

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **China, the United States and Taiwan: When Talking Matters**

*William Choong\**



*US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (R) shakes hands with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi during a meeting in Nusa Dua on the Indonesian resort island of Bali on July 9, 2022. Stefani Reynolds/POOL/AFP.*

*\*William Choong is Senior Fellow at the Regional Strategic and Political Studies Programme of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Taiwan Strait crisis of August 2022 underscores the heightened risk of the US-China competition veering into conflict.
- During the current crisis, historical lessons regarding crisis communications and management from the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 EP-3 incident have not been put into practice.
- The increased tempo of US military activities in the Indo-Pacific and China's growing power projection, especially surrounding the flashpoints of the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, have increased the risks of inadvertent escalation into conflict between the two great powers.
- There is a pressing need for China and the United States to pursue crisis management measures for future crises, to reduce the risk of escalation into outright conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

In August 2022, Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, visited Taiwan, ostensibly to support the island's democracy. China took exception to the visit and staged a series of military exercises around Taiwan in six declared zones around the island. In response, the US staged a series of naval and aerial deployments close to Taiwan. The so-called Fourth Taiwan Crisis marks a key turning point in Sino-US relations, which have been in freefall since the advent of the Trump administration.<sup>1</sup>

The latest Taiwan crisis underscores the dangerous escalation of great power competition between China and the US. Since 2017, the theme of "competition" has overtaken the earlier narratives of "engagement" and the associated hybrid of "co-petition" between the two great powers.<sup>2</sup> The Sino-US competition is driven by their conflicting visions of the regional order. Washington is strengthening its network of partnerships and alliances under the aegis of a liberal international order, while China is advocating an "Asian way" that seeks to entrench China as the resident power while delegitimising the presence of other great powers, in particular the US.<sup>3</sup> These entrenched visions have led to contentions between China and the US across different arenas. The US has rolled out initiatives in security (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS), the economy (the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework), technology (particularly in semiconductors) and global infrastructure in the Group of 7. This has been done with the goal of constraining China's influence.<sup>4</sup>

The increased tempo of American military activities and deployments in the Indo-Pacific to challenge and deter China from undermining the US-led rules-based order has also raised the possibility of inadvertent escalation with China. The South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait are potential hotspots: US freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea have risen from one a year to 10 annually between 2015 and 2020 (in 2021, this fell to five).<sup>5</sup> In the Taiwan Strait, US naval transits reached a record of 13 in 2020 (in 2021, it dipped to 12).<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, China has been building up its military capabilities and "routinising" its military presence along its periphery.<sup>7</sup> Speaking in June 2022, US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin said there has been an "alarming increase" of "unsafe aerial intercepts and confrontations at sea by PLA aircraft and vessels."<sup>8</sup> One incident occurred in June 2022, between a Chinese Su-30 fighter and an American C-130.<sup>9</sup> In recent months, China has also been carrying out reportedly unsafe intercepts of US allied aircraft from Australia and Canada. In June 2022, for example, Canberra reported that a PLA Air Force J-16 fighter intercepted a Royal Australian Air Force P8-A Poseidon conducting a "routine maritime surveillance" mission over the South China Sea.<sup>10</sup>

The rise in tensions and heightened risks of confrontation between China and the US have a bearing on ASEAN, which in August 2022 put out its first-ever statement on the Taiwan Strait. The grouping expressed concern about "regional volatility" and called for "maximum restraint".<sup>11</sup> In this context, there is a critical need for Beijing and Washington to resume dialogue and leverage on crisis communication mechanisms. This paper examines the historical record of how China and the US had employed dialogue and crisis communications in previous crises, and how the two great powers can enhance such processes given the increasing number

of unsafe intercepts and confrontations. Such dialogue and communication would reduce the risk of crises and inadvertent incidents escalating into open-armed conflicts.<sup>12</sup>

