

Reducing Escalation Risk in the Taiwan Strait: A Crisis-Management Framework

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Section: Regional security, Taiwan Strait, and crisis management

Research question

What practical steps can governments take to reduce the risk that a Taiwan Strait crisis escalates, without confusing risk reduction with political concession or presuming Taiwan's people lack agency?

Key findings

- Crisis management can reduce miscalculation and keep channels open; it cannot resolve the underlying status dispute or guarantee restraint.
- The public record contains attributed, conflicting positions — the U.S. Taiwan Relations Act and the PRC's Anti-Secession Law. They are evidence of what each government states, not a neutral settlement of Taiwan's status.
- Workable arrangements need multiple channels with named offices, acknowledgement procedures, recurring tests, and a stated fallback when a channel fails; a hotline that exists on paper is only one element.
- De-escalation can be separated from concession: a pause, clarification, or incident investigation need not concede any party's legal or political position.
- Plans made only among outside powers are incomplete: Taiwan's institutions and affected people belong inside crisis planning, including civilian protection and continuity of communications.

The policy problem

Crisis management is not a substitute for resolving the political disagreement that produces tension. Its narrower purpose is to reduce miscalculation, keep channels open, and make clear how governments intend to respond to dangerous events. That purpose is important because governments may interpret the same military movement, political statement, or third-party visit differently. A channel that transmits a message does not guarantee that the other side accepts it.

The relevant public record contains distinct legal and political positions. The U.S. Taiwan Relations Act states U.S. policy that the future of Taiwan should be determined by peaceful means and treats non-peaceful efforts, including coercion, as a matter of grave concern; it also calls for defensive articles and maintaining U.S. capacity to resist force or coercion.[1] The PRC's 2005 Anti-Secession Law states the PRC's position that Taiwan is part of China and identifies circumstances in which the state says it would use "non-peaceful means." These are attributed positions of the respective governments, not a neutral legal settlement of Taiwan's status.[2]

The UN Charter requires member states to settle disputes by peaceful means and prohibits the threat or use of force in international relations against territorial integrity or political independence, subject to the Charter's provisions.[3] The G7 Hiroshima Communiqué separately states opposition to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion and supports peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.[4] These sources support a policy objective of preventing coercive escalation. They do not remove the need to describe the actors' differing claims accurately.

What crisis management can realistically do

Crisis management can improve the chance that an incident is noticed, interpreted, and communicated before leaders face pressure to respond publicly or militarily. It cannot eliminate the underlying dispute, guarantee restraint, or substitute for the views of people most affected. A functioning hotline is only one element: it can be ignored, misunderstood, or unavailable at the moment it is needed.

A robust approach therefore needs multiple channels and clear procedures. Governments can agree on who is authorized to communicate, which contact points are available during an incident, how a message is acknowledged, and how

a failure to reach the intended recipient is escalated. Military channels, diplomatic channels, and public communications serve different functions; one should not be treated as a replacement for the others.

A layered policy framework

Define the incident before defining the response. Governments should distinguish routine activity, an accident, a dangerous encounter, a coercive act, and a direct use of force. Public statements should identify what is known, what is still being assessed, and which source supports the account. Keeping verified event dates separate from disputed interpretations of intent is the discipline this research program applies.

Keep crisis communications operationally usable. Contact lists, translation procedures, confirmation protocols, and recurring tests matter more than public declarations that a hotline exists. When governments will not use a formal military channel, diplomatic channels and third-party communication routes may still reduce ambiguity. Such channels should be tested under realistic conditions and their limitations stated honestly.

Separate de-escalation from concessions. A government can propose a pause, clarification, or incident investigation without conceding its legal or political position. Conversely, a crisis channel should not be used to demand that the other side first accept a contested status claim. Separating immediate risk reduction from final-status negotiations makes participation more feasible, though it cannot ensure agreement.

Make public signaling consistent and legible. Inconsistent or contradictory messages can create uncertainty about what conduct is being deterred and how a government will respond. Governments should explain the purpose of military deployments, visits, or exercises where appropriate, while protecting information that should not be disclosed. The goal is not to remove strategic ambiguity by assertion; it is to reduce avoidable ambiguity about an immediate incident and the available communication path.

Include Taiwan's institutions and affected people. Arrangements among outside powers alone cannot represent the interests or perceptions of people in Taiwan. Crisis planning should incorporate Taiwan's own authorities, emergency institutions, and public needs in ways consistent with each participant's policies

and legal frameworks. Civilian protection, continuity of communications, evacuation planning, and accurate public information belong in crisis management rather than being postponed until conflict begins.

Preserve third-party and regional channels. Regional organizations and partners can support de-escalatory communication, clarify shared public positions, and help maintain contact when bilateral routes fail. The G7's statement offers a public example of a shared commitment against unilateral coercion, but a communiqué is not an operational mechanism and does not establish that members will respond identically to every event.[4]

How to evaluate proposals

A proposal should be evaluated by whether it identifies the incident it is designed to prevent, names the participating offices, establishes contact and acknowledgement procedures, defines how it would be tested, and explains what happens if a channel fails. It should also identify the policy positions it does not resolve. A proposal that merely calls for “dialogue” is too vague to evaluate; a proposal that promises deterrence without describing escalation pathways is incomplete.

Policy-makers should also examine the risks of signaling. A measure intended to reassure one audience may be read as a threat by another. A temporary pause might reduce danger but could be interpreted as acceptance of a new status quo. These risks should be discussed in advance, with explicit conditions for restarting contact and documenting compliance.

Limits and further research

This paper offers a public-policy framework, not an operational military plan or a prediction of conflict. The cited legal texts and public statements establish what particular actors say their policy or legal position is. They do not, on their own, establish how an actual crisis would unfold or whether any proposed channel would be used. The anti-secession law should be treated as evidence of the PRC government's publicly stated legal framework; the Taiwan Relations Act should be treated as U.S. law and policy, not as a complete account of Taiwan's position.[1]
[2]

A next research stage should inventory publicly documented communication mechanisms, incident protocols, and prior crisis episodes; distinguish official announcements from independent confirmation; and record disagreements about what triggered or de-escalated each event. The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis is a priority case for that inventory: its material should be carried forward with its unresolved caveats about specific naval-transit descriptions intact, rather than rewritten as a settled narrative.

References

[1] Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96-8 —

<https://www.congress.gov/96/statute/STATUTE-93/STATUTE-93-Pg14.pdf>

[2] Anti-Secession Law, English text published by the Chinese Embassy —

https://na.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/200503/t20050318_6553850.htm

[3] United Nations Charter — <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

[4] G7 Hiroshima Leaders' Communiqué —

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/20/g7-hiroshima-leaders-communicue/>

Status and updates

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