

BALANCING ENGAGEMENT AND CONFRONTATION: TAIWAN'S STRATEGIC APPROACH TO NATIONAL SECURITY

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Taiwan has long faced security threats from China, with different ruling parties adopting either engagement or confrontation as their policy approaches, each having its supporters and specific contexts of applicability. As China's threats intensify, Taiwan must seek a balance between engagement and confrontation while fostering domestic consensus. To this end, Taiwan should formulate a guiding National Security Strategy to help the public better understand the security environment. However, an overly detailed strategy could undermine deterrence effectiveness; therefore, issuing a concise version that preserves strategic ambiguity would be a feasible option to articulate national core interests, build societal consensus, and provide a foundation for adjusting cross-Strait policy.

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Introduction

Since the relocation of the Republic of China (ROC) government to Taiwan in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which established its regime on mainland China, has emerged as the most significant threat to Taiwan's national security. Half a century later, both continuity and change have characterized cross-Strait dynamics. The continuity lies in China's persistent role as the primary security threat to Taiwan. However, what has changed is the

growing imbalance in cross-Strait military power, a shift that has become increasingly pronounced with China's rise. This shift poses an unprecedented existential threat to Taiwan. In response to these circumstances, Taiwan's political parties have pursued differing strategies. Nevertheless, when a nation faces security threats, the lack of internal consensus will undoubtedly undermine its ability to counter external threats. Therefore, formulating a national security strategy that not only provides

clear guidance but also fosters consensus is clearly an urgent imperative for Taiwan; however, how best to develop such a strategy remains a significant challenge.

Responding to the China Threat: Balancing Engagement and Confrontation

Prior to the lifting of martial law, Taiwan was characterized by one-party dominance under the long-standing rule of the Kuomintang (KMT). The party maintained a firm stance of non-coexistence with the CCP, advocating a strong anti-communist and anti-Soviet ideology. After the lifting of martial law, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) steadily grew stronger and ultimately replaced the KMT in government in 2000. With the direct election of the president, Taiwan has experienced three peaceful transfers of power. Regardless of which party is in power, all administrations must ultimately face public scrutiny, which demonstrates the maturity and stability of Taiwan's democratic politics. The differing cross-Strait policies pursued by the KMT and the DPP during their respective periods of governance have not only influenced the trajectory of cross-Strait relations but also reflect their fundamentally distinct conceptualizations and strategies for addressing the China threat.

In the face of the China threat, the contemporary KMT no longer insists on outright confrontation. Rather, it advocates continued cross-Strait engagement based on the so-called "1992 Consensus,"¹ aiming to deepen economic and cultural exchange and cooperation, thereby promoting peace and preventing war. The DPP, in contrast, maintains that China has never relinquished its ambition to annex Taiwan. Accordingly, it rejects the "1992 Consensus" and argues that excessive economic dependence on China would endanger Taiwan's security. In response, former President Tsai Ing-wen introduced the "New Southbound Policy" in 2016

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to diversify economic ties and reduce reliance on mainland China. President Lai Ching-te has further proclaimed the vision of guiding Taiwan's industries through a transition—from previously moving westward across the Taiwan Strait, to shifting southbound, to cooperating with northern partners, and now confidently stepping across the Pacific to expand eastward into the Americas and other regions—with the goal of staying firmly rooted in Taiwan, expanding their global presence, and marketing their products worldwide.²

The KMT and the DPP's respective cross-Strait policies—engagement versus confrontation—occupy opposite ends of the policy spectrum, each rooted in distinct theoretical frameworks. The KMT's engagement approach is rooted in liberalism, which asserts that high levels of economic interdependence can raise the costs of war and therefore serve as a deterrent to war. Conversely, the DPP's confrontation approach is based on realism, which contends that such interdependence can exacerbate security vulnerabilities, thereby raising the risk of war; thus, Taiwan must pursue diversification to mitigate strategic risk. Both arguments can find supporting examples in world

history, making it difficult to definitively judge which is right or wrong.

Looking back at the development of cross-Strait relations, during the presidency of former President Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT (2008–2016), cross-Strait relations indeed entered an unprecedented phase of reconciliation. However, under the administration of former President Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP (2016–2024), Taiwan refused to accept the “1992 Consensus,” leading to a comprehensive diplomatic and international blockade by China. At first glance, the KMT’s engagement policy may seem more favorable than the DPP’s confrontational stance.

However, drawing such a conclusion would be an oversimplification. While the KMT’s engagement policy yielded certain peace dividends, the CCP’s ultimate objective has remained unchanged: it

demands that Taiwan acknowledge its status as part of “one China”—specifically, the People’s Republic of China (PRC).³ Surrendering national sovereignty in exchange for fleeting peace dividends is an option unlikely to gain public support in Taiwan. Even the KMT would likely hesitate to openly endorse such a position.

In other words, the benefits of engagement are not without limits. If Taiwan continues to believe that engagement with China alone can guarantee peace and security, it would be a serious misjudgment. Given China’s unwavering ambition to annex Taiwan, a more prudent tactical approach would be to strike a balance between engagement and confrontation.

Currently, Taiwan’s two dominant political parties—the ruling DPP and the opposition KMT—each command a significant base of core supporters. The rest of the electorate can be classified as swing voters, who do not consistently support a particular party but instead evaluate policies based on their perceived merits. The outcomes of Taiwan’s major elections are largely shaped by the dynamics among these three political forces. While differing administrations may pursue divergent cross-Strait policies in accordance with their respective ideologies, in a democratic society like Taiwan, all government policies are ultimately subject to public scrutiny and electoral accountability.

