

April 29, 2024

Taiwan's Position in the World

Introduction

Taiwan, the self-governing Asian democracy that also calls itself the “Republic of China” (ROC), has struggled to maintain “international space” for itself in the world. The People’s Republic of China (PRC), with its capital in Beijing, has never controlled Taiwan, but claims sovereignty over it and has vowed to “unify” with it, by force if necessary. As part of its effort to pressure Taiwan to accept unification, the PRC has spent decades seeking to isolate Taiwan internationally.

The United States terminated diplomatic relations with the ROC on January 1, 1979, in order to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. Following this diplomatic break, Congress passed the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA, P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. §§3301 et seq.). Section 4(d) of the TRA offers U.S. support for Taiwan continuing to occupy one form of international space: membership in international organizations. The provision states, “Nothing in this Act may be construed as a basis for supporting the exclusion or expulsion of Taiwan from continued membership in any international financial institution or any other international organization.” Since a Taiwan policy review in 1994, U.S. policy has been to support Taiwan’s membership in international organizations for which statehood is not a requirement for membership, and to encourage “meaningful participation” for Taiwan in organizations in which its membership is not possible. Other major areas of U.S. effort today include helping Taiwan shore up its remaining diplomatic relationships and expand its unofficial relationships around the world.

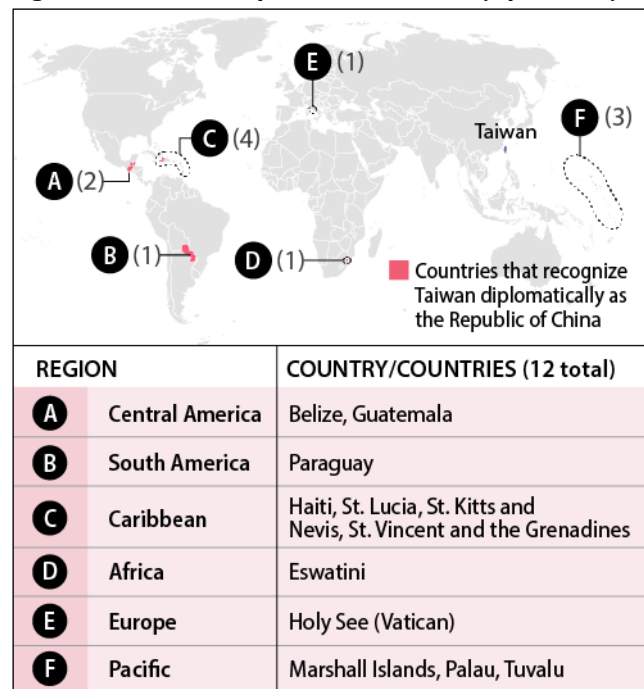
The Biden Administration has argued for a need to support Taiwan’s ability to “contribute its valuable expertise to address global challenges.” Also driving U.S. government efforts appears to be an assessment that efforts to broaden and deepen international support for Taiwan could help deter the PRC from seeking to absorb Taiwan by force. The PRC alleges that, “To help Taiwan expand its ‘international space,’” the United States is, “inducing other countries to interfere in Taiwan affairs, and concocting Taiwan-related bills that infringe upon the sovereignty of China.” The PRC charges that these and other U.S. efforts feed resistance in Taiwan to peaceful unification—or in the PRC government’s words, “incite separatist forces to create tension and turmoil in cross-Straits [sic] relations.” Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for its part, accuses the PRC of having “never ceased in its attempts to suppress Taiwan’s international space” and “acted with malign intent to disrupt Taiwan’s relations with diplomatic allies.”

Taiwan’s Diplomatic Partners

As a condition for establishing diplomatic relations, the PRC requires all its diplomatic partners to agree to engage with Taiwan only unofficially. As of April 2024, a dozen

countries are choosing to forego diplomatic relations with the PRC and to recognize Taiwan diplomatically as the ROC (see **Figure 1**). When Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen took office in May 2016, Taiwan had 22 diplomatic partners. Since then, 10 partners have switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC: Sao Tome and Principe (2016), Panama (2017), Dominican Republic (2018), Burkina Faso (2018), El Salvador (2018), Solomon Islands (2019), Kiribati (2019), Nicaragua (2021), Honduras (2023), and Nauru (2024). An eleventh partner, the Gambia, broke relations with Taiwan in 2013 and established diplomatic relations with the PRC in 2016, after Tsai’s election but before her inauguration.

Figure 1. Taiwan’s Diplomatic Partners (April 2024)



Source: CRS graphic by Mari Y. Lee.

Taiwan relies on its diplomatic partners to advocate for it at the United Nations and in other international fora from which it is absent. Taiwan’s diplomatic partners also provide opportunities for Taiwan leaders to make official trips abroad—and transit visits through the United States on the outbound and inbound legs of such journeys. (See CRS In Focus IF12371, *Taiwan Presidents’ U.S. Transit Visits*.) Although the U.S. government itself does not recognize Taiwan diplomatically, it seeks to dissuade other countries from breaking diplomatic relations with Taiwan. When Nauru switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in January 2024, a Department of State spokesperson acknowledged the action as “a sovereign decision,” but said it was “nonetheless a disappointing one.” In March 2024,

the White House stated that it “strongly opposes” Senate-passed S.J.Res. 62, which would nullify a Department of Agriculture rule opening the U.S. market to beef from Paraguay, Taiwan’s last remaining diplomatic partner in South America. Among the White House’s objections was that, “Access to the U.S. market is critical for Paraguay ... to withstand pressure from the PRC to withdraw diplomatic recognition of Taiwan.”

The Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-135), as amended by the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act (TERA; Title LV, Subtitle A of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2023, P.L. 117-263), states that it is U.S. policy “to support Taiwan’s diplomatic relations with governments and countries.” In the 118th Congress, the House-passed Taiwan International Solidarity Act (TISA, H.R. 1176) would amend the TAIPEI Act to encourage U.S. allies and partners “to oppose the [PRC’s] efforts to undermine Taiwan’s official diplomatic relationships and its partnerships with countries with which it does not maintain diplomatic relations.” U.S. efforts to assist Taiwan in strengthening its relationships with its diplomatic partners include joint development assistance and private sector investment cooperation.

Taiwan’s Unofficial Relations

Taiwan maintains unofficial representative offices in 62 U.N. member states, plus the European Union and the self-declared republic of Somaliland. It opened three new such offices in 2023, in Montreal, Milan, and Mumbai. In the United States, Taiwan’s unofficial office is known as the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO). U.S. government efforts to support Taiwan’s unofficial relationships include the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), a platform for Taiwan to share its expertise with global partners through training workshops in Taiwan and abroad. Launched in 2015, GCTF now counts Australia’s and Japan’s unofficial offices in Taiwan as co-administrators. Congress made available \$4 million for GCTF in FY2023 (P.L. 117-328), and \$4 million again in FY2024 (P.L. 118-47).

International Organizations

The ROC was a founding member of the United Nations in 1945. It retained the “China” seat in the General Assembly and on the Security Council after 1949, when its government retreated from mainland China and re-located to Taiwan. In 1971, U.N. General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 2758 (XXVI) recognized representatives of the PRC as “the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations,” and expelled “the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek,” the ROC’s then-president. PRC representatives replaced those of the ROC in both UNGA and the Security Council, as the PRC assumed the rights and obligations of China as a U.N. member state.

Interpretations of UNGA Resolution 2758 vary. In a 2022 government White Paper, the PRC insisted that the resolution “settled once and for all the political, legal and procedural issues of China’s representation in the U.N., and it covered the whole country, including Taiwan.” The U.N. Secretariat’s Office of Legal Affairs stated in 2010 that,

“the United Nations considers ‘Taiwan’ as a province of China with no separate status.”

A statement of congressional findings in Section 5516 of the TERA, on the other hand, states that UNGA Resolution 2758 “does not address the issue of representation of Taiwan and its people at the United Nations, nor does it give the PRC the right to represent the people of Taiwan.” TISA would amend the TAIPEI Act to state that UNGA Resolution 2758 “did not address the issue of representation of Taiwan and its people in the United Nations or any related organizations,” and that it is U.S. policy to instruct U.S. government representatives to advocate for international organizations “to resist the [PRC’s] efforts to distort the decisions, language, policies, or procedures of such organizations regarding Taiwan.”

In 2021, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken encouraged U.N. member states to join the United States “in supporting Taiwan’s robust, meaningful participation throughout the U.N. system and in the international community.” Since then, representatives of the U.S. Department of State and Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs have met twice-yearly to discuss “expanding Taiwan’s participation at the United Nations and in other international fora.”

Taiwan is a full member of such bodies as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, as an economy or a separate customs territory, not a state, and, at the PRC’s insistence, not under the name “Taiwan.” (In the ADB, it is “Taipei, China.” In APEC, it is “Chinese Taipei.”) The PRC has sought to exclude Taiwan from other organizations, including U.N. specialized agencies. Taiwan is not a member of the World Health Assembly (WHA)—the governing body of the World Health Organization—for example, or of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). With PRC assent, Taiwan attended the WHA as an observer from 2009 to 2016. After President Tsai’s election in 2016, the PRC objected to Taiwan’s WHA participation and invitations to Taiwan stopped. The PRC acquiesced to Taiwan’s attending ICAO’s 2013 triennial meeting as a guest of ICAO’s president, but Taiwan has received no invitations since.

The TAIPEI Act, as amended by the TERA, states that it is U.S. policy to advocate “for Taiwan’s membership in all international organizations in which statehood is not a requirement and in which the United States is also a participant,” and “for Taiwan to be granted observer status in other appropriate international organizations.” Section 5518 of the TERA directs the Secretary of State to identify “no more than 20” international organizations in which the U.S. government “will prioritize for using its voice, vote, and influence to advance Taiwan’s meaningful participation” from 2022 to 2025. In the 118th Congress, the House-passed Taiwan Non-Discrimination Act (H.R. 540) would require U.S. support for Taiwan’s membership in the International Monetary Fund, a U.N. specialized agency that confines membership to “countries.”

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