



Taiwan: Select 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 formal diplomatic ties with self-ruled Taiwan, over which the PRC claims sovereignty. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA, P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. 3301 et seq.), enacted on April 10, 1979, provides a legal basis for this unofficial bilateral relationship. It also includes commitments related to Taiwan’s security. For discussion of issues related to Taiwan’s economy, see CRS In Focus IF10256, *U.S.-Taiwan Trade Relations*, by Karen M. Sutter.

Taiwan’s Modern History

In 1949, after losing a civil war on mainland China to the Communist Party of China, the Kuomintang (KMT), the ruling party of the ROC, moved its seat of government to Taipei. For decades after, the KMT continued to assert that its ROC government 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 United Nations. Taiwan today claims “effective jurisdiction” over Taiwan, the archipelagos of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu, and some smaller islands. It also claims disputed islands in the East and South China Seas.

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 popular pressure forced it to allow political liberalization. Taiwan held its first direct parliamentary election in 1992 and its first direct presidential election in 1996. 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 January 2020 elections, President Tsai was reelected to a second four-year term with 57.1% of the vote. The DPP lost 7 seats in the 113-seat legislature, but retained its majority, with 61 seats. The KMT now controls 38 seats, a gain of 3. The results empowered Tsai to move forward with an agenda includes demanding “respect from China” for what she calls Taiwan’s “separate identity.” Taiwan’s widely lauded response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has bolstered Tsai’s public support. Taiwan has recorded seven COVID-19 deaths.

U.S. Commitments Related to Taiwan

Four documents underpin the U.S. “one-China policy” and U.S. relations with Taiwan: joint communiqués concluded with the PRC in 1972, 1978, and 1982, plus the TRA. The U.S. “one-China policy” is distinct from the PRC’s “one-China principle,” which asserts that Taiwan is part of China. In the three communiqués, the United States recognized the PRC as the “sole legal government of China”; acknowledged, though did not affirm, “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 United States does not take a position on Taiwan’s future political status, except that it be resolved peacefully, without resort to threats or use of force.

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 and is staffed by U.S. government personnel assigned or detailed to AIT.)
- It is U.S. policy “to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”
- 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 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” regarding the U.S. role in the event of a PRC attack on Taiwan.

The Six Assurances

President Ronald Reagan communicated what became known as the “Six Assurances” to Taiwan before the announcement of the 1982 U.S.-PRC communiqué, which focused on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. The assurances included that in the negotiations with the PRC, the United States did not agree “to engage in prior consultations with Beijing on arms sales to Taiwan,” and did not agree to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan. In August 2019, the Trump Administration declassified a 1982 internal presidential memo clarifying that, “the U.S. willingness to reduce its arms sales to Taiwan is conditioned absolutely upon the continued commitment of China to the peaceful solution of the Taiwan-PRC differences.”

Trump Administration Policy

The Trump Administration has sought to “strengthen and deepen” bilateral relations with Taiwan, even as it states that it remains committed to the post-1979 framework of unofficial U.S.-Taiwan relations. A May 2019 meeting between the U.S. and Taiwan National Security Advisors was the first such meeting publicly disclosed in the era of unofficial relations. In August 2020, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar became the first U.S. cabinet member to visit Taiwan since 2014 and the seventh to do so since 1979. In January and May 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo issued statements congratulating Tsai, respectively, on her reelection and the start of her second term, making him the highest-level U.S. official ever to have issued such statements. The May statement drew a rebuke from China, which demanded in a rare Foreign Ministry statement that the United States “stop official interactions and moves aimed at upgrading substantive relations with Taiwan” and “stop meddling in China’s internal affairs.”

An increasingly prominent element of U.S. policy is an effort to help Taiwan strengthen its relations with other countries, particularly the 15 countries that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, rather than the PRC. In 2019, Japan joined the United States and Taiwan as a formal member of the Global Cooperation and Training Framework, which convenes workshops to share Taiwan’s expertise with other countries. Also in 2019, the United States and Taiwan launched Indo-Pacific Democratic Governance Consultations, to help Indo-Pacific countries address governance challenges, and a new Pacific Islands Dialogue, to help “meet the development needs of Taiwan’s diplomatic partners in the Pacific.”

Although the United States terminated its Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan in 1980, it engages with Taiwan’s military through dialogues, training, and arms sales, with a focus on encouraging Taiwan to field “credible, resilient, and cost-effective capabilities.” The Trump Administration has notified Congress of 14 proposed major Foreign Military Sales cases for Taiwan, with a combined value of about \$13.2 billion. The U.S. Navy has conducted 10 Taiwan Strait transits in 2020, the same number as in all of 2019. On June 9, 2020, a U.S. Navy C-40 transport plane flew over Taiwan with Taiwan’s permission. In apparent response, Chinese Su-30 fighter jets briefly entered Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone.

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 “do its utmost with maximum sincerity to achieve a 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 2019, PRC President Xi recommitted the PRC to peaceful unification, but reserved the option to use force. He called for exploring “a Taiwan plan for ‘one country, two systems,’” a reference to an arrangement under which mainland China and Taiwan would be parts of one country, but maintain different political and other systems, as in Hong Kong. After China’s June 2020 imposition of a national security law on Hong Kong, President Tsai declared the approach “not viable.”

Unlike her KMT predecessor, President Tsai has not endorsed the “1992 consensus,” under which Taiwan and the PRC acknowledged “one China,” but retained their own interpretations of what it meant. In a BBC interview after her reelection, Tsai said, “We don’t have a need to declare ourselves an independent state. We are an independent country already and we call ourselves the Republic of China (Taiwan).” In 2016, the PRC suspended contacts with Taiwan’s government over Tsai’s unwillingness to endorse the “1992 consensus.”

Since 2016, the PRC has established diplomatic relations with eight countries that previously recognized Taiwan: first the Gambia, then Sao Tome and Principe, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, El Salvador, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati. The PRC has also stepped up military patrols and exercises around Taiwan and blocked Taiwan’s attendance as an observer at annual World Health Assembly meetings, which Taiwan attended from 2009 to 2016. The PRC has offered carrots, too: 2018’s “31 measures” and 2019’s “26 measures,” intended to improve living and working conditions and business opportunities for Taiwan people in mainland China.

Select Legislation in the 116th Congress

Section 1258 of the Senate-passed National Defense Authorization Act for FY2021 (S. 4049) would state that it is U.S. policy “that nothing in the [TRA] constrains deepening, to the extent possible, the extensive, close, and friendly relations” with Taiwan, “including defense relations,” and that the U.S. Armed Forces will maintain the capacity “to deny a ‘fait accompli’ operation by the [PRC] to rapidly seize control of Taiwan.” The House-passed William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for FY2021 (H.R. 6395) does not include parallel provisions. Both bills would, however, urge “practical training and military exercises” with Taiwan; the Senate bill would state that it is U.S. policy for such activities to include, “as appropriate, the Rim of the Pacific exercise, combined training at the National Training Center at Fort Erwin, and bilateral naval exercises and training.” Both bills would call for port calls in Taiwan with the U.S. Navy hospital ships *USNS Comfort* and *USNS Mercy*.

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