

# TAIWAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY UNDER TRUMP 2.0

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*Compared to the cautious restraint of his first term, Trump 2.0 exudes confidence and the demeanor of a domineering CEO in a context of international politics. By fully leveraging America's unparalleled economic and military influence, within less than a year after returning to office, Trump has already stirred global unrest. Trump 2.0 has shifted U.S. global strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific to counter China's rise, especially prioritizing military deterrence against Chinese aggression toward Taiwan. His framing of China as America's primary strategic adversary offers an opportunity for strategic alignment with Taiwan. In response, President Lai Ching-te introduced the "Four Pillars of Peace action plan"—strengthening defense, economic security, alliances with democracies, and dignified cross-Strait engagement—to safeguard peace in the Taiwan Strait and Indo-Pacific stability. Thus, Lai has prioritized self-defense, built strategic interdependence with the U.S., and implemented a "regional joint defense" military strategy to align with Trump's global strategic outlook.*

## Introduction

A national security strategy is how a country creates and manipulates its power to protect and promote its proposed core interests, while responding to and neutralizing threats it identifies as endangering these interests. Confronted with intense pressure from Beijing, President Lai Ching-te has taken a firm stance on national security by upholding Taiwan's sovereignty and autonomy. His approach to cross-

strait relations centers on preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. The idea of maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait reflects the overwhelming consensus in Taiwanese society today, even if different political parties have varying views on what that status quo entails and how best to uphold it. Ensuring peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is also a core pillar of the Trump administration's

policy toward the region. When President Lai Ching-te assumed office, he immediately introduced the “Four Pillars of Peace” strategy to ensure Taiwan’s security and promote stability across the Strait.

President Trump subscribes to a realist philosophy of “peace through strength”, guided by his “America First” doctrine. Under his administration, the global strategic focus has shifted to the Indo-Pacific region to counter China’s rising threat, with a particular emphasis on military measures—prioritizing deterrence against a possible Chinese military invasion of Taiwan. However, trading war for peace is Trump’s hallmark, and his transactional diplomacy places economic interest at the core, reflecting a clear anti-war posture. Therefore, in maintaining Taiwan Strait security, Trump 2.0 centers its strategy on “preventing war”, with concrete implementation rooted in deterrence and denial. In response, President Lai Ching-te has significantly strengthened Taiwan’s self-defense, deepened strategic interdependence with the U.S., and pursued a coherent “regional joint defense” military posture, aligning with Trump’s global strategy.

### **President Lai Ching-te’s National Security Strategy Framework**

Given President Lai Ching-te’s uncompromising stance in defending Taiwan’s sovereignty, China has carried out unprecedented military intimidation against Taiwan. In the brief year since President Lai took office on May 20, 2024, China has conducted three rounds of large-scale military exercises encircling Taiwan. In response to China’s continued maximum coercion, President Lai has proactively implemented counter-strategies. In his national security strategy, and under the guiding principle of preserving stability, he continues the cross-strait policy of “maintaining the status quo” associated with the Democratic Progressive Party and widely endorsed during the tenure of former President Tsai Ing-wen. This helps moderate his negative “Taiwan independence” image, aligns with the domestic mainstream public opinion, and mitigates concerns abroad—contributing positively

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to the strategic approach of internationalizing Taiwan Strait security.

At the heart of President Lai Ching-te’s national security vision is an unyielding commitment to defending Taiwan’s sovereignty. Under the banner of peace, he anchors his cross-Strait policy in the principle that the ROC and the PRC are not subordinate to each other, asserting Taiwan’s status as a sovereign state—the Republic of China. This forms the strategic bedrock of his response to any accusations of separatism: as President Lai declared, “To be practical means to face reality—as a sovereign nation, Taiwan needs no declaration of independence.”<sup>1</sup>

