

# SECURITY CHOICES FOR THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA (TAIWAN) AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

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*Cross-Straits relations and the strategic interaction between Washington and Beijing constitute the overarching national security framework within which the Taiwan independence movements seek to find opportunities. This issue brief examines Taiwan's national security through the lens of the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan), tracing its historical evolution and strategic challenges. It explores how the triangular dynamics among Beijing, Taipei, and Washington shape Taiwan's security choices and considers the implications that a pursuit of Taiwan independence may hold for regional stability and the ROC's long-term survival.*

## Introduction

Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China (ROC), has had direct armed conflicts or military standoffs with the political authorities across the Taiwan Strait, the People's Republic of China (PRC), since late 1949, when the two sides separated over the Chinese Civil War. Subsequently, the national security of the ROC has been inextricably linked to the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities and the support of the United States (U.S.).

Former ROC President Chiang Ching-kuo of the Kuomintang (KMT) initiated the process of democratization in the Taiwan Area.<sup>1</sup> It was later accelerated by former President Lee Teng-hui of the same party. The ROC's national security was further shaped by the gradual rise of pro-independence movements. The intensity of pro-independence sentiment has often been closely tied to the degree of forceful suppression by the CCP authorities and the extent to which the U.S. government explicitly does not support Taiwan independence.

Although the ROC that represented China was established in 1912, it currently exercises effective governance over Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu. The three primary factors influencing its national security are cross-Straits relations, Taipei–Washington relations, and pro-independence movements. The following discussion will be structured around these three key dimensions.

### **Managing Cross-Straits Relations for Peace, Stability, and Mutual Prosperity**

After October 1949, armed forces from Taiwan and from mainland China clashed in the areas surrounding Kinmen and Matsu. Thereafter, interactions between the two sides became virtually nonexistent. Following 1979, then-President Chiang Ching-kuo declared the “Three Noes” policy—no contact, no negotiation, and no compromise.

The “Three Noes” policy was shaped by the political and economic conditions of its time. At that point, the military balance across the Taiwan Strait had not yet shifted decisively, and Taiwan arguably held a slight advantage. Moreover, Taiwan’s economy was not dependent on mainland China, and its GDP was approximately 20 percent of that of the mainland—a stark contrast to the roughly 4.3 percent today.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, advocating for a contemporary adoption of a similar “Three Noes” approach toward mainland China is highly unrealistic. Times have changed. Nowadays, many democratic countries, while opposing or rejecting communism, still maintain interactions with communist regimes. This is especially pertinent in the case of cross-Straits relations, where cultural, religious, and interpersonal exchanges between the people on both sides have become highly frequent. Notably, over the past five years, Taiwan’s exports to mainland China and Hong Kong have consistently accounted for between 31.7 percent and 43 percent of its total exports.<sup>3</sup>

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Overall, cross-Straits relations moved in a generally, or relatively, positive direction during the administrations of Kuomintang (KMT) leaders Lee Teng-hui (1988–2000) and Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016). In response to the CCP’s self-defined “One China Principle,” Lee’s concept of “One China, with respective interpretations” and Ma’s advocacy of the “1992 Consensus” functioned as key formulas for maintaining peace, stability, and prosperity across the Taiwan Strait.

By contrast, cross-Straits relations have consistently deteriorated during periods of the Democratic Progressive Party’s (DPP) rule. In response to the DPP’s approach of “incremental independence”, CCP leader Xi Jinping has adopted a dual strategy of both engagement and coercion, grounded in the framework of the PRC’s Anti-Secession Law. Coupled with the growing imbalance in military capabilities across the Taiwan Strait, this has led to

a new normal characterized by persistent military tension and heightened political distrust.

Regardless of which political party holds power, and regardless of the party's political inclination to embrace or oppose Taiwan independence, the core objectives of the ROC's national security remain the same. First, to prevent the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from invading Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu – albeit with different approaches (deterrence only under the DPP or deterrence plus engagement under the KMT). Second, to preserve the region's liberal democratic political system, economic prosperity, and way of life.

### **Struggling for Washington's Partial Endorsement of Taipei**

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, support from the U.S. is indispensable for every governing administration in Taiwan. Prior to unilaterally severing diplomatic ties with the ROC in January 1979, the U.S. not only stationed troops in Taiwan and Penghu but also bore joint defense responsibilities under the Sino-American Mutual

Defense Treaty signed in 1954. Today, the U.S. remains the only country in the world both willing and able to sell advanced defensive weaponry to the ROC government. Regardless of the party in power, Taipei has consistently maintained arms procurement from Washington — a practice that has only intensified over time. During the respective eight-year terms of Presidents Chen Shui-bian, Ma Ying-jeou, and Tsai Ing-wen, the volume of arms purchases steadily and significantly increased. Starting around the first term of President Donald Trump, the U.S. has also visibly intensified its cooperation with the ROC's military and coast guard in joint training and capacity-building.<sup>4</sup>

After the Taiwan Area gradually democratized, the U.S. and the ROC began to emphasize that they were like-minded democratic countries. An increasing number of politicians and citizens in the latter came to believe that democracy would encourage greater political support from the U.S. There has even been a belief among some people in Taiwan that this would incentivize the U.S. to come to the ROC's aid in the event of a military conflict across the Taiwan Strait.

