

**POL 039 – FLASHPOINT TAIWAN: U.S-CHINA TENSIONS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

*Stanford Continuing Studies*

*Summer 2025*

*Syllabus Version 1.0*

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**POL 039**

*Time:* Mondays 6:00-7:30pm

*Classroom:* Online only

*Canvas site:* [Sp24-EASTASN-168-02/268-01](https://stanford.zoom.us/j/91980123456)

**Description:**

Taiwan has carved out a place for itself in the world that far outstrips its geographic size and population. With less than 24 million people, its economy is among the 20 largest in the world today, and Taiwanese firms, including its strategically important semiconductor industry, are key links in the multinational production chains that crisscross the Indo-Pacific. It is a major trading partner and long-standing friend of the United States in an increasingly volatile region. It is also one of the most successful cases in the Third Wave of democratization, and it remains by many measures the most liberal democracy in Asia.

Today, however, Taiwan is threatened by the rise of the authoritarian People’s Republic of China (PRC), an economic juggernaut and rapidly modernizing military power which asserts the right to rule over Taiwan and has relentlessly sought to extend the island’s diplomatic isolation and economic dependence on the Chinese mainland. As a consequence, Taiwan’s long-term security is as imperiled as any democracy in the world.

The cross-Strait relationship is crucial for regional and global security: it is still the one issue that could most plausibly draw the United States and the PRC into an armed conflict. Taiwan is also important as a democratic model: it provides a powerful counterexample to the argument that liberal democracy is inappropriate for Chinese-speaking or “Asian values” societies, including the PRC. And as one of the shining political successes of the Third Wave of democracy, its failure would be deeply tragic.

This course will provide a broad overview of Taiwan’s place in the security environment of East Asia, review different theoretical approaches for understanding the prospects for war or peace in the Taiwan Strait, and examine contemporary policy debates in the United States over how, or even whether, to continue to provide security assistance to the island.

Topics to be covered include:

- The history of US-Taiwan-PRC relations from 1945 to the present
- Taiwan’s contested sovereignty: its ambiguous status in the contemporary inter-state system, and the practical consequences of its diplomatic isolation
- Hard security issues: China’s rise, changes in the cross-Strait military balance, the US-Taiwan security partnership, and Taiwan defense and security planning and challenges
- Economic security issues: trends in cross-Strait trade and investment, Taiwan’s economic importance to the United States and other advanced economies, and PRC use of economic integration as a political tool
- Sharp power issues: PRC United Front strategy and tactics, “gray-zone” activities, covert and corrupting activities and the threats to democracy in Taiwan

- Taiwan's domestic politics: influence of PRC threats and activities on Taiwan's democratic politics, strengths and weaknesses of Taiwan's contemporary political system and impact on its security

### **Course Materials:**

#### *Required Books:*

Scott L. Kastner. 2022. *War and Peace in the Taiwan Strait*. Columbia University Press.

This book will serve as our main textbook. All other weekly readings will be posted to the Canvas site. Some of the readings are excerpts from books; these will be posted as pdfs or available electronically through Stanford Libraries. Most of the rest are also available online through Stanford University library's various electronic journal databases (e.g. MUSE, JSTOR).

#### *Newspaper Reading*

Because we will refer regularly to current events in this course, I recommend that you follow the news in Taiwan on a daily basis. The *Taipei Times*, Taiwan's primary English-language daily newspaper, is available online for free at [www.taipeitimes.com](http://www.taipeitimes.com), as is [FocusTaiwan](http://FocusTaiwan), the English-language website of Taiwan's Central News Agency. In addition to these, I have posted a list of other online media resources (both English- and Chinese-language) on the Canvas site under Pages.

#### *Additional Readings and Resources*

I may occasionally recommend other materials, and I will also post additional resources on the Canvas site. I also will make frequent use of the Canvas announcement tool and will keep you up to date on course activities and any changes via that system, so double check that you can access the Canvas site so that you can receive these notifications.

### **Course Requirements:**

This course is offered not-for-credit (NGR) and is open enrollment. There are no required course assignments.

#### *Lecture*

The course will be offered through a weekly lecture of approximately 90 minutes, offered online through the Stanford Zoom platform. It will be recorded and available for asynchronous viewing.

#### *Discussion and Q&A*

Following the end of our officially scheduled time (7:30pm), I will stick around online for at least another half hour to answer your questions and facilitate class discussion.

#### *Readings*

All students are encouraged to complete the primary readings before the corresponding week's class meeting. For students interested in delving deeper into each week's theme, I have included two other kinds of reading options – *commentaries* and *supplementary readings*.

