



By: *Jonas Parello-Plesner*

# Europeans cannot ignore the direct and existential threat facing Taiwan



A world leader finally said the quiet part out loud about Taiwan. Last month, Japan's new prime minister, **Takaichi Sanae**, stated that Chinese aggression against the self-governing democratic island could constitute a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan, warranting a military response.

Takaichi is right, but it is not just Japan that would be affected. Because Taiwan produces 90% of the world's most advanced semiconductors and hosts one of its most vibrant globalized tech ecosystems, a blockade or invasion would send shockwaves through the global economy, potentially tilting the race for AI leadership in China's favor.

The fall of free Taiwan would also upend the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, placing much of Asia under China's yoke, while cementing China's chokehold on the South and East China Seas.

For these reasons, a conflict over the island has the potential to escalate into a broader war.

Chinese President Xi Jinping sees mainland China's "reunification" with Taiwan as central to his legacy.

The island hosted Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) leader Chiang Kai-shek's government-in-exile after the People's Republic was established in 1949, but since then, it has developed into a high-tech, ultra-modern, and resilient liberal democracy.

That is precisely why Xi is targeting it: just as a sovereign Ukraine threatens Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime by demonstrating that a vital democracy can take root in a post-Soviet country, Taiwan disproves the Communist Party of China's claim that Chinese culture is incompatible with democratic capitalism.

## Takaichi has not backed down

Predictably, Takaichi's comments drew fury from **China's leaders**, who immediately

enacted their "wolf warrior" playbook – also used against Australia after it demanded an inquiry into COVID-19's origins, Lithuania when it opened a Taiwanese Representative Office, and Norway when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo.

The basic strategy is simple: feign outrage, threaten and cajole, then weaponize China's colossal market power to force the "adversary" to heel.

**Takaichi understands that deterrence depends on a clear and resolute commitment to stand up for democracy and self-determination in Taiwan**

In Japan's case, China said that Takaichi had **crossed a "red line,"** warned of **safety risks** for Chinese visiting the country, canceled the release of **Japanese films**, and suspended **seafood imports** from the country.

But Takaichi has not backed down. She understands that deterrence depends on a clear and resolute commitment to stand up for democracy and self-determination in Taiwan.

## European leaders must start "walking the talk"

Far from following Takaichi's example, however, other democratic leaders, particularly in the United States and Europe, seem to be paying little attention to the threat the island faces.

They are too preoccupied with renewed diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine – a conflict that might never have begun if the US and Europe had shown greater resolve following Russia's 2014 invasion of eastern Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea.

Rather than repeat past mistakes, European leaders must start "walking the talk." This includes fighting for a fair resolution to the

## Ukraine war.

An agreement that rewards the aggressor, such as by handing Ukrainian territory to Russia, will signal to autocrats worldwide that Western democracies are unwilling or unable to enforce the rules-based order they created after World War II.

In a world where might makes right, China can take what it wants.

**European leaders cannot become so consumed by Ukraine's plight that they ignore the direct and existential threat facing Taiwan**

But European leaders cannot become so consumed by Ukraine's plight that they ignore the direct and existential threat facing Taiwan.

During his three-day leaders' summit with French President Emmanuel Macron in China, Xi sought to take advantage of Europe's desire for peace in Ukraine by **offering to support** diplomatic efforts to that end – in exchange for Europe's repudiation of Takaichi.

Macron didn't take the bait, but more must be done.

Europe must join Japan in dropping any ambiguity about its commitment to impose high costs on China over any act of aggression against Taiwan.

## 'Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow'

Moreover, the European Union must step in to counter China's economic coercion, offering Japan immediate, tangible economic support and either launching retaliatory measures against China or joining Japan in bringing a case before the World Trade Organization.



*The only credible way to prevent China from pursuing its designs in Taiwan is to forge a united front of democracies willing to impose punishing costs if it does*

This could open the way for the codification of such economic solidarity, with democratic countries pledging to rally around any of their ranks facing economic coercion. Think of it as an economic version of NATO's collective-defense clause.

Just as Putin was clear about his intentions toward Ukraine, Xi has left no doubt about his plans for Taiwan: he has ordered the People's Liberation Army to be **ready to invade** by 2027.

Such an invasion would probably begin with an economic blockade of the island, which relies on imports, not least of energy supplies.

While US President Donald Trump's unpredictability could have a deterrent effect, we have seen that the US is unreliable.

The only credible way to prevent China from pursuing its designs in Taiwan is to forge a united front of democracies willing to impose punishing costs if it does.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Taiwanese social media were inundated by the slogan, "Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow." That scenario is even more likely now. The risk is that we become so focused on today that we fail to see tomorrow.

Jonas Parellø-Plesner, a former Danish diplomat, is Executive Director of the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, and a non-resident fellow at the German Marshall Fund.