



Taiwan: Political and Security Issues

Taiwan, which officially calls itself the Republic of China (ROC), is a self-governing 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. Competing interests among the United States, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China)—namely the PRC’s determination to unify with Taiwan, official and popular Taiwan resistance to absorption by the PRC, and U.S. security commitments related to Taiwan—mean that the United States and China could someday be drawn into armed conflict over Taiwan’s fate.

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 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 against 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 local elections on November 26, 2022, and presidential and legislative elections in 2024.

On August 2-3, 2022, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi became the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Taiwan since then-Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1997. She was accompanied by five other Members of Congress. PRC State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi condemned the Speaker’s trip as a “reckless move” that “seriously undermined China’s sovereignty.” The PRC’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) responded to the visit by conducting exercises in six locations around Taiwan. PRC state media portrayed the activities as intended to demonstrate how the PLA could isolate and attack Taiwan, including by blockading ports, attacking military bases on Taiwan’s east coast, and controlling access to the Bashi Channel in the Luzon Strait between Taiwan and the Philippines. The exercises, which included missile test-launches over Taiwan, were unprecedented in scale and established a “new normal” in which PLA ships and aircraft now operate closer to Taiwan and with more regularity. The PRC also announced unspecified sanctions against the Speaker and her immediate family, cancelled U.S.-PRC military dialogues, and suspended cooperation with the United States in five areas, including counter-narcotics.

U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan

Since 1979, the United States has maintained a “one-China policy,” which it currently describes as being 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’s government in 1982. Under the one-China policy, the United States maintains official relations with the PRC and unofficial relations with Taiwan, sells defensive arms to Taiwan, supports peaceful resolution of cross-Strait differences, opposes any unilateral changes to the status quo (without explicitly defining the status quo), and states that it does not support independence for Taiwan. The U.S. one-China policy is distinct from the PRC’s “one China principle,” which defines Taiwan as part of China.

In the U.S.-China joint communiqués, the U.S. government 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.” (See CRS In Focus IF11665, *President Reagan’s Six Assurances to 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 deterred provocations from both sides of the Taiwan Strait and as incentivizing Taiwan to invest in its own defense.

President Biden has sent mixed messages about U.S. policy. Since August 2021, he has four times appeared to abandon strategic ambiguity. The most recent instance was in September 2022, when a CBS News journalist asked, “So unlike Ukraine, to be clear, sir, U.S. forces, U.S. men and women would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion?” and the President answered, “Yes.” White House officials later said U.S. policy remains unchanged.

PRC Policy Toward Taiwan

On August 10, 2022, the PRC released its first White Paper on Taiwan in 22 years. It portrays “China’s complete reunification”—including unification with Taiwan—as a “historic mission” for the Communist Party of China (CPC). The document states that “[n]ational reunification by peaceful means” is the CPC and PRC’s “first choice” and reaffirms the PRC’s proposal for a “One Country, Two Systems” approach to “resolving the Taiwan question.” The White Paper proposes that, “after reunification Taiwan will enjoy a high degree of autonomy as a special administrative region.” The PRC’s Anti-Secession Law, passed in 2005, states 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.”

Beijing cut off communication with President 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 government has worked to exclude Taiwan from participation in the work of U.N. agencies, claiming that U.N. General Assembly Resolution 2758 “confirmed that Taiwan is a part of China.” In October 2022, AIT Chairman James Moriarty accused the PRC of “intensifying efforts to misuse” the resolution to “preclude Taiwan’s meaningful participation in the U.N. system.”

Taiwan’s Security

As the PLA has become more capable, the cross-Strait balance of military power has shifted in the PRC’s favor. Taiwan’s military is highly capable, but its budget is less than one-tenth of the PLA’s and it faces equipment, readiness, and personnel challenges. President Tsai’s government has accused the PRC of using its growing military might to conduct a sustained campaign of intimidation and coercion against the island. Near-daily PLA operations in and above waters around Taiwan increase the demands on Taiwan’s military to monitor and respond to such activities, and could compress the time available for Taiwan to respond if the PLA attacks.

Taiwan’s military and civilian leaders and U.S. defense officials broadly agree that Taiwan’s strategy to deter such an attack should reflect the asymmetric cross-Strait power balance by targeting PLA weaknesses and harnessing Taiwan’s natural advantages, such as its fortress-like island geography. They do not always agree, however, on how to implement such a strategy. Washington—Taiwan’s primary arms supplier—seeks to shape Taiwan’s planning and procurement to focus on deterring an amphibious invasion. Some in Taiwan argue this approach leaves Taiwan vulnerable to other forms of coercion short of an invasion. Uncertainty as to whether and how Washington might aid Taiwan in the event of an attack informs these debates.

Taiwan and the 117th Congress

On September 14, 2022, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported S. 4428, the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022, with an amendment in the nature of a substitute. On September 29, 2022, Senators Menendez, Risch, and Graham proposed the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 as Amendment 6340 to Senator Reed and Senator Inhofe’s Amendment 5499 to the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2023 (H.R. 7900). Amendment 6340 includes provisions that would change longstanding elements of U.S. policy toward Taiwan. Among other things, the amendment would state that it is U.S. policy to support “the freedom of the people of Taiwan to determine their own future,” make Taiwan eligible for Foreign Military Finance grant assistance, and authorize \$6.5 billion of appropriations for such assistance for FY2023 to FY2027. A companion bill, H.R. 9010, is pending in the House.

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