From the outset of his presidency on May 20, 2024, President Lai has articulated a clear continuation of republican governance rooted in stability, refusing to depart from the “status quo” framework established under his predecessor, Tsai Ing-wen.<sup>2</sup> He has

launched the “Four Pillars of Peace Action Plan”—a strategic blueprint focused on strengthening Taiwan’s defense, enhancing economic resilience, deepening partnerships with global democracies, and preserving stable, principle-based leadership in cross-strait relations—as a comprehensive approach to safeguarding the Republic of China’s sovereignty.<sup>3</sup>

In response to China’s growing encroachment, President Lai Ching-te convened a high-level national security meeting on March 13, 2025, where he formally declared Beijing to be a “foreign hostile force” under Taiwan’s Anti-Infiltration Act. He also identified five core national security and influence threats posed by China and unveiled a 17-point response strategy to address them comprehensively. The five major threats from China are: A direct threat to Taiwan’s national sovereignty; infiltration and espionage within Taiwan’s military; manipulation of citizens’ national identity; use of cross-strait exchanges as vectors of societal infiltration; and economic “fusion development” initiatives aimed at drawing in Taiwanese businesspeople and youth.<sup>4</sup> This approach reflects Lai’s adoption of a whole-of-society security strategy, placing national sovereignty at its strategic core.

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## **Trump 2.0’s Taiwan Security Policy**

Trump 2.0’s Taiwan policy follows a pragmatic two-track strategy that prioritizes managing Beijing’s rising influence: it projects strength by treating China as the dominant geopolitical threat and bolstering Taiwan’s deterrence; yet it also preserves diplomatic latitude, avoiding actions that would derail U.S.–China engagement. A confidential Pentagon directive—the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance—makes this explicit: China is the only pacing threat, and the dual-priority scenario is to prevent a Chinese fait accompli over Taiwan while safeguarding the American homeland.<sup>5</sup>

According to an internal CIA memo, Director John Ratcliffe has designated China as the top priority threat, declaring: “No adversary in U.S. history has posed a more acute geopolitical challenge, nor has any strategic competitor been as formidable as the Chinese Communist Party.”<sup>6</sup>

Speaking at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue—his first major speech at Asia’s premier security forum—U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth underscored the Trump administration’s renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific and declared that China’s actions represent a “real, and potentially imminent, threat.” He conveyed a stark message to Beijing: a forced invasion of Taiwan would have “devastating consequences”.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, under the global strategic realignment designed to counter China’s rise, the Trump 2.0 administration has adopted an unprecedentedly high threshold of firmness in deterring China from taking military action against Taiwan.

Despite his administration’s tougher rhetoric, President Trump has deliberately avoided declaring whether the U.S. would send troops to defend Taiwan—preferring strategic ambiguity and placing U.S.–Taiwan relations secondary to the broader U.S.–China relationship. This restraint aims to prevent unnecessarily antagonizing Beijing, thereby preserving stable bilateral ties. Historically, Taiwan’s presidential transit through the U.S., though

unofficial, has served as a barometer of the strength and tone of U.S.–Taiwan relations. Any shift or cancellation of such transits is carefully scrutinized for signaling Washington’s posture toward Taipei. As reported by The New York Times, Beijing objected to Trump’s rumored transit approval for President Lai Ching-te through New York—part of an intended trip to Central America—this, in part, to preserve a favorable climate for trade talks and a potential Xi–Trump meeting. Allegedly, the Trump administration declined the transit permit. U.S. officials have not confirmed this account, and Taiwan’s Presidential Office has likewise said Lai is not planning any overseas visits in the near term.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to rejecting President Lai’s proposed U.S. transit, Taiwan’s Defense Minister Wellington Koo was slated to meet Elbridge Colby, the Pentagon’s policy undersecretary, in Washington in June 2025. However, the U.S. abruptly scrapped the meeting—reportedly because officials feared it would complicate ongoing trade talks with China and jeopardize plans for a Trump–Xi summit.<sup>9</sup> Taken together, these episodes underscore a dual and sometimes contradictory mindset in Trump’s approach to Taiwan.