## **HISTORICAL RECORD OF US-SINO CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

Crisis management does not resolve the systemic issues that led to a crisis in the first place; rather, successful crisis management only defuses the crisis and reduces the risk of escalation.<sup>13</sup> China and the US have various crisis communications mechanisms in place — for example, the 1998 Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) created after the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, a presidential hotline established in 1998, and a 2008 Defense Telephone Link. These mechanisms did in part help to pull the two great powers away from the brink of escalation into conflict, but on the whole they have had a patchy record since the 1990s. Writing after Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, Swaine notes that with more than 15 years of work with American and Chinese military officers, officials and specialists on how to manage serious political-military crises, the August 2022 Taiwan crisis has shown that not many lessons in the past were put into practice.<sup>14</sup> Prior to the 2022 crisis, China and the US implemented crisis management measures in three crises: the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1998 and the 2001 fatal collision between a US EP-3 maritime patrol aircraft and a Chinese fighter jet.

### *1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis*

During the Taiwan Straits crisis in 1995-96, China and the US edged closer to the brink of conflict after Washington granted a visa to then-Taiwan president Lee Teng Hui to visit his alma mater in the US. In March 1996, China conducted military exercises and lobbed missiles into waters near Taiwan. The US responded by deploying two carrier battle groups near Taiwan. According to Pollack, the crisis was resolved because the three major parties — China, the US and Taiwan — saw “their principal needs met without tensions escalating into hostilities”. He adds that the crisis management was well “choreographed”.<sup>15</sup> Two-way meetings were held at all levels, from the political leader level (Bill Clinton and Jiang Zemin) down to the working level. A March 1996 meeting between then-US National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Huaqiu established the boundaries of anticipated actions and reduced misperceptions.<sup>16</sup> In the end, the Lake-Liu channel helped to put in motion a series of summit meetings between Clinton and Jiang in 1997 and 1998.<sup>17</sup>

### *1999 Chinese Embassy Bombing*

During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in May 1999, two US B-2 bombers launched five 2,000 pound joint direct attack munitions (JDAM) at a building which was suspected to house the Serbian Federal Directorate for Supply and Procurement. The bombed building turned out to be the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, resulting in the deaths of three Chinese state media journalists and in 20 people being injured. The bombing sparked the most serious crisis in Sino-American relations post-Cold War.

The Chinese were not convinced by the American explanation about a flawed technique to locate the intended target, a reliance on inaccurate databases and a defective target review process.<sup>18</sup> Clinton sent a letter of apology to Jiang. He tried to talk to Jiang over a bilateral hotline, but the Chinese did not arrange the call. While not publicly agreeing to China's list of demands, US officials told their Chinese counterparts that the US would take "tangible steps" to make amends and address as many Chinese concerns as possible.<sup>19</sup> In the end, the crisis petered out in a benign fashion, due to the accumulated network of contacts, commerce and strategic convergence of views. This led both sides to put the episode behind them.<sup>20</sup>

### *The 2001 EP-3 Incident*

In April 2001, a US EP-3 maritime patrol aircraft and a Chinese F-8 fighter collided in international airspace over the South China Sea. The collision led to the loss of the Chinese pilot and plane. The EP-3 was forced to land at a military base on Hainan Island. The crisis caused serious strains in the bilateral relationship.

Through the crisis, the Chinese were adamant that the US apologise for the loss of the Chinese pilot and for the fact that the EP-3 had landed in Hainan without permission. The US wanted the release of the EP-3 crew, the return of the aircraft and recognition from Beijing that international procedures for emergency situations allowed a plane from one nation to land on the territory of another without permission.<sup>21</sup> In the end, both sides reached a compromise: the US said it was "very sorry" about the loss of the Chinese pilot and about the EP-3 plane entering Chinese airspace without verbal clearance; the Chinese agreed to release the airmen immediately. They held a meeting to discuss how to prevent future accidents and develop a joint plan to return the plane. This was facilitated by two meetings a day over a span of four days between US ambassador to China Joseph Prueher and Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong.<sup>22</sup> One Chinese analyst notes that the constant contact between the two sides — including exchange of letters between senior leaders and strenuous efforts by embassies on both sides — played a critical role for communications and introduced some important proposals.<sup>23</sup>

