely, Taiwan is a central focus of Chinese nationalism. Today's China—unlike in 1949—is a global leader in various domains, including military power, making concessions on a sensitive issue like Taiwan unthinkable. Moreover, a PRC law aims to prevent Taiwan from formally declaring independence, providing legal grounds for “non-peaceful measures” to thwart secession.<sup>24</sup> Beijing views this as a legal framework for the “One China” principle and a warning to independence advocates. Taiwan, the U.S., Japan, and the EU criticize the law, seeing it as a source of tension in the Taiwan Strait. Since its enactment in 2005, China has shown no intent to amend or repeal it, using it to justify military activities near Taiwan.

Today's U.S.-China rivalry, including over Taiwan, differs from the Cold War-era U.S.-Soviet competition, exacerbating the situation. Unlike the Soviet Union, which had no interest in conquering Western Europe, China seeks to assert control over Taiwan. Furthermore, modern China is far stronger than the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. The current “strategic ambiguity” approach to Taiwan is nearing exhaustion. An armed conflict over Taiwan between the U.S. and China poses a real threat with potentially catastrophic consequences: unprecedented military losses between two nuclear powers,

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<sup>21</sup> Allison, G. “Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World” publisher “MIT Press”, 2020. p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Focus Taiwan - CNA English News. “Taiwan ranked top in Asia, 10th in world on EIU freedom index” <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202402150018> [L.s. 20.02.2025].

<sup>23</sup> Allison, G. see footnote 16. pg. 219.

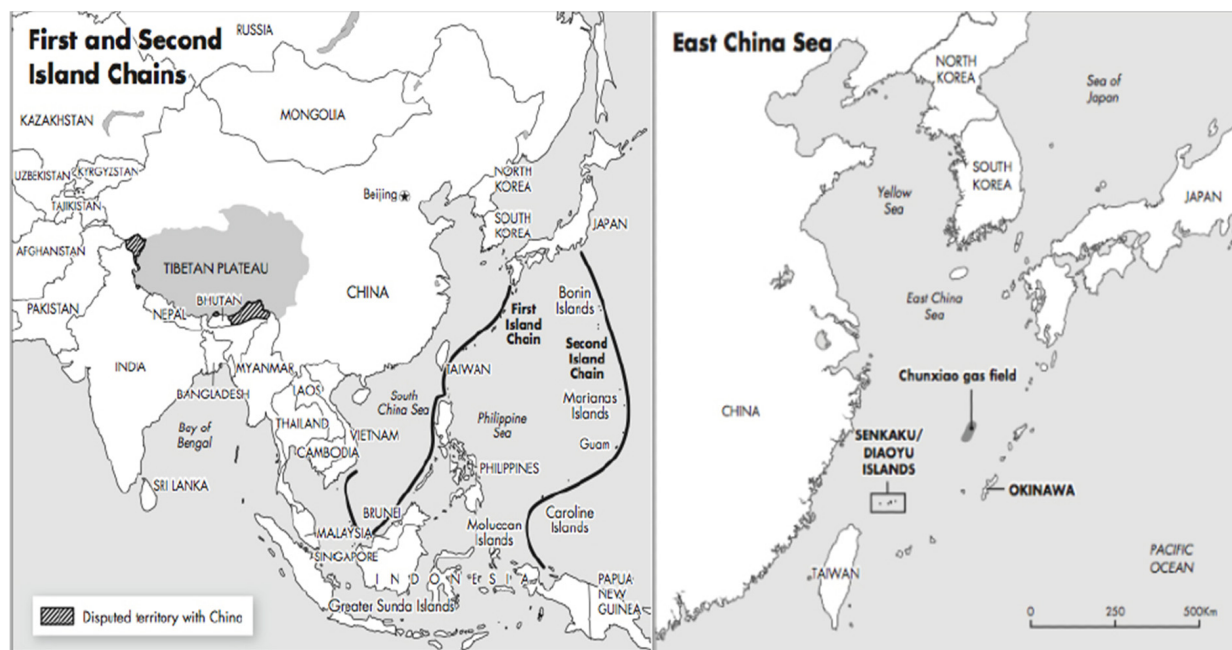
<sup>24</sup> Bonny Lin and I-Chung Lai. “Employing “Non-Peaceful” Means Against Taiwan” <https://www.csis.org/analysis/employing-non-peaceful-means-against-taiwan> [L.s. 05.03.2025].

a global economic collapse due to disrupted shipping and semiconductor shortages, and technological setbacks. The Asia-Pacific order would face complete destabilization.

