

Taiwan could spark nuclear war: report

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Taiwan is the most likely potential crisis that could trigger a nuclear war between China and the US, a new academic report concludes.

“Taiwan remains the single most plausible and dangerous source of tension and conflict between the US and China,” says the 42-page report by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Prepared by the CSIS’ Project on Nuclear Issues and resulting from a year-long study, the report emphasizes that Beijing continues to be set on a policy to prevent Taiwan’s independence, while at the same time the US maintains the capability to come to Taiwan’s defense.

“Although tensions across the Taiwan Strait have subsided since both Taipei and Beijing embraced a policy of engagement in 2008, the situation remains combustible, complicated by rapidly diverging cross-strait military capabilities and persistent political disagreements,” the report says.

In a footnote, it quotes senior fellow at the US Council on Foreign Relations Richard Betts describing Taiwan as “the main potential flashpoint for the US in East Asia.”

The report also quotes Betts as saying that neither Beijing nor Washington can fully control developments that might ignite a Taiwan crisis.

“This is a classic recipe for surprise, miscalculation and uncontrolled escalation,” Betts wrote in a separate study of his own.

The CSIS study says: “For the foreseeable future Taiwan is the contingency in which nuclear weapons would most likely become a major factor, because the fate of the island is intertwined both with the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and the reliability of US defense commitments in the Asia-Pacific region.”

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Titled Nuclear Weapons and US-China Relations, the study says disputes in the East and South China seas appear unlikely to lead to major conflict between China and the US, but they do “provide kindling” for potential conflict between the two nations because the disputes implicate a number of important regional interests, including the interests of treaty allies of the US.

The danger posed by flashpoints such as Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and maritime demarcation disputes is magnified by the potential for mistakes, the study says.

“Although Beijing and Washington have agreed to a range of crisis management mechanisms, such as the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement and the establishment of a direct hotline between the Pentagon and the Ministry of Defense, the bases for miscommunication and misunderstanding remain and draw on deep historical reservoirs of suspicion,” the report says.

For example, it says, it is unclear whether either side understands what kinds of actions would result in a military or even nuclear response by the other party.

To make things worse, “neither side seems to believe the other’s declared policies and intentions, suggesting that escalation management, already a very uncertain endeavor, could be especially difficult in any conflict,” it says.

Although conflict “mercifully” seems unlikely at this point, the report concludes that “it cannot be ruled out and may become increasingly likely if we are unwise or unlucky.”

The report says: “With both sides possessing and looking set to retain formidable nuclear weapons arsenals, such a conflict would be tremendously dangerous and quite possibly devastating.”

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