*Commentaries* introduce different views on a current issue linked to that week's theme (for instance, different critiques of the One China policy of the United States.) These typically focus explicitly on the U.S.-Taiwan-PRC strategic triangle and make a policy criticism or recommendation.

*Supplementary readings* present some of the foundational theories and empirical findings from which that week's lecture is drawn. Most of these are written by leading thinkers in political science and are general theories (i.e. not specific to China, Taiwan, or the United States).

*Canvas Discussion*

I will also post a discussion prompt on Canvas before each week's class that includes questions related to that week's readings. You are encouraged to post a question or comment about the readings or engage with the posts from your class peers. This post can ask for a clarification—for instance, about evidence or the argument that you do not understand. Or it can be a substantive issue that you think would be helpful to discuss in class—for instance, how does a reading or recent development in Taiwan relate to something from the lecture? It can even be a critique—say, “this reading sucks, and here's why!”—or a response to something one of your peers has written. I encourage you to use these discussion prompts to engage with each other as well. This prompt is a chance for you to speak directly with (and argue with—respectfully, of course!) your peers.

## Tentative Schedule

### Week 1. The “Taiwan Problem” in the Inter-State System

**Monday, July 14. 6:00-7:30pm.** Lecture

*Primary Readings:*

1. Kastner, *War and Peace in the Taiwan Strait*, Introduction and Ch. 1
2. Stephen D. Krasner, 2001, “Problematic Sovereignty,” Ch. 1 in *Problematic Sovereignty: Contested Rules and Political Possibilities*. Columbia University Press.
3. Robert Madsen, 2001, “The Struggle for Sovereignty between China and Taiwan,” in *Problematic Sovereignty*

*Commentaries – different views on the U.S. One China Policy:*

- Eliot Cohen, “Telling the Truth about Taiwan,” *The Atlantic*, October 2023
- Michael Swaine, “The Worrying Erosion of the One China Policy,” *The National Interest*, February 2023.

*Supplementary Background Readings:*

- Hoopes and Brinkely, 1997, *FDR and the Creation of the UN*, excerpts
- Chengxin Pan, 2012, “Normative Convergence and Cross-Strait Divergence: Westphalian Sovereignty as an Ideational Source of Conflict,” in *New Thinking about the Taiwan Issue*.
- Jessica Drun and Bonnie Glaser, “The Distortion of UN Resolution 2758 and Limits on Taiwan’s Access to the United Nations,” German Marshall Fund report, March 2022.
- David Lake, 2009, “The State and International Relations,” *Oxford Handbook of International Relations*.

**7:30-8:00pm: I will remain online until 8pm for Q&A and discussion**

### Week 2. Systemic Explanations of War: The Security Dilemma across the Taiwan Strait

**Monday, July 21. 6:00-7:30pm.** Lecture

*Primary Readings*

1. Kastner Ch. 2
2. Jack S. Levy, 2008, “Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China,” in *China’s Ascent*.
3. Adam Liff and Ikenberry, 2014, “Racing Toward Tragedy?: China’s Rise, Military Competition in the Asia-Pacific, and the Security Dilemma.” *International Security* 39(2): 52-91.

*Commentaries*

- Michelle Flournoy and Mike Brown, “Time Is Running Out to Defend Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 2022.
- Andrew Nathan, “Beijing Is Still Playing the Long Game on Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 2022.

*Supplementary Background Readings*

- Kenneth Waltz, 1988, “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory.” In Rothberg and Rabb, *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*.

- Robert Jervis, 1978, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*
- Stephen Van Evera, 1998, “Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War,” *International Security*

**7:30-8:00pm: I will remain online until 8pm for Q&A and discussion**

### **Week 3. Hierarchies, Alliances, and Security Cooperation: Taiwan as a Client State**

**Monday, July 28, 6:00-7:30pm. Lecture**

#### *Primary Readings*

1. Kastner, Ch. 3
2. Richard Bush, March 2017, “A One-China Policy Primer.” Brookings Institution, East Asia Policy Paper 10.
3. Keren Yarhi-Milo, Alexander Lanoszka, and Zack Cooper, 2016, “To Arm or To Ally?: The Patron’s Dilemma and the Strategic Logic of Arms Transfers and Alliances,” *International Security* 41(2): 90-139.

#### *Commentaries*

- Andrew Erickson, Gabriel Collins, and Matt Pottinger, “The Taiwan Catastrophe: What America—and the World—Would Lose If China Took the Island.” *Foreign Affairs*, February 2024.
- Stephen Wertheim and Jennifer Kavanagh, “The Taiwan Fixation: American Strategy Shouldn’t Hinge on an Unwinnable War,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2025.

