

As Taiwan and the Mainland face off, Scott Morrison must keep calm

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Political leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have been facing off against each other. Taiwan has been called the most dangerous place on earth. Exaggeration, maybe, but Australia should be careful not to get involved in any confrontation.

In calling Taiwan the most dangerous place on earth earlier this year, [*The Economist*](#) didn't predict when war between Mainland China and Taiwan might break out.

The most dangerous period would have to be between October 1 and October 10 in any year. The People's Republic of China (PRC) National Day falls on October 1, and the Republic of China (ROC) on October 10 (Double Tenth Day). Both are days of hubris and rampant nationalism.

On the eve of the PRC's national day, an editorial in the Communist Party of China's official newspaper, [*the People's Daily*](#) hailed the party's achievements and said that China's economy now ranks third in the world, the people are relatively well-off and the country plays "a decisive role" in world affairs.

Normal holiday travel was restricted due to ongoing pandemic concerns but the public mood was buoyant and patriotism reigned.

The return from Canada of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou was widely interpreted as a sign of China's growing international prestige. The defence forces marked the holiday by sending dozens of fighter jets from bases in South China towards the Philippines, south of Taiwan, over the Pratas Islands that are part of Taiwan's territory, in several waves over two days and nights.

Analysts have speculated that these flights were designed to test Taiwan's air defences over a longer period. Although not over the Strait and not over the main island of Taiwan, they were clearly aggressive and threatening.

The US State Department issued a statement on October 3 voicing concern about the provocative action. On October 4, Beijing's Foreign Affairs

spokesperson [Hua Chunying](#) told the US that the flights were none of its business. She said China would take all measures necessary to crush any “Taiwan independence” attempts. “Taiwan independence is doomed to fail,” she said.

In response, Taiwan’s Foreign Minister [Joseph Wu](#) told ABC reporter Stan Grant that Taiwan was ready to respond to an attack by the Mainland and that, if that happened, “they are going to suffer tremendously as well.”

Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng warned that China would have the capacity to take the island by 2025. President Tsai Ing-wen appealed to the international community to support Taiwan to resist Chinese aggression.

The blustering and threatening on both sides are nothing new. This has been going on for decades, peaking every year in October.

When I first arrived in Hong Kong as a graduate student in the early 1960s, adherents of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang KMT) in the refugee settlements flew their flags and let off fireworks on their day, and patriotic supporters of the Communist Party of China (CPC) did the same on their day.

In between, the Hong Kong police tried to keep order and to keep demonstrations off the streets. For those 10 days, it was best to stay home to avoid trouble.

Over many years, Taiwan people have become used to mainland propaganda and threats.

Although rattled and nervous, they have trusted their government leaders to manage the prickly situation and keep them safe. Public opinion surveys such as the 2020 “[Taiwan Election and Democratisation Study](#)” by National Chengchi University confirm that they wish to enjoy the freedoms and democratic rights that they have got used to, that they do not want reunification and that most people are happy with the status quo.

No one wants reunification, not even the KMT. Under KMT rule, Taiwan was officially known as the ROC, thereby claiming the whole of the mainland. That title is virtually never used now.

President Tsai Ing-wen was returned to power in January 2020 with a record popular vote of 57 per cent, on a campaign that strongly featured cross-Strait relations. She has been increasingly strongly in favour of independence.

In September last year, Chinese military aircraft made daily flights over the Strait. In October, Taiwan denounced the Mainland for gate-crashing a Double Tenth reception in Fiji and injuring an embassy staff member who tried to prevent them. A [poll](#) in November last year found that 80 per cent of Taiwanese were ready to defend the island by force if necessary.

This does not mean, however, that they are alarmed by this week's Mainland overflights or that they want to initiate armed conflict, as the Australian National University's [Wen-ti Sung](#) has pointed out.

What has changed this year is that government leaders in Taiwan are far more vocal and forceful in responding to the usual Mainland threats than heretofore and are actively soliciting international support. They are giving voice to their constituents, and no doubt relying on international ant-China frameworks such as the Quad and AUKUS.

This year the United States has issued new guidelines permitting stepped-up diplomatic engagement with Taiwan.

In June, three US senators arrived in Taiwan on a military plane with a donation of 750,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine. Mainland spokespersons had previously signalled that the use of military aircraft could be a trigger for retaliatory action.

These steps could have been taken by the PRC as provocation. It is therefore encouraging that President Joe Biden spoke to President Xi Jinping about Taiwan on October 6. He [told reporters](#) in Washington, "We agree we'll abide by the Taiwan agreement," referring to the US "One China Policy" and the *Taiwan Relations Act*, which states that the future of Taiwan should be settled by peaceful means.

The world should breathe a sigh of relief.

Former prime minister Tony Abbott is in Taiwan this week on a private visit, during which he expects to meet Tsai.

Let us hope he keeps his head even if all about him are losing theirs.

For our own sake, for the sake of the peoples of Taiwan and Australia, surely it is time for Prime Minister Scott Morrison to assure Xi that, like the US, we shall abide by our Taiwan agreements.

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