



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 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 economic issues, see 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, the ROC’s ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT), moved the ROC seat of government to Taiwan. The KMT continued to assert that the ROC 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 has remained outside of the United Nations since. It today claims “effective jurisdiction” over Taiwan, the archipelagos of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu, and other outlying islands.

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. 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 January 2020 with 57.1% of the vote. The DPP lost seats but maintained its majority in Taiwan’s parliament, the Legislative Yuan. Tsai has demanded “respect from China” for what she calls Taiwan’s “separate identity.” Tsai’s August 2020 decision to ease restrictions on imports of U.S. pork containing ractopamine, a food additive, has cost her public support. A referendum on the issue, originally scheduled for August 2021, is now slated for December 18, 2021.

In delaying the vote, Taiwan’s government cited its first major outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), which began in May 2021. Taiwan had previously recorded a cumulative total of 7 deaths from COVID-19. By July 14, 2021, it had reported 753 deaths. The Biden Administration donated 2.5 million doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to the island in June 2021. Japan has donated 2.37 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

U.S. Commitments Related to Taiwan

The PRC seeks to enforce a “one China principle,” which holds that Taiwan is part of China. The United States adheres to its own “one-China policy,” guided by U.S.-PRC joint communiqués concluded in 1972, 1978, and 1982; the TRA; and “Six Assurances” that President Ronald Reagan communicated to Taiwan in 1982. The U.S. government considers Taiwan’s political status to be unresolved.

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. In the 1982 communiqué, the U.S. government stated that with a PRC commitment to a “peaceful solution” “in mind,” the United States “intends gradually to reduce its sale of arms to Taiwan.” (U.S. arms sales have continued.)

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.)
- 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, in accordance with constitutional processes, appropriate action by the United States in response to any such danger.”

The 1982 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, 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. In October 2020, Trump Administration National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien referred to, “a lot of ambiguity there about what the United States would do in response to an attack by China on Taiwan.”

Biden Administration Policy

Three days after President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. took office, his State Department urged the PRC “to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan and instead engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan’s democratically elected representatives.” The Department announced that the Administration would be “deepening our ties with democratic Taiwan,” indicated that the United States would “continue to support a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues, consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people on Taiwan,” and characterized the U.S. commitment to Taiwan as “rock solid.” In his first phone call with PRC leader Xi Jinping on February 10, 2021, Biden raised concerns about China’s “increasingly assertive actions in the region, including toward Taiwan.”

Senior Biden Administration officials have used blunt language to warn China against any use of force against Taiwan. In May 2021, for example, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken stated, “it would be a very serious mistake for anyone to try to disrupt by force the existing status quo.” The Administration has successfully negotiated for language on the importance of “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” to be included in joint leaders’ statements with allies Japan (April 2021) and South Korea (May 2021), and in a G7 summit communiqué (June 2021) and a U.S.-European Union Summit Statement (June 2021).

Like the Trump Administration, the Biden Administration has committed diplomatic resources to helping Taiwan retain its remaining diplomatic relationships. Since 2016, eight countries have switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC, leaving Taiwan with 15 diplomatic partners. (The PRC does not allow countries to recognize both the PRC and Taiwan.) The Biden Administration has also continued to involve like-minded partners in co-hosting workshops under the U.S.-Taiwan-Japan Global Cooperation and Training Framework, “a platform for Taiwan to share its expertise with partners around the world.”

Before leaving office, Trump Administration Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo 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). The new guidelines for the first time encourage working-level meetings with Taiwan counterparts in federal

buildings. U.S. government displays of Taiwan symbols of sovereignty remain off limits.

The United States terminated its Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan in 1980, but engages with Taiwan’s military through dialogues, training, and arms sales. The Trump Administration notified Congress of 20 proposed major Foreign Military Sales cases for Taiwan, with a combined value of over \$18 billion. The U.S. Navy, which conducted 11 Taiwan Strait transits in FY2020, has so far conducted 10 in FY2021, including 6 under the Biden Administration.

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 leader Xi called for exploring “a two systems plan for Taiwan,” referring 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 imposed a national security law on Hong Kong in 2020, President Tsai declared the approach “not viable.”

On July 1, 2021, Xi reaffirmed the Communist Party’s “unshakable commitment” to “[r]esolving the Taiwan question and realizing China’s complete reunification.” 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 sending military aircraft across the median line of the Taiwan Strait. PRC-linked actors have targeted Taiwan with cyberattacks, and the PRC government has sought to isolate Taiwan internationally, including by blocking Taiwan’s attendance as an observer at annual World Health Assembly (WHA) meetings, which Taiwan attended from 2009 to 2016.

Select Legislation in the 117th Congress

Pending bills with broad Taiwan provisions include H.R. 3524, H.R. 3972, S. 687, S. 1054, S. 1169, and Senate-passed S. 1260. Other pending bills include those seeking to address Taiwan’s security (H.R. 1173, H.R. 2103, H.R. 3934, and S. 332) and its participation in the WHA (H.R. 497, H.R. 1145, H.R. 1168, H.R. 1169, S. 296, S. 812, and S. 2073) and other international organizations (H.R. 2646). H.R. 3084 and S. 811 would establish a Taiwan fellowship program for U.S. government employees.

Susan V. Lawrence, Specialist in Asian Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.