



Taiwan: Political and Security Issues

Taiwan, which officially calls itself the Republic of China (ROC), is an island democracy of 23.6 million people located across the Taiwan Strait from mainland China. U.S.-Taiwan relations have been unofficial since January 1, 1979, when the Carter Administration established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and broke diplomatic ties with self-ruled Taiwan, over which the PRC claims sovereignty. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA, P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. §§3301 et seq.), provides a legal basis for this unofficial bilateral relationship. It also includes commitments related to Taiwan’s security. See also CRS In Focus IF10256, *U.S.-Taiwan Trade Relations*, by Karen M. Sutter.

Modern History and Current Events

In 1949, after losing a civil war on mainland China to the Communist Party of China (CPC), the ROC’s then-ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT), moved the ROC government to Taiwan. The KMT continued to assert that the ROC was the sole legitimate government of all China until 1991. In 1971, U.N. General Assembly Resolution 2758 recognized the PRC’s representatives as “the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations,” and expelled “the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek,” the ROC’s then-leader. Taiwan remains outside the U.N. today.

Figure 1. Taiwan



Sources: Graphic by CRS. Map generated by Hannah Fischer using data from NGA (2017); DoS (2015); Esri (2014); DeLorme (2014).

The KMT maintained authoritarian one-party rule on Taiwan until 1987, when it yielded to public pressure for political liberalization. The May 2016 inauguration of current President Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) marked Taiwan’s third peaceful transfer of political power from one party to another. In

2020, Tsai won a second four-year term and her party retained its majority in Taiwan’s parliament, the Legislative Yuan. In her October 10, 2021, national day address, Tsai called on Taiwan’s people to renew four commitments: to “a free and democratic constitutional system,” that the ROC and PRC “should not be subordinate to each other,” “to resist annexation or encroachment upon our sovereignty,” and that Taiwan’s future “must be decided in accordance with the will of the Taiwanese people.”

U.S. Commitments Related to Taiwan

The PRC seeks to enforce a “one China principle,” which defines Taiwan as part of China, and the PRC as the sole legal government representing China. The United States adheres to its own “one-China policy,” guided by the TRA, U.S.-PRC joint communiqués concluded in 1972, 1978, and 1982; and “Six Assurances” that President Ronald Reagan communicated to Taiwan in 1982. (The Trump Administration first moved the TRA ahead of the joint communiqués in the recitation of U.S. policy.) The U.S. government’s long-standing position has been that Taiwan’s political status remains unresolved.

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. has sent mixed messages about his view of Taiwan’s political status. The PRC readout of his November 15, 2021, virtual meeting with PRC President Xi Jinping reported that Biden told Xi, “the U.S. does not support ‘Taiwan independence.’” President Bill Clinton was the first U.S. President to make such a statement, intended to signal that the United States is not actively encouraging Taiwan to formalize a status as a sovereign nation separate from China. A senior Biden Administration official confirmed that Taiwan independence “is not something that the United States supports.” On November 16, however, President Biden said of Taiwan, “It’s independent. It makes its own decisions.” Asked to clarify those comments, Biden said both, “we are not encouraging independence” and “they have to decide.”

Key provisions of the TRA include the following:

- Relations with Taiwan shall be carried out through the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), a private corporation. (AIT Taipei performs many of the same functions as U.S. embassies elsewhere.)
- The United States “will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.”
- “The President is directed to inform the Congress promptly of any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people on Taiwan and any danger to the interests of the United States arising therefrom. The President and the Congress shall determine, ... appropriate action by the United States in response to any such danger.”

In the communiqués, the United States recognized the PRC government as the “sole legal government of China”; acknowledged, but did not endorse, “the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China”; and pledged to maintain only unofficial relations with Taiwan. The 1982 Six Assurances include assurances that in negotiating the 1982 U.S.-PRC communiqué, the United States did not agree to consult with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan, set a date for ending such arms sales, or “take any position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan.”

The TRA does not require the United States to defend Taiwan, but states that it is U.S. policy to maintain the capacity to do so, creating “strategic ambiguity” about U.S. actions in the event of a PRC attack on Taiwan. President Biden has twice made remarks that appeared to move the United States toward a position of strategic clarity. Asked on October 21, 2021, whether “the United States would come to Taiwan’s defense if China attacked,” the President replied, “Yes, we have a commitment to do that.” A White House spokesperson later clarified, “The President was not announcing any change in our policy.”