### *The 2022 Taiwan Strait Crisis*

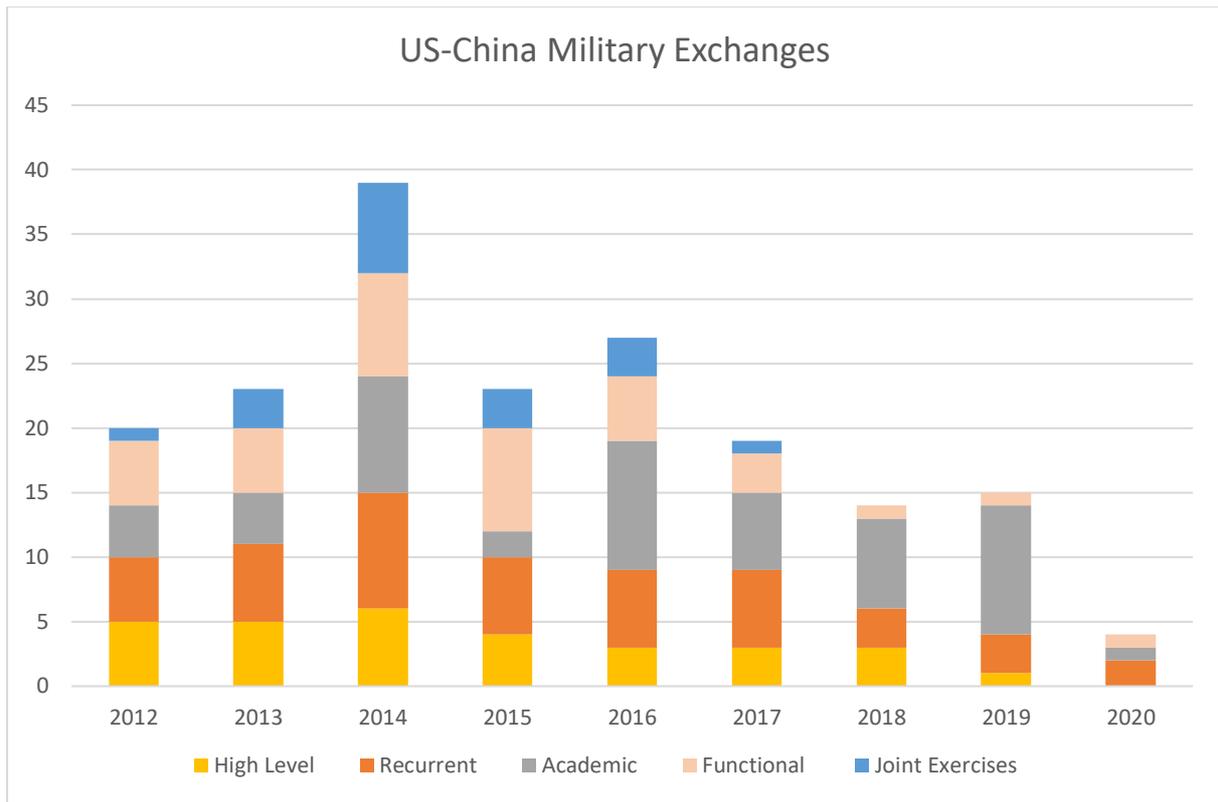
The 2022 Taiwan Strait crisis was precipitated by Pelosi's visit to the island which sparked angry protests by Beijing. China carried out military exercises around Taiwan from 2 August to 10 August, with live fire exercises conducted on 4-7 August.<sup>24</sup> China's set of six declared boxes for the exercises was bigger than the closure zones in the 1995-96 Taiwan crisis. The Chinese had apparently planned well ahead of the crisis;<sup>25</sup> they delivered a formal demarche to the US ambassador to China, levied sanctions on Taiwan and conducted cyber-attacks on Taiwanese government websites. There were US military deployments to the area — including the deployment of a small US aircraft carrier — but the crisis did not escalate into conflict.