To Washington, Taiwan is both a key strategic outpost for balancing Beijing and a potential bargaining chip when it places U.S.–China relations at risk. In essence, Taiwan’s strategic value is contingent on the trajectory of U.S.–China engagement: deteriorating relations increase U.S. intervention in Taiwan’s defense; stable ties decrease its strategic necessity. This reflects a policy of strategic ambiguity—one that sends mixed signals, deters but avoids firm commitments, and places the Taiwan issue in the broader context of U.S.–China diplomacy.

### **Strengthen Self-defense to Avoid the Free-riding Impression**

President Lai Ching-te’s “Four Pillars of Peace” form the strategic backbone of his effort to ensure peace and stability along the Taiwan Strait, firmly

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grounded in his doctrine of preserving the mutually non-subordinate status quo across the Strait. Not only does this framework build on former President Tsai Ing-wen’s established definition of the cross-strait status quo, but it also aligns with the prevailing consensus among both the Trump administration and the broader international community on the importance of maintaining regional stability—even as Beijing labels such “status quo maintenance” a variant of Taiwanese independence. Lai’s four-pillar strategy elevates building Taiwan’s own defense capability as the foremost priority. It underscores a key strategic insight drawn from the Russia–Ukraine conflict: only by preparing and defending ourselves can we ensure external assistance will come.

In strategic terms, Taiwan’s defense and economic resilience function as the internal levers—or “independent variables”—that Taipei can and must



push forward on its own. By contrast, diplomacy and cross-strait relations behave like “dependent variables,” influenced by external actors and larger geopolitical dynamics. Hence, Taiwan’s path to strategic autonomy begins with strengthening its own deterrence, fast-tracking force modernization, boosting economic robustness, and reducing overreliance on China. Those are self-driven objectives that Taiwan both can and must pursue. Conversely, courting international support through diplomatic engagement or exercising restraint to avoid provoking Beijing are necessary but inherently reactive efforts—they depend on circumstances and goodwill, not unilateral control.

In response to mounting military and economic pressure from China, President Lai Ching-te’s “Four Pillars of Peace” policy “centers on safeguarding the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait by reinforcing internal resilience before seeking external support. This strategic sequencing—fortifying Taiwan’s defense and economic strength first, then shaping favorable international conditions—embodies a “self-help first, external help second” doctrine. It

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aligns closely with the principle of “securing the home front before engaging externally.”

Since taking office, President Lai has dramatically boosted Taiwan’s defense budget, underscoring his administration’s emphasis on deterrence and resilience. In July 2025, Taiwan’s 10-day Han Kuang military exercise—for the first time substantially extended and featuring town resilience drills alongside inland defense scenarios—symbolized the centrality of self-defense in the country’s military posture. Under the DPP administrations, Taipei’s defense spending has increased dramatically, and President Lai has even committed to increasing it to 3 percent of GDP as part of broader national security and reform efforts.

This defense spending boost is welcome—but still insufficient by Trump-era standards, which demand that aid recipients demonstrate maximum self-reliance. At his Senate confirmation hearing on March 4, 2025, Elbridge Colby, Trump’s pick for Policy Undersecretary at the Pentagon, reiterated Trump’s view that Taiwan’s current defense budget—well below 3 percent of GDP—is inadequate, calling instead for it to reach roughly 10 percent of GDP.<sup>10</sup> Trump’s disdain for countries perceived as riding on the U.S. security umbrella is well-known—not just toward NATO allies, but especially toward Taiwan, which lacks any treaty guarantee.

What NATO is doing today may serve as Taiwan’s blueprint for tomorrow. At the 2025 Hague Summit, NATO leaders agreed to raise their defense and security-related spending to 5 percent of GDP by 2035, nearly doubling the prior 2 percent benchmark.<sup>11</sup> Taiwan’s premium existential challenge—facing China’s military coercion while internationally isolated—demands a level of self-defense that far surpasses what European states require under NATO’s collective defense model.

Currently, Taiwan allocates about 2.45 percent of GDP to defense, and President Lai has pledged to exceed 3 percent in the near term.<sup>12</sup> Yet by

NATO's new metric, such levels may still be seen as inadequate. Thus, a defense budget trajectory that approaches NATO's 5 percent standard may become a new yardstick used by the Trump administration to assess whether Taiwan is genuinely fulfilling its "self-help" obligations.