As with the notion that policies are neither inherently good nor bad, their value lies in their ability to adapt to specific times and circumstances. The cross-Strait policies of the KMT and the DPP represent two opposing ends of the strategic spectrum, yet neither may be fully suited to the complexities of the current geopolitical landscape. Clearly, identifying a balanced approach—one that is both flexible and adaptive—would likely constitute a more prudent and effective strategy in addressing the multifaceted threat posed by China.

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The Need for a National Security Strategy in Taiwan

As a pluralistic liberal democracy, Taiwan guarantees its citizens freedom of expression and promotes robust public discourse. This dynamic democratic environment has led to a political landscape defined by a tripartite balance among major party bases and swing constituencies. However, in the face of an increasingly assertive China, it is crucial for the Taiwanese public to develop a clearer and more unified understanding of the prevailing security landscape. Therefore, the development of a coherent and actionable national security strategy—one that can foster internal consensus and guide a unified external posture—has become an urgent national imperative.

A comprehensive national security strategy must begin with a thorough assessment of Taiwan's external strategic landscape to accurately identify current threats to national security. Equally crucial is the clear delineation and prioritization of Taiwan's national interests. The governing authority is responsible for articulating a strategic vision for the country and proposing guiding principles to protect those interests. Through such a structured approach, the public can develop a deeper understanding of the most pressing threats to national security, which in turn facilitates the formation of societal consensus and broader support for national policies.

With the exception of two National Security Reports issued during the presidency of Chen Shui-bian of the DPP (2000–2008), Taiwan has yet to institutionalize the periodic publication of a national security strategy, as is done in countries such as the United States, Russia, and Japan. The primary reason for this is Taiwan's status as a small state with limited strategic leverage—an inherent constraint. Publishing a detailed strategy could risk exposing Taiwan's strategic red lines, which adversaries could exploit to assess the credibility of

Taiwan's commitments to its core interests. Should Taiwan fail to fulfill these commitments, the credibility of its deterrence could be significantly undermined. Given the pronounced asymmetry in cross-Strait military capabilities, Taiwan faces a genuine dilemma regarding whether to publish such a strategy. Nonetheless, this strategic ambiguity should not prevent Taiwan from outlining a national security framework altogether.

For Taiwan, a practical approach would be to issue a concise, principles-based national security strategy that preserves a certain degree of strategic ambiguity, rather than adopting a comprehensive and detailed format similar to that of the United States. The current administration should publish an official document outlining the nation's core interests and immediate priorities. Establishing such a principled framework would not only help address external threats, but also stimulate domestic debate, foster consensus, and serve as a foundation for coherent policy development. Historically, the KMT and the DPP have often pursued diametrically opposed cross-Strait policies. In the current volatile security environment, the formulation of an appropriate national security strategy presents a timely opportunity to unify domestic perspectives and strike a strategic balance between engagement and confrontation.

Conclusion

Taiwan has long faced security threats from China, and different political parties have adopted various approaches in response during their terms in office. The KMT advocates for an engagement-oriented policy, while the DPP favors a policy of confrontation. Both parties have their respective supporters, reflecting the fact that each policy has its proponents. There is no inherent right or wrong in these policies; their value lies in their applicability to specific circumstances. Given the unprecedented nature of the current threat posed by China, Taiwan needs a more flexible policy toward mainland

China, striking a balance between engagement and confrontation to effectively address the China threat. Therefore, Taiwan must foster greater internal consensus, and this requires a national security strategy that provides clear guidance, enabling the public to gain a better understanding of the current security landscape.

Nevertheless, Taiwan faces a strategic dilemma in deciding whether to publish a national security strategy or not. A fully detailed and transparent document could undermine deterrence by revealing strategic red lines. However, this challenge does not justify the complete absence of a strategy. A more practical approach would be to issue a concise, principles-based national security strategy that preserves a certain degree of strategic ambiguity. By clearly articulating Taiwan's core interests and immediate priorities, such a document could help strengthen domestic consensus and serve as a foundation for future policymaking—reconciling the extremes of past engagement and confrontation policies in a more nuanced and sustainable manner.

Note: This is the first in a series of articles on 'Rethinking Taiwan's National Security: Perspectives Across a Changing Landscape'

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Endnotes

- 1 The term “1992 Consensus” originated in 1999, when Shu-bei Tang, then Vice Chairman of China’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits, claimed that during cross-Strait talks in 1992, both sides had reached a “consensus on acknowledging one China.” This marked the first time the outcomes of the 1992 meeting were broadly referred to as a “consensus.” Later, on April 28, 2000, Chi Su, then Chairman of Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council, formally coined the term “1992 Consensus,” further interpreting it as “one China, with respective interpretations.” China’s version of “one China” naturally refers to the People’s Republic of China, while Taiwan insists it refers to the Republic of China, with both sides reserving room for their own interpretations. In the end, both sides agreed to shelve the dispute. In other words, the precise meaning of the “1992 Consensus” has never been truly agreed upon by both sides of the Strait. See Zong-han Miao, “A Revisit to the 1992 Hong Kong Talks: Understanding the 1992 Consensus in One Go,” Central News Agency, January 14, 2019, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/201901045008.aspx>.
- 2 Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), “President Lai addresses opening of 2025 Yushan Forum,” March 17, 2025, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6921>.
- 3 The “One-China” principle is the core stance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regarding Taiwan. The CCP asserts that there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is part of China, and the government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legitimate government representing all of China. Moreover, the assertion that Taiwan is part of China is indisputable and unalterable. In other words, for the CCP, Taiwan will ultimately be reunified with mainland China under the One-China framework—the People’s Republic of China. For detailed policy explanations related to the “One-China” principle, refer to “The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue,” China.org.cn, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/taiwan/7956.htm>; The State Council Information Office, The People’s Republic of China, “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era,” August 10, 2022, http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2022-08/10/content_78365819.htm.