But the avoidance of conflict was not due to the effective use of crisis communications, but despite the lack of it. Communication at the highest levels between China and the US prior and during the crisis were few and far between, including a long period when the two sides did not have high-level defence exchanges. US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke to his Chinese counterpart General Wei Fenghe on the phone on 20 April 2022. The last time there was similar

high-level contact between the two defence ministers was on 6 August 2020, a gap of nearly 20 months.<sup>26</sup> As the crisis ensued, Chinese military officials did not return calls from their American counterparts.<sup>27</sup> Lessons learnt from previous crises — for example, that the two sides maintain channels of communication — were not put in practice, and China and the US ended up “talking past each other”.<sup>28</sup>

## **THE NEED TO RESTART CRISIS MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS**

The dearth of high-level exchanges between China and the US underscores a growing trend. Since 2014, the number of high-level exchanges has been declining. In 2014, there were 39 defence exchanges and contacts, comprising high-level visits, recurrent exchanges, academic exchanges and functional exchanges and joint exercises. In 2020, the corresponding figure had dropped to four (see Chart 1).<sup>29</sup> Prior to the 2022 Taiwan Strait crisis in August, there were some high-level meetings between China and the US, but both sides failed to gain traction on contentious issues such as Taiwan and the war in Ukraine. Secretary Austin met General Wei at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2022. The latter said the meeting “went smoothly”, but there was no evidence of any breakthrough in settling long-running disputes over issues such as Taiwan, China’s activities in the South China Sea, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, a two-hour phone call on 28 July between President Biden and President Xi yielded little apart from a stern warning from Beijing that the US not “play with fire” over Taiwan. In addition, China and the US are trying to propagate their respective visions of regional order: the latter with its “rules-based international order” and the former with the Global Security Initiative based on the notion of “indivisible security” that rejects the “hegemonism” of the West.<sup>31</sup>



Set in this context of intensified Sino-US competition, crisis communications and management will not resolve the series of intractable issues between the two great powers. But crisis communications and dialogue would help to ameliorate tensions in a crisis, and subsequently reduce the risk of an escalation into conflict. In principle, both Washington and Beijing duly recognise the importance of “common sense guardrails to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict”.<sup>32</sup> Given the current state of deep mutual distrust between both parties, the use of “guardrails” is more plausible in theory than in practice. Towards this end, there is a need to return to lessons culled from previous Sino-American crises. These include:

- Maintaining direct channels of communication and sending signals that are clear, specific and detailed;
- Focusing on limited objectives and employing means to achieve them;
- Preserving military flexibility and civilian control; and
- Avoiding ideological or principled lock-in positions.<sup>33</sup>

In the current context, there are three ways in which China and the US could continue to support crisis communications.

### *Manning the Hotlines*

China and the US have a system of crisis communications and management. They include the Maritime Military Consultative Agreement (MMCA); a 2014 Rules of Behaviour promoting

safe encounters between the two militaries; the 1998 presidential hotline and 2008 Defence Telephone Link.<sup>34</sup> These mechanisms have bolstered strategic stability in the relationship, and both countries have not seen a major incident since 2001; but the mechanisms have fallen short of their true potential.<sup>35</sup>

Political leaders on both sides need to drive home to their respective bureaucracies the need to communicate, particularly in times of crisis. China has a record of avoiding the use of such mechanisms in times of crisis — this underscores the irony that even with crisis communications in place, phones in the real-world are ringing in “empty rooms”.<sup>36</sup> At the operational level, the people manning the phones in China are not empowered to speak on behalf of the country’s political leadership. During the 2001 EP-3 incident, US embassy calls to the Chinese government went unanswered for 12 hours. When the calls were answered, Chinese officials offered no information.<sup>37</sup> Chinese assistant foreign minister Zhou called an emergency meeting with US ambassador to China Joseph Preuher only 12 hours after the collision.<sup>38</sup>