### **Constructing Strategic Interdependence between Taiwan and the U.S.**

The Ukraine–Russia war has taught Taiwan two vital truths for a smaller power confronting a larger aggressor: firstly, you must be able to defend yourself, then you must obtain international backing. Taiwan's gravest strategic vulnerability stems from potential diplomatic isolation, as being left to face down a militarily superior China alone could prove catastrophic. To exploit this, Beijing aggressively presses the "One China Principle"—denying Taiwan's sovereignty and recasting cross-strait relations as an internal issue—precisely to keep international actors at bay.

Given China's rise, the United States stands alone as the only nation in the international community with both the capacity and willingness to realistically deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan. For this reason, cultivating strategic interdependence with the U.S. isn't just prudent—it's essential to Taiwan's efforts to garner global support and elevate the security of the Taiwan Strait from a regional concern to an international agenda.

Because U.S.–Taiwan ties are deeply shaped by broader U.S.–China dynamics, Taiwan must carefully leverage tensions between Washington and Beijing while aligning its interests with the U.S.—in short, proving itself a partner, not a burden. The rising specter of China has become a rare point of agreement across both U.S. parties, providing a solid foundation for Washington to view Taiwan as a strategic partner. Under Trump 2.0, U.S. strategic focus has decisively pivoted from Europe to the Indo-Pacific—with China explicitly identified as the

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pace threat in a new Interim Defense Guidance—signaling that Taiwan is front and center in the U.S.–China strategic competition.

U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance has explicitly labelled "China is America's biggest threat" and warned that the war in Ukraine may divert U.S. focus—weakening support for Taiwan if Washington can no longer rival China on both fronts.<sup>13</sup> Taiwan's strategic relevance to the U.S. depends on how seriously Washington defines the China threat. The more urgent that threat appears, the more Taiwan becomes a strategic priority; full alignment between U.S. and Taiwan security interests is forged in the shadow of shared concern over Chinese expansion.

Taiwan occupies a singular place in Beijing's worldview, making it perhaps the most sensitive issue in Sino–American relations—and thus the most powerful card the U.S. can play to counter Chinese pressure. In a heightened U.S.–China standoff, Taiwan serves the United States not as a drain, but as a strategic asset—one that fits squarely within

Trump-era transactional diplomacy. By wielding the “Taiwan card” selectively in negotiations—either as leverage or as a signifier of restraint—Trump gains flexibility at the bargaining table. This approach is emblematic of his deal-driven style coupled with strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan–China dynamics.

Taiwan’s Lai Ching-te administration, aware of the island becoming a bargaining chip in Trump’s U.S.–China negotiations, has clearly adopted a pragmatic and cooperative stance, rather than confronting Trump directly in order to avoid causing conflict. Recent cases such as President Lai’s cancelled U.S. transit and the defense-minister visit called off illustrate Taiwan’s practical cooperation with Trump. As long as the Trump administration continues to regard China as America’s greatest threat, there remains shared strategic interest and room for cooperation between Taiwan and the U.S. In fact, President Lai’s “Four Pillars of Peace action plan”, encompassing the military, economic, democratic, and cross-strait dimensions, is expressly

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aimed at strengthening linkage with U.S. national interests and thus building Taiwan–U.S. strategic interdependence.

### **“Regional Joint Defense” with the Island Chain Strategy**

Taiwan is situated at the core of the first island chain, and that geographic position determines its inseparable linkage to the island-chain strategy. To counter China’s threats to Indo-Pacific regional security, current U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, AUKUS, the Quad, and regional multilateral military exercises are all closely tied to the practical implementation of the island-chain strategy. In a speech titled “United States’ New Ambitions for Indo-Pacific Security” delivered at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth affirmed: “But beyond our borders—we are reorienting toward deterring aggression by Communist China.”<sup>14</sup>

In his “Four Pillars of Peace Action Plan,” President Lai Ching-te specifically emphasized: “Taiwan lies at the core defensive line of the First Island Chain, and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait are necessary elements for global security and prosperity.”<sup>15</sup> He thereby intended to connect Taiwan Strait security with Indo-Pacific regional security in order to counter China’s diplomatic isolation of Taiwan. Taiwan’s ‘regional joint defense’ initiative is the strategic linkage between Taiwan’s national defense strategy and the island-chain concept—leveraging U.S. power to counter the threat of Chinese expansionism.

