



Taiwan: Political and Security Issues

Taiwan, which officially calls itself the Republic of China (ROC), is an electoral democracy of 23.5 million people residing on one large and numerous small islands across the Taiwan Strait from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). U.S.-Taiwan relations have been unofficial since January 1, 1979, when the Carter Administration established diplomatic relations with the 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. 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 Taiwan and the 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 U.S. government’s long-standing position has been that Taiwan’s political status remains unresolved.

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.” President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. has at times sent mixed messages about his view of Taiwan’s political status.

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. Some observers, including some Members of Congress, have

advocated abandoning the strategic ambiguity policy in favor of a clear U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan.

Cross-Strait Challenges

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 a November 2021 virtual meeting between President Biden and PRC leader Xi Jinping, 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.”

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. In November 2021, the PRC government announced that it had placed Taiwan’s premier, foreign minister, and parliamentary speaker on a blacklist, barring their affiliated institutions from cooperating with PRC entities and their financial supporters from doing business in the PRC.

Taiwan is the primary focal point of PRC military modernization and strategy. For decades, Taiwan’s military was more advanced than China’s and unquestionably able to deter a PRC invasion. As China’s air, naval, missile, and amphibious forces have become more capable, the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait has shifted significantly in the PRC’s favor. In June 2021 testimony, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley stated that Xi has challenged China’s military to develop the capability to take Taiwan by 2027. Concerns about whether or when the PRC could attack Taiwan have become more acute as PRC military operations near Taiwan have become more sophisticated and frequent. China’s armed forces regularly conduct exercises near Taiwan that showcase the kinds of capabilities they likely would employ in a cross-Strait conflict. Chinese military aircraft have conducted more than 1,400 air sorties into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone since September 2020.

The PRC government has sought to isolate Taiwan internationally. Since 2016, 9 former Taiwan diplomatic partners have switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC, leaving Taiwan with 14 diplomatic partners. Taiwan maintains unofficial offices in an additional 59 countries, though the PRC insists that these offices not include the word “Taiwan” in their names. In 2021, the PRC downgraded diplomatic ties with Lithuania and imposed a de facto trade embargo against the country after it allowed Taiwan to open a “Taiwanese Representative Office” there. 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 pursues a range of policies in an effort to make itself resilient to PRC economic, political, diplomatic, and military coercion. Taiwan’s asymmetric military strategy aims to deter, and, if necessary, defeat PRC attacks. Taiwan’s military is professional and technologically advanced, but it enjoys less than one-tenth the budget of China’s military and faces equipment, readiness, and personnel challenges. The Tsai Administration is pursuing new policies intended to harden the island’s defenses, bolster its image on the international stage, and combat PRC influence operations.

U.S. Policy Responses

Senior Biden Administration officials have repeatedly raised concerns about the PRC’s “continued military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan.” According to the White House’s readout of the Biden-Xi virtual meeting, Biden underscored “that the United States strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

Recent administrations have sought to help Taiwan retain its remaining diplomatic relationships and expand its unofficial ones, although some observers criticize punitive U.S. actions against countries severing diplomatic relations with Taiwan as ineffective or even counterproductive. The U.S. and Taiwan involve like-minded governments in co-hosting workshops under the U.S.-Taiwan-Japan Global Cooperation and Training Framework. The State Department in April 2021 issued new guidelines to federal agencies pursuant to the Taiwan Assurance Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260) that encourage working-level meetings with Taiwan counterparts in federal buildings.

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 December 2021, 32 active duty U.S. military personnel were deployed to Taiwan. The two militaries also conduct regular dialogues, training, and other cooperative security activities.

Taiwan generally enjoys widespread congressional support. As PRC coercion against Taiwan has intensified in recent years, many Members have introduced legislation aiming to support Taiwan’s international engagement, boost U.S.-Taiwan economic and cultural engagement, and enhance Taiwan’s security; some Members have signaled support through congressional delegations (Beijing has strongly condemned these visits). Members of Congress, and U.S. policymakers and experts more generally, disagree at times—with each other, and with counterparts in Taiwan—about how Taiwan can most effectively defend itself. Some argue Taiwan must focus more on developing so-called asymmetric, instead of conventional, capabilities. Some Members have introduced legislation that would expand U.S. influence over Taiwan’s defense strategy by incentivizing Taiwan to procure U.S.-approved arms.

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