



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 interests and commitments related to Taiwan—raise the specter of U.S.-PRC 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

Facing defeat at the hands of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in a civil war on mainland China, in 1949, 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 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 to hold presidential and legislative elections in 2024.

In August 2022, then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi became the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Taiwan since 1997. 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 suspended some cooperation with the United States and announced sanctions against Pelosi and her family. Pelosi’s successor as Speaker in the 118th Congress, Kevin McCarthy, stated in July 2022 that he, too, would like to lead a delegation to Taiwan as Speaker.

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 TRA; 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

At the CPC’s 20th Party Congress in October 2022, China’s top leader, Xi Jinping, referred to unification with Taiwan as “a historic mission and an unshakable commitment” and as necessary for “the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” He reiterated the CPC’s preference for peaceful unification, and its proposal for a “One Country, Two Systems” approach to governance of Taiwan. (An August 2022 PRC White Paper on Taiwan states that a post-unification Taiwan would “enjoy a high degree of autonomy as a special administrative region” of the PRC.) Xi also warned, however, that the CPC “will never promise to renounce the use of force.” 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 U.S. Congress

Congress has been influential in shaping U.S.-Taiwan relations through legislation and participation in longstanding and emerging debates over whether or how the United States should support Taiwan. In 2022, the 117th Congress passed the most comprehensive Taiwan-related legislation since the TRA in the form of the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act (or TERA, Title LV, Subtitle A of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263). Among other things, the act authorizes Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance for U.S. arms sales to Taiwan for the first time; mandates “comprehensive” U.S.-Taiwan military training programming; and establishes fellowships in Taiwan for U.S. government officials. The FMF assistance authorized by TERA includes up to \$2 billion a year in loans and up to \$2 billion a year in grant assistance for Taiwan through FY2027. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328) makes up to \$2 billion available for FMF loans to Taiwan in FY2023, but does not appropriate funds for FMF grant assistance to Taiwan.

Susan V. Lawrence, Specialist in Asian Affairs
Caitlin Campbell, Analyst 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.