

# Sorry, Elon, You Are 100 Percent Wrong on Taiwan

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A ship sails in the Taiwan Strait between the coast of Pingtan island (foreground), the closest point to Taiwan, and another island in China's southeast Fujian province on April 7, 2023. Greg Baker/AFP via Getty Images



By Gordon G. Chang

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## *Commentary*

“From their standpoint, you know, maybe it’s analogous to like Hawaii or something like that, like an integral part of China that is arbitrarily not part of China mostly because... the U.S. Pacific Fleet has stopped any sort of reunification effort by force,” Elon Musk, appearing remotely at the All-In Summit in Los Angeles in September, [said](#) referring to Taiwan.

In May, Musk [talked to CNBC](#) on the same topic. “The official policy of China is that Taiwan should be integrated,” he told the channel’s David Faber. “One does not need to read between the lines. One should only read the lines.” And then the world’s richest man stated this: “I think there’s a certain, there’s some inevitability to the situation.”

Musk is brilliant when it comes to providing what the world needs, but he is ignorant about Taiwan. His conclusions could not be more wrong.

To begin with, the People’s Republic of China cannot “reunify” with Taiwan. The communist regime has never ruled the island republic.

Moreover, neither has China. In fact, no Chinese ruling group has ever held indisputable sovereignty to the island.

“The Chinese Communist Party leadership claims that Taiwan has been part of China ‘since ancient times,’” Gerrit van der Wees, a former Dutch diplomat who teaches Taiwan history at George Mason University, told this author. “A closer examination shows that this is simply not the case.”

The Party likes to point to the Ming dynasty, van der Wees notes, but Ming rulers considered Taiwan “beyond our territory” and did not object to either the Dutch building Fort Zeelandia or the Dutch East Indies Company establishing administrative control over a portion of Taiwan.

Beijing also speaks about Qing dynasty rule over Taiwan, but the Qings never controlled the island’s mountainous spine, which

comprises about half the island, and the Chinese considered the Manchu Qings, who overthrew the Ming rulers, to be foreigners. Yes, Qing rulers declared Taiwan a “Province of China,” but the provincial status lasted only eight years. In 1895, they [ceded Taiwan](#) to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

From 1928 to 1943, the Communist Party itself [recognized Taiwan](#) as a state separate and apart from China.

Chiang Kai-shek was certainly Chinese, and he definitely controlled all of Taiwan’s area, but the 1951 San Francisco Treaty, which resolved most of the World War II legal issues in Asia, did not confer sovereignty on his Kuomintang regime.

More to the point, the people of the island do not see themselves as “Chinese.” “China” appears in the name of their state, but that is because Chiang, losing the Chinese Civil War, fled the “mainland” and took up residence on the island. His Kuomintang party cemented its rule with the ruthless “White Terror” from 1949 to 1992. The decades-long brutality, repression, and discrimination reinforced a sense of Taiwan identity among the people there.

Today, generally about two-thirds of Taiwan’s people in self-identification surveys deny they are “Chinese.” In a [Pew Research Center survey](#), conducted between June and September of last year, 67 percent of Taiwan’s people said they were “primarily Taiwanese.” Only 3 percent—generally those who came with Chiang or their descendants—saw themselves as “primarily Chinese.”

The bad news for China’s rulers is the outlook of the younger age cohorts. Among those 18 to 34, 83 percent view themselves as Taiwanese and 1 percent Chinese. Taiwan has already developed a sense of identity separate and apart from China.

Musk’s use of the Hawaii example is instructive. In both Hawaii and Taiwan, foreigners arrived and dominated an indigenous society. The critical difference is that Hawaii’s local inhabitants eventually accepted the union with the United States. In the case of Taiwan, local residents continue to reject unification with China.

That rejection refutes Musk's claim of inevitability.

In the course of human events, nothing is inevitable.

Moreover, there are obstacles to unification. For one thing, China is not going to take on the United States if President Donald Trump makes it clear that he will defend Taiwan. China's regime is extremely casualty-averse, evident from Beijing's reluctance to report losses from a skirmish with India in June 2020. Chinese leaders are unlikely to start a war, even if they think they will ultimately prevail, when casualties could be measured in the hundreds of thousands. In short, a Chinese invasion is not "inevitable" for that reason alone.

Trump, however, [refuses](#) to make any clear declaration of intent. This keeps China guessing.

Trump also appears to be casualty-adverse, priding himself on staying out of wars during his first presidential term. If China were to attack Taiwan, the 47th president, advised by Musk, might stay out of the fight.

If Xi Jinping thinks Trump will not defend Taiwan, will he then attack? There are other factors preventing China from making a bold grab. For one thing, the People's Republic is getting weaker—the Chinese economy is failing—making notions of inevitability outdated.

Also, the Chinese leadership must know that a war would be extremely unpopular with the Chinese people, and a war against Taiwan would be the most unpopular of all. Although the people of Taiwan do not consider themselves "Chinese," people in China, as a result of endless Communist Party indoctrination, do, and the Chinese in China—both officials and common folk—believe that "[Chinese do not kill Chinese.](#)"

Furthermore, the Chinese military, racked by purges and suicides, is in no condition to start hostilities with an invasion of the main island of Taiwan, and Xi does not trust any general or admiral with complete control of the People's Liberation Army, a necessary move if Beijing were to launch a combined air-land-sea operation against the island.

Xi appears to be losing support in the military, and he is not about to make some flag officer the most powerful figure in China by giving him or her control of virtually all of the armed forces.

Yes, the U.S. Pacific Fleet potentially stands in the way of a Chinese invasion, but the real obstacles are conditions in China, not to mention centuries of history, tradition and culture.

So, respectfully, Mr. Musk: China is China, Taiwan is Taiwan, and Taiwan, although close to China, is not China.

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**Gordon G. Chang**

Author

Gordon G. Chang is a distinguished senior fellow at the Gatestone Institute, a member of its Advisory Board, and the author of "The Coming Collapse of China."



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