



Taiwan: Political and Security Issues

Taiwan, which officially calls itself the Republic of China (ROC), is a democracy of 23 million people located across the Taiwan Strait from mainland China. Its government claims “effective jurisdiction” over the island of Taiwan, the archipelagos of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu, and other outlying islands. Taiwan also claims disputed geographic features in the East and South China Seas. The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s or China’s) stated determination to unify with Taiwan at an unspecified future date, combined with U.S. security commitments related to Taiwan, make Taiwan the hotspot that could most plausibly draw the United States and China into armed conflict.

U.S.-Taiwan relations have been unofficial since January 1, 1979, when the United States established diplomatic relations with the PRC and broke them 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 unofficial relations. See also CRS In Focus IF10256, *U.S.-Taiwan Trade Relations*.

Figure 1. Taiwan



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

Modern History and Current Events

In 1949, at the end of a civil war on mainland China with the Communist Party of China (CPC), the ROC’s then-ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT), moved the ROC government to Taiwan. Until 1991, the KMT continued to assert that the ROC government on Taiwan was the sole legitimate government of all China. In 1971, however, 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.

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. Tsai won a second four-year term in 2020, and her party retained its majority in Taiwan’s parliament, the Legislative Yuan. Taiwan is scheduled to hold elections for nine categories of local elected office on November 26, 2022.

The most recent flashpoint in U.S.-Taiwan-PRC relations has been news of a possible visit to Taiwan by the Speaker of the House. In recent years, some Members of Congress have argued that the U.S. government should encourage visits between U.S. and Taiwan officials at all levels, in part to improve high-level communication. That position was enacted into law in 2018’s Taiwan Travel Act (P.L. 115-135). If the Speaker were to travel to Taiwan this summer, she would be the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Taiwan since then-Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1997. She would be visiting at a time when the Russian invasion of Ukraine has heightened concerns about the potential for PRC military action to pressure Taiwan to accept integration into the PRC, and at a sensitive political moment for China. China’s leader, Xi Jinping, is believed to be seeking appointment to a norm-breaking third term as China’s top leader at a CPC Congress in the fall, a quest already complicated by economic, social, and public health challenges in China. Some analysts believe the political moment may make a muscular PRC response to any visit by the Speaker more likely. Others argue that it might make the PRC leadership more risk averse.

On July 25, a PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson warned that if the trip goes forward, “the Chinese side will take firm and strong measures to safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity.” He preceded that statement with a phrase that the ministry translated as, “We are fully prepared for any eventuality.” A standard PRC dictionary translates the phrase as, “We stand in combat readiness.” Asked on July 20, 2022, about a possible trip by the Speaker, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. said, “the military thinks it’s not a good idea right now.” The next day, the Speaker herself declined to discuss her travel plans. When asked about how to deter a Chinese attack on Taiwan, she said, “it’s important for us to show support for Taiwan.”

U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan

Since 1979, the United States has maintained a “one-China policy,” now guided by the Taiwan Relations Act; U.S.-PRC joint communiqués concluded in 1972, 1978, and 1982; and “Six Assurances” that President Ronald Reagan communicated to Taiwan in 1982. Under the policy, which

supporters credit with keeping the peace for over four decades, the United States maintains official relations with the PRC and unofficial relations with Taiwan, sells arms to Taiwan, supports peaceful resolution of cross-Straits differences, and opposes any unilateral changes to the status quo (without explicitly defining what the status quo is). The U.S. one-China policy is distinct from the PRC's "one China principle," which defines Taiwan as part of China, and the PRC as China's sole legal government.

In the U.S.-China joint communiqués, the United States recognized the PRC government as the "sole legal government of China," and acknowledged, but did not endorse, "the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China." The Six Assurances include assurances that in negotiating the 1982 communiqué, the United States did not agree to consult with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan or to "take any position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan."

Key provisions of the TRA include the following:

- U.S. 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."

The TRA does not require the United States to defend Taiwan, but it 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. Some observers, including some Members of Congress, have advocated abandoning the policy of strategic ambiguity in favor of a clear U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan. Supporters of ambiguity see it as having served to deter provocations from both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

President Biden has sent mixed messages about U.S. policy. Three times in the last year, he has appeared to abandon strategic ambiguity, most recently in May 2022, when he answered "Yes" to a journalist who asked, "Are you willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan, if it comes to that?" Biden later said strategic ambiguity remained U.S. policy, adding, "The policy has not changed at all." In November 2021, Biden said of Taiwan, "It's independent." Later the same day, he said his administration is "not encouraging independence" for Taiwan.

PRC Policy Toward Taiwan

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."

PRC leader Xi has publicly committed China to striving for peaceful unification. In October 2021, he stated, "National reunification by peaceful means best serves the interests of the Chinese nation as a whole." Yet he has also repeatedly warned, "No one should underestimate the resolve, the will, and the ability of the Chinese people to defend our national sovereignty and territorial integrity." China's armed forces regularly conduct exercises near Taiwan that showcase the kinds of capabilities they likely would employ in a cross-Straits conflict. PRC military aircraft conduct sorties into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (an area beyond the island's territorial airspace) on an almost daily basis.

Beijing cut off communication with Tsai's government in 2016, citing her unwillingness to endorse a formula known as "the 1992 consensus." The consensus stipulates that the KMT and the CPC agreed that Taiwan and mainland China are parts of "one China," without agreeing on what "China" means. Xi's government has also sought to isolate Taiwan internationally. Since 2016, 9 former Taiwan diplomatic partners have switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC, leaving Taiwan with 14 such partners. The PRC has worked to exclude Taiwan from international organizations, including by blocking Taiwan's attendance as an observer at annual World Health Assembly meetings.

Taiwan's Security

As China's air, naval, missile, and amphibious forces have become more capable, the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait has shifted in the PRC's favor. Taiwan's military is professional and technologically advanced, but it enjoys less than one-tenth the budget of the PRC's military and faces equipment, readiness, and personnel challenges. The Tsai administration is pursuing new policies intended to harden the island's defenses. They include an asymmetric military strategy that aims to deter, and if necessary, defeat PRC attacks.

The United States terminated its Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan in 1980, but engages in security cooperation with Taiwan, most concretely through arms sales. The vast majority of Taiwan's arms imports are from the United States, and the island is among the top recipients of U.S. foreign military sales (FMS). As of March 2022, 30 active-duty U.S. military personnel were deployed to Taiwan. The two militaries also conduct regular dialogues, training, and other cooperative security activities. The U.S. Navy conducts near-monthly transits of the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan and the 117th Congress

As PRC coercion against Taiwan has intensified, many Members have introduced legislation that aims to support Taiwan's international engagement, boost U.S.-Taiwan economic and cultural engagement, and enhance Taiwan's security (e.g., The Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 (S. 4428)). Some Members have introduced legislation (e.g., S. 3131/H.R. 6443 and S. 3192) that would expand U.S. influence over Taiwan's defense strategy by incentivizing Taiwan to procure certain U.S.-approved arms.

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