**Appendix 1**

Strait/Channel	Location	Significance
Taiwan Strait	Between Taiwan and mainland China	International shipping and geopolitics
Luzon Strait	Between Taiwan and Luzon (Philippines)	International shipping
Bashi Channel	Between Taiwan and the Philippines	Navigation between South China Sea and Pacific
Tsugaru Strait	Between Honshu and Hokkaido (Japan)	Links Sea of Japan to Pacific Ocean
Kanmon Strait	Between Honshu and Kyushu (Japan)	Links Sea of Japan to East China Sea
Osumi Strait	Separates Kyushu from Osumi Peninsula	Links East China Sea to Pacific Ocean

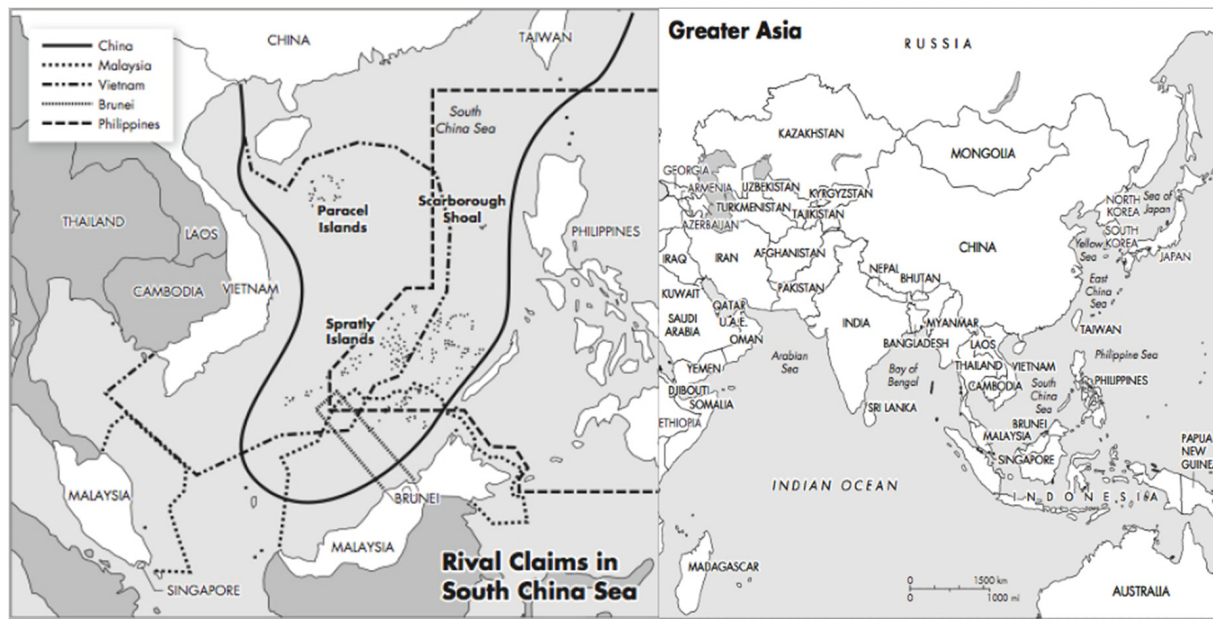
**Appendix 2**



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<sup>25</sup> Mearsheimer, J. see footnote 15. p. 361-362.

Appendix 3



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Source: The Tragedy of Great Power Politics by John J. Mearsheimer

<sup>26</sup> Mearsheimer, J. see footnote 15. p. 361-362.

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