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Moreover, the semiconductor supply chain has in recent years become a key area of contention between Washington and Beijing. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) enjoys a dominant position in the global semiconductor supply chain, which has been referred to as a "Silicon Shield" for the ROC. This "Silicon Shield" concept has led many politicians and citizens in Taiwan to believe that it would encourage Western countries, particularly the U.S., to be more willing to deploy military forces to defend Taiwan.

Without American support, the ROC would be unable to ensure its national security. Yet, the U.S. continues to impose obvious diplomatic restrictions on the ROC and generally maintains a policy of

“strategic ambiguity” regarding the Taiwan Strait. As such, successive ROC administrations have had to leverage areas such as democracy and the semiconductor industry to seek further backing from the U.S., in hopes that these areas could potentially be transformed into forms of effective deterrence protecting the ROC.

## Avoiding Taiwan Independence Movements Potentially Leading to Conflict

Taiwan independence seeks to replace the ROC with Taiwan as the sovereign independent state, thereby effectively hollowing out the ROC and reducing it to a mere term. The current ruling party, the DPP, states in its party charter the intention to establish “the Republic of Taiwan as a sovereign, independent, and autonomous nation.” Under the continuous leadership of Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te, it has become evident that, as the party charter outlines, they are actively working to establish Taiwan’s own national sovereignty and identity. This effort is seen as a prerequisite for creating the legal and political framework necessary to achieve the DPP’s ultimate goal of making “Taiwan a sovereign state.”

The ROC is a democratic republic that replaced the Qing Dynasty and inherited China’s sovereignty and sovereign rights. These include the territories currently under the ROC’s control: Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu. They also include claims to the sovereignty and sovereign rights over, for example, the Diaoyu Islands and the islands, reefs, and shoals in the South China Sea, all of which are affected by the pro-independence movements. If Taiwan were to emerge as a newly independent sovereign state unrelated to “China”, its territorial claims would face challenges in terms of their legitimacy under contemporary international law and politics.

Furthermore, Taiwan independence could likely lead to military conflict across the Taiwan Strait,

as successive CCP leaders have consistently insisted that Taiwan is a part of China (sometimes referred to as the PRC).<sup>5</sup> These CCP top leaders have never ruled out the possibility of using force to achieve national reunification. The PRC’s Anti-Secession Law, an act of domestic legislation, further reinforces the belief among the CCP authorities that they may resort to non-peaceful means to achieve reunification when peaceful reunification is no longer feasible.

Despite its avowals of endorsing peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and a pacific resolution of cross-Strait disputes, the U.S. government also frequently emphasizes its opposition to Taiwan independence. The U.S. is, in practical terms, only willing to assist Taiwan in participating meaningfully in international organizations where statehood is not a requirement. This stance reflects concerns that Taiwan independence could lead to irreversible and catastrophic consequences.

Therefore, under the current circumstances, the concept and movement of Taiwan independence run contrary to the national security of the ROC. Pro-independence parties have grown under the framework of the ROC and are now even in control of the central government. Ultimately, however, this trajectory could undermine, hollow out, and eventually overturn the ROC itself. It could also plunge the ROC (more precisely, the Taiwan Area)—along with potentially other stakeholders around the Taiwan Strait—into a perilous state of military confrontation and instability. The intrusions of the PLA or Mainland Chinese Coast Guard into the twenty-four nautical miles measured from the territorial sea baseline of Taiwan have manifested this danger.

Regarding the future of Taiwan and Mainland China, whether to reunite or separate and in what way, remains an open question. An urgent challenge preceding any resolution is how to avoid potential armed conflict, mainly resulting from de

facto or de jure Taiwan independence.

## Conclusion

In general, cross-Strait relations and the strategic interaction between Washington and Beijing constitute the overarching national security framework within which the Taiwan independence movements seek to find opportunities. National security for the ROC, which currently controls Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu, can mean several related things. First, favorable and predictable cross-Strait engagements that discourage the threat or use of force to a certain extent. Second, continued U.S. support for the peaceful and constructive status quo and the preservation of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. And third, a reduction in the likelihood of armed conflicts arising from Taiwan independence.

*Note: This is the second in a series of articles on ‘Rethinking Taiwan’s National Security: Perspectives Across a Changing Landscape.’ The first article was ‘[Balancing Engagement and Confrontation: Taiwan’s Strategic Approach to National Security.](#)’*

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## Endnotes

- 1 The Taiwan Area refers to Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, Matsu, and any other area under the effective control of the ROC government, according to the Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area, promulgated by ROC Presidential Order on July 31, 1992.
- 2 “Country Comparison Taiwan Vs. China,” Countryeconomy.com, <https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/taiwan/china?sc=XE34>.
- 3 International Trade Administration at the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Republic of China, Taiwan), “Trade Statistics,” <https://publicinfo.trade.gov.tw/cuswebo/FSC3000C?table=FSC3010F>.
- 4 Forum on the Arms Trade, “U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan,” <https://www.forumarmstrade.org/ustaiwan.html>.
- 5 Some have labeled the KMT—the party that founded the ROC since 1912 and has remained in opposition for nine consecutive years—as being pro-communist China or accepting the CCP “one country, two systems” formula. In reality, the KMT’s party charter advocates for the realization of the ROC as a free, democratic, equitable, and unified nation. It further emphasizes the revitalization of Chinese culture, the implementation of constitutional democracy, opposition to communism, and rejection of territorial division. Therefore, the KMT cannot accept reunification under the CCP, nor can it endorse the agenda of Taiwan independence.