The PRC, Taiwan, and “One China”

The PRC maintains that mainland China and Taiwan are parts of “one China” whose sovereignty cannot be divided. The PRC’s 2005 Anti-Secession Law commits Beijing to working toward “peaceful unification” with Taiwan. It states, however, that in the case of Taiwan’s “secession” from China, or if the PRC concludes that possibilities for peaceful unification have been exhausted, “the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.” In the November 2021 Biden-Xi virtual meeting, President Xi said, “We have patience and will strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with utmost sincerity and efforts.” He warned, however, that, “should the separatist forces for Taiwan independence provoke us, force our hands or even cross the red line, we will be compelled to take resolute measures.” He did not define China’s “red line.”

In March 2021, then-Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Philip S. Davidson testified that the PRC threat to Taiwan could be “manifest” “in the next six years.” In his own June 2021 testimony, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley stated that while the PRC’s Xi has challenged China’s military to develop the capability to take Taiwan by 2027, Milley does not see “the intent to attack or seize in the near term.”

The PRC conducts regular military patrols and exercises around Taiwan, including over 1,000 air sorties into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone since September 2020. PRC-linked actors have targeted Taiwan with cyberattacks, and the PRC government has sought to isolate Taiwan internationally. Since 2016, 8 former Taiwan diplomatic partners have switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC, leaving Taiwan with 15 diplomatic partners. Taiwan maintains unofficial offices in an additional 59 countries, though the PRC insists that the offices not include the word “Taiwan” in their names. In November 2021, the PRC downgraded diplomatic ties with Lithuania after it allowed Taiwan to open a “Taiwanese Representative Office” in its capital. The PRC has also worked to exclude Taiwan from international organizations,

including blocking Taiwan’s attendance as an observer at annual World Health Assembly meetings.

Beijing cut off communication with Tsai’s government in June 2016, citing Tsai’s unwillingness to endorse a formula known as “the 1992 consensus,” under which the KMT and the CPC agreed that Taiwan and mainland China are parts of “one China,” without agreeing on what “China” means. In November 2021, the PRC government announced that it had placed Taiwan’s premier, foreign minister, and parliamentary speaker on a blacklist, calling them “‘Taiwan independence’ diehards.” It barred their affiliated institutions from cooperating with PRC entities and their financial supporters from doing business in the PRC.

Biden Administration Policy

Senior Biden Administration officials have repeatedly raised concerns about the PRC’s “continued military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan” and urged Beijing “to engage in meaningful dialogue to resolve cross-strait issues peacefully.” In its readout of the Biden-Xi virtual meeting, the White House said Biden underscored “that the United States strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

The Biden Administration has continued the Trump Administration’s policy of working to help Taiwan retain its remaining diplomatic relationships, as well as expand its unofficial relationships. The U.S. government involves like-minded governments in co-hosting workshops under the U.S.-Taiwan-Japan Global Cooperation and Training Framework. Taiwan is among the 110 invited participants for the Biden Administration’s Summit for Democracy, scheduled for December 9-10, 2021. The United States has also supported Taiwan with donations of 4 million doses of the Moderna Coronavirus Disease 2019 vaccine.

At the end of the Trump Administration, the State Department rescinded previous guidance on executive branch contacts with Taiwan, calling the old rules “self-imposed restrictions of our permanent bureaucracy.” The State Department issued new guidelines in April 2021, pursuant to the Taiwan Assurance Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260). They encourage working-level meetings with Taiwan counterparts in federal buildings, but continue to bar U.S. government displays of Taiwan symbols of sovereignty.

The United States terminated its Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan in 1980, but engages with Taiwan’s military through dialogues, training, and arms sales. In an October 2021 interview with CNN, President Tsai for the first time confirmed the presence of a small number of U.S. servicemembers on the island. The Biden Administration has notified Congress of one proposed Foreign Military Sales (FMS) case for Taiwan, with a value of \$750 million. The Trump Administration notified Congress of 20 proposed major FMS cases for Taiwan, with a combined value of over \$18 billion. The U.S. Navy conducted 13 Taiwan Strait transits in FY2021, including 9 under the Biden Administration. In October 2021, the U.S. Navy conducted a joint transit with ally Canada.

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