#### *Supplementary Readings*

- David Lake, 2011, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, introduction
- James Morrow, 1991, “Alliances and Asymmetry,” *American Journal of Political Science*
- James Morrow, 1993, “Arms versus Allies,” *International Organization*
- Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, 1990, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks,” *International Organization*

**7:30-8:00pm: I will remain online until 8pm for Q&A and discussion**

### **Week 4. Domestic Influences on Foreign Policy: Democracy in Taiwan**

**Monday, August 4. 6:00-7:30pm. Lecture**

#### *Primary Readings*

1. Kastner, Ch. 4
2. Xin Qiang, 2020, “Selective Engagement: Mainland China’s Dual-Track Taiwan Policy,” *Journal of Contemporary China*
3. TBD

#### *Commentaries*

- Tanner Greer, September 2019, “Why Taiwan’s Defense Strategy Makes No Sense,” *Foreign Affairs*

- Raymond Kuo, December 2021, “The Counter-Intuitive Sensibility of Taiwan’s New Defense Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*.
- Yuster Yu and Michael Hunzeker, April 2025, “Taiwan’s Biggest Problem in Steeling Itself for War with China is Cultural,” *War on the Rocks*.
- TBD

#### *Supplementary Background Readings*

- Kharis Templeman, 2024, “Taiwan’s Transition to Democracy and Beyond (1986-2024)” in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Taiwan*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.
- Kenneth Schultz, 2013, “Domestic Politics and International Relations,” *Sage Handbook*
- James Lee Ray, 1998, “Does Democracy Cause Peace?” *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Michael W. Doyle, 1986, “Liberalism and World Politics,” *American Political Science Review*

**7:30-8:00pm: I will remain online until 8pm for Q&A and discussion**

<p><b>Week 5. Rationalist Explanations of War: Information Asymmetries and Commitment Problems across the Taiwan Strait</b></p>
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**Monday, August 4, 6:00-7:30pm. Lecture**

#### *Primary Readings*

1. Kastner, 2022, *War and Peace in the Taiwan Strait*, Ch 5-8.

#### *Commentaries*

- Hal Brands, “U.S. Deterrence in Taiwan is Failing,” *Foreign Policy*, September 2023.
- Elbridge Colby, “America Must Prepare for a War Over Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 2022.
- Bonnie Glaser, Tom Christensen, and Jessica Chen Weiss, “Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 2023.
- Raymond Kuo, Michael Hunzeker and Mark Christopher, “Scared Strait: How Should America Deter China from Attacking Taiwan?” & rebuttal in *Foreign Affairs*

#### *Supplementary Background Readings*

- James Fearon, 1995, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*
- Robert Powell, 2002, “Bargaining Theory and International Conflict,” *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Robert Powell, 2006, “War as a Commitment Problem,” *International Organization*

**7:30-8:00pm: I will remain online until 8pm for Q&A and discussion**

<p><b>6. Sharp Power: Non-Military Coercion across the Taiwan Strait</b></p>
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**Monday, August 11. Lecture**

#### *Readings [tentative, subject to change]:*

1. Christopher Walker, Shanti Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, 2020, “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power,” *Journal of Democracy*

2. Christina Lai, 2022, “More than Carrots and Sticks: Economic Statecraft and Coercion in China–Taiwan Relations from 2000 to 2019,” *Politics*.
3. Kharis Templeman, 2020, “How Taiwan Stands Up to China,” *Journal of Democracy*.

#### *Commentaries*

- Thomas Shattuck and Benjamin Lewis, “How Taiwan’s New President Should Respond to Chinese Coercion,” *War on the Rocks*, January 2024.
- Pratik Jakhar, “China’s Economic Coercion Is More Bark Than Bite,” *Foreign Policy*, October 2021
- Ivan Kanapathy, 2024, “Countering China’s Gray-Zone Activities,” Ch. 6 in Matt Pottinger, ed., *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan*.
- Dan Blumenthal and Frederick Kagan, March 2023, “China’s Three Roads to Controlling Taiwan,” American Enterprise Institute.

#### *Supplementary Background Readings*

- David A. Baldwin, 2013, “Power and International Relations,” Sage Handbook
- Christopher Walker, 2018, “What Is Sharp Power?” *Journal of Democracy*
- David Stilwell, 2020, “Covert, Coercive, and Corrupting: Countering the Chinese Communist Party’s Malign Influence in Free Societies,” remarks delivered at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

**7:30-8:00pm: I will remain online until 8pm for Q&A and discussion**

HAVE A GREAT REST OF THE SUMMER!