A deeper issue is that Chinese officials only find such hotlines beneficial when they can express objections on policy issues, such as American military deployments to the region.<sup>39</sup> This underscores the fact that crisis communication mechanisms, no matter how well designed, are not a substitute for substantive exchanges about policy differences. There has been some traction in incorporating discussions about policy issues into a more comprehensive Policy Dialogue System (PDS). This puts the MMCA consultations in a broader framework, which may help address Beijing’s concerns about the delinking of operational issues from a more comprehensive policy conversation. This will allow the Chinese to voice their opposition to American military presence in the region.<sup>40</sup> The June meeting between Austin and Wei at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore would have provided an opportunity for both countries to commit to the PDS,<sup>41</sup> but there is no evidence in the public domain that shows that they had made such a commitment. Given that there are no specific binding rules on encounters between military aircraft, it has been suggested that the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus (ADMM Plus) mechanisms could initiate discussions for such a mechanism.<sup>42</sup> Currently, such a mechanism exists only for ASEAN members in the ADMM, and not to “Plus” partners in the ADMM-Plus.<sup>43</sup>

### *Openness and Sensitivity*

During crises, it is important to keep channels of communication open, even when there are deep disagreements over contentious policy issues. At a fundamental level, communication would lead to a deeper understanding of the other’s intentions and redlines and facilitate better responses.<sup>44</sup> Two things are important in the process of maintaining such channels of communication. Firstly, there needs to be a smaller group of officials at the working level who can be in constant contact, exchange views, ferry messages to their respective capitals and come up with potential solutions. There is a need to find a contemporary analogue to the Lake-Liu channel from the 1995-96 crisis. Swaine suggests using former senior officials as a backchannel, involving former US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and senior State Council official Dai Bingguo.<sup>45</sup>

Secondly, it is important that in crisis communications, both sides exercise a high level of tact and sensitivity. Public statements or actions tend to push the other side to harden its posture;

direct and private signals reduce the reputational costs to the other side if it changes course.<sup>46</sup> De-escalatory signals should be accompanied by clear explanations. During a crisis simulation, the Chinese believed that the US' removal of an aircraft carrier (a positive gesture in the eyes of the latter) from the scene of a crisis was a prelude to the launching of an attack.<sup>47</sup> In the autumn of 2020, the Chinese government grew anxious that the US would launch an attack on its outposts in the Spratlys as the bilateral relationship tanked. US officials responded by informing their Chinese counterparts that Washington would not launch such an attack.<sup>48</sup>

### *Resting Places*

On Taiwan, China and the US have adopted maximalist positions that would be hard to reconcile: China wants peaceful unification but has never renounced the use of force against the island; the US wants Chinese acceptance of the status quo for Taiwan, which is anathema to Beijing in the long-term. But there is a quid pro quo that both parties might be able to agree on. As Schelling states, two parties can “concert their intentions and expectations” if one party knows that the other is trying to do the same. In this case, a logical expectation would be the avoidance of unintended escalation that leads to open conflict.<sup>49</sup>

The US has continued to stress its position: it opposes “unilateral changes” to the status quo, does not support Taiwan independence and expects China-Taiwan differences to be resolved peacefully.<sup>50</sup> The challenge here is that Beijing remains unconvinced of the US position, particularly given that President Biden has said — four times — that he would defend the island in the event of an attack. American lawmakers should be made aware that their approach — visits to Taiwan and the Taiwan Policy Act, which seeks to improve Taiwan's defence and strengthen bilateral ties — threaten Biden's strategy of using mini-lateral, issue-based coalitions (security, economics and technology) to manage the threat of China.<sup>51</sup> In ongoing dialogue with the Chinese, American officials should stress an approach based on the aforesaid quid pro quo. Likewise, Beijing should realise that military exercises could push more Taiwanese into supporting independence; the exercises would also pull the US, as well as its allies and partners, further into China's own backyard, thus complicating China's security outlook.<sup>52</sup> The resumption of China-US dialogue, which Beijing has curtailed, would have been a significant step towards returning to a shared focal point on Taiwan.

## **CONCLUSION**

In a crisis, consistent communication and dialogue help to forestall an escalation in tensions that could lead to outright conflict. China and the US are already experiencing a serious deterioration in bilateral relations, fuelled by competing visions of regional order in the Indo-Pacific. It would be useful if both sides are to return to basics in re-opening and utilising channels of dialogue and communications. Granted, these channels will not resolve underlying and systemic differences between the superpowers. In a crisis, however, a dogged persistence to use such channels might well make the difference between an uneasy state of strategic competition and outright conflict.