Taiwan’s “2023 National Defense Report” made a landmark shift by formally integrating international support into Taiwan’s military posture. For the first time, Taiwan’s defense strategy explicitly invokes “regional joint defense”—positioning the island not just as a passive participant, but as a key node within a broader strategic architecture anchored by its unique location in the first island chain.

This strategy, described as “Multi-domain Deterrence

Combined with Joint Defense in the Region”, acknowledges Taiwan’s geostrategic leverage: “Taiwan is a linchpin at the First Island Chain. It plays a key strategic role in integrated deterrence and Indo-Pacific defense formed by the U.S. and its allies. The ROC will improve its operational interoperability and participate in regional joint defense through military exchanges to cooperate with like-minded partners and collectively meet PRC’s threats and challenges.”<sup>16</sup> Here, “regional joint defense” highlights Taiwan’s strategic position at the heart of the island chain, framing it as vital to U.S. regional security initiatives such as “integrated deterrence”, Indo-Pacific defense posture, operational interoperability, and a regional collective defense mechanism—all aligned to collectively address the China threat.

Taiwan’s “regional joint defense” framework fundamentally aims to avoid isolation—ensuring the island is not left to contend alone in a cross-strait crisis. By leveraging its pivotal location within the First Island Chain, Taiwan is actively embedding itself within U.S.-led security architectures in the Indo-Pacific. This positioning not only deepens Taiwan–U.S. strategic interdependence but also formally incorporates Taiwan into America’s island-chain defense posture. In essence, Taiwan is undergoing a strategic pivot—from diplomatic marginalization under Chinese isolation to becoming a core player in the broader international collective response to Chinese military expansion.

To preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is not only a shared challenge among the international community confronting China’s revisionist attempt to alter the existing regional security order, but also one of the rare strategic consensuses among U.S. President Trump and his allied partners despite their wider policy divergence. The international community regards maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as a shared interest—and this very perspective is the key enabler for Taiwan’s national defense strategy initiative of “regional joint defense” to materialize. That initiative not only, for the first time, explicitly mentions the importance

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of integrating international partner strength into Taiwan’s defense planning, but also rarely—and publicly—emphasizes that Taiwan’s military strategy will align with the U.S. Indo-Pacific “integrated deterrence” strategy in order to bolster deterrent power against China’s military aggression. The initiative demonstrates that three factors—Taiwan’s critical position in the First Island Chain, the “China threat” narrative, and U.S. strategic influence—form the strategic operational foundation of Taiwan’s “regional joint defense” framework.

## **Conclusion**

President Lai Ching-te’s “Four Pillars of Peace Action Plan” strategically positions preserving the status quo of mutual non-subordination across the Taiwan Strait as its central objective. This aligns



neatly with Trump's global agenda to resist China's expansionism. At the same time, the plan enables Taiwan to strengthen its self-defense capabilities, mitigate the disadvantage of confronting the Chinese threat alone, and enhance its multi-layered deterrence power.

Leveraging its geographic advantage in the First Island Chain, Taiwan's "regional joint defense" initiative, for example, deepens strategic interdependence with the United States and neighboring countries. Through mechanisms such as intelligence sharing, military coordination, and joint exercises, Taiwan's security ties with the U.S. and its allies grow increasingly robust. Thus, Taiwan and the United States form a "security community": Taipei is not merely a passive security beneficiary, but also an active security provider, co-maintaining regional peace and stability, and occupying an irreplaceable position in Trump's strategic posture to contain Chinese threat.

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