**ENDNOTES**

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<sup>2</sup> Yun Sun, “Asia-Pacific Security: A Chinese Perspective,” in *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2022*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, p. 41 <https://www.iiss.org/~publication/ff4be539-07e9-4d47-a1b7-390822d81e57/chapter-2-asia-pacific-security-a-chinese-perspective.pdf>,

<sup>3</sup> Hoang Thi Ha, “Building Peace in Asia: It’s Not the ‘Asian Way’,” *ISEAS Fulcrum*, 29 July 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/building-peace-in-asia-its-not-the-asian-way/>

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<sup>9</sup> Lara Seligman, “Chinese Fighter Jet Had ‘Unsafe’ Interaction with U.S. Military Plane in June,” *Politico*, 14 July 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/07/14/chinese-jet-us-military-interaction-00045832>

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Haenle, “Why the U.S. and Chinese Militaries Aren’t Talking Much Anymore,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 11 August 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/11/why-u.s.-and-chinese-militaries-aren-t-talking-much-anymore-pub-85123>

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- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 343
- <sup>21</sup> Dennis C. Blair and David B. Bonfili, “The April EP-3 Incident,” in Swaine et al, *Managing Sino-American Crises*, pp 382-383
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 383
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- <sup>24</sup> Sarah Zheng, “China Plans Four Days of Military Drills in Areas Encircling Taiwan,” *Bloomberg* 3 August 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-02/china-announces-military-drills-encircling-taiwan-from-aug-4-7-l6cc5ljn>
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- <sup>27</sup> Lara Seligman and Alexander Ward, “Pentagon Chiefs’ Calls to China Go Unanswered Amid Taiwan Crisis,” *Politico*, 5 August 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/08/05/pentagon-china-calls-taiwan-00050175>
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<sup>33</sup> Swaine, “Understanding the Historical Record,” pp 6-10. In pursuing “military flexibility,” Swaine advises that crisis decision makers escalate slowly, thus allowing the other party to respond to each move. This would avoid “major escalatory leaps” in favour of “incremental, symmetrical, tit-for-tat responses”.

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<sup>36</sup> Julian Borger, “Hotlines ‘Ring Out’: China’s Military Crisis Strategy Needs Rethink, Says Biden Asia Chief,” *The Guardian*,

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<sup>38</sup> Zhang, “The Sino-American Aircraft Collison,” pp 394-395

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 27

<sup>42</sup> ibid

<sup>43</sup> ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meetings, “Guidelines for Air Military Encounters,” 19 October 2018, [https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2018\\_Oct\\_12th%20ADMM\\_Singapore,%2019%20October%202018\\_%5BFinal%5D%20Guidelines%20for%20Air%20Military%20Encounters.pdf](https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2018_Oct_12th%20ADMM_Singapore,%2019%20October%202018_%5BFinal%5D%20Guidelines%20for%20Air%20Military%20Encounters.pdf)

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<sup>45</sup> Swaine, “Will the New Taiwan Crisis Spiral Out of Control?”

<sup>46</sup> Ryan Hass, “Fear of Conflict -- The Key to Managing Taiwan Tensions,” *The Straits Times*, 26 September 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/fear-of-conflict-the-key-to-managing-taiwan-tensions>

<sup>47</sup> Swaine, “Will the New Taiwan Crisis Spiral Out of Control?”

<sup>48</sup> ICG, “Risky Competition,” p. 12

<sup>49</sup> Schelling, Thomas C., *The Strategy Of Conflict*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, 1960, p. 57

<sup>50</sup> *Reuters*, “U.S. Updates Taiwan Fact Sheet Again to Say It Does Not Support Independence,” 3 June 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-updates-fact-sheet-again-says-does-not-support-taiwan-independence-2022-06-03/>

<sup>51</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser and Zack Cooper, “Nancy Pelosi’s Trip to Taiwan is Too Dangerous,” *New York Times*, 28 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/28/opinion/china-us-taiwan-pelosi.html>

<sup>52</sup> Haenle, “Breaking the US-China Cycle of Escalation Over Taiwan”

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