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Asian Perspective, Volume 49, Number 1, Winter 2025, pp. 75-103 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/anp.2025.a953086>



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Great Power Competition in Contested States: The Case of Taiwan

Wu Jieh-min

Abstract: *This article critically engages with the geopolitical complexities in the Taiwan Strait, highlighting the paradox of maintaining the “status quo” amid US-China strategic competition. It analyzes historical perspectives since World War II, focusing on the varying interpretations of the status quo by the United States, China, and Taiwan. The study charts Taiwan’s evolution from a geopolitical object to a significant actor in international society and assesses the impact of escalating US-China rivalry on regional geopolitics. I argue that international systemic factors alone cannot fully explain the transformation of the “status quo” in Taiwan. As a relatively small power, Taiwan enjoys a degree of autonomy in shaping its foreign behavior by defining its own version of the “status quo” within the democratic process. This autonomy is evidenced by Taiwan’s emerging strength in the global economy, as well as the transformation of public opinion regarding its relationship with the neighboring great power (the People’s Republic of China) and Taiwanese self-understanding of a new national identity. In exploring the dynamics of the grand game between the United States and China, the Taiwan experience poses a clear theoretical challenge to the conventional “great power–small state” paradigm.*

Keywords: *geopolitics, national identity, status quo, revisionism, strategic ambiguity, contested state, Taiwan.*

TAIWAN REPRESENTS A SOVEREIGNTY-CONTESTED STATE WHOSE STATEHOOD continues to be challenged by the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) and whose de jure statehood has not been acknowledged by the Western powers. However, irrespective of the definitional criteria of statehood outlined by the Montevideo Convention (Crawford 2006), or from a sociopolitical standpoint, Taiwan functions

as a fully-fledged state. This contested state has sustained its de facto independence, enjoying tacit recognition from the majority of the world's states. This assertion is substantiated by a simple fact: the passports issued by the Government of the Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan) facilitate unimpeded global travel and are often granted visa-free entry in numerous countries, privileges not universally accorded to the passports of the PRC (Wang 2004). Over an extended period under the Pax Americana, Taiwan has relished a substantive independent status with relative peace and stability, evolving into a consolidated democracy over the past thirty years.

For a considerable duration, the notion of “maintaining the status quo” has been perceived as the optimal strategy for preserving peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Interestingly, different nations harbor their own interpretations of what constitutes this “status quo” in the Taiwan Strait. This singular term reflects a multitude of meanings. The United States views adherence to the status quo as the key to sustaining regional peace and prosperity, as articulated by the director of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT):

Maintaining the ‘status quo’ ensures peace, stability, and prosperity in Taiwan and the world. . . . The US has a long-standing ‘one China policy’, which is rooted in the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiqués, and the ‘six assurances’, which is the so-called ‘status quo.’ (Liu 2023)

In Taiwan, the status quo is predominantly interpreted as highlighted by President Tsai Ing-wen’s “Four Commitments” in her 2021 National Day Address:

Our enduring commitment to a free and democratic constitutional system, our commitment that the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China should not be subordinate to each other, our commitment to resist annexation or encroachment upon our sovereignty, and our commitment that the future of the Republic of China (Taiwan) must be decided in accordance with the will of the Taiwanese people. (Office of the President, Republic of China 2021)

This statement by President Tsai emphasizes that the status quo represents the continuous existence of the ROC as a sovereign state, not subordinate to the PRC. This aligns with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)’s 1999 resolution regarding its party charter (see below).

China, on the other hand, advocates the One China Principle. Despite not positively using the term status quo, it steadfastly claims Taiwan is part of China, asserting an unquestionable right to unify Taiwan with the mainland (Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council 2019).

In summary, the One China Policy (reflecting Washington's stance), ROC-Taiwan's de facto independence (as seen from Taipei's perspective), and the One China Principle (Beijing's approach) represent divergent interpretations of the status quo. These viewpoints have coexisted during peacetime without significantly disturbing the balance of power among stakeholders in the Taiwan Strait. However, this status quo has recently faced escalating challenges, primarily due to China's rising power and heightened sovereignty claims over Taiwan amid intensifying US-China rivalry. These challenges are further exacerbated by Chinese mounting military threats, economic coercion, sharp power tactics, and cognitive warfare.

Why are these changes occurring in the Taiwan Strait? How do these changes affect the foreign behaviors of the three main parties involved in the Taiwan Strait: Taiwan, China, and the United States? In this article I trace the historical roots and turning points of the struggle for supremacy and influence between the two powers of the United States and China in the Taiwan Strait post-World War II; explain why and how the status quo is shifting and drifting; and elucidate the impact of this shift on Taiwan, as well as Taiwan's subjectivity and agency in responding to this historic turn of events.

In the post-World War II era, Taiwan's relationship with the United States and China went through three major geopolitical events. The first was the Korean War (1950–1953), the second was the US-China rapprochement in the early 1970s, and the third was the US-China strategic competition that began in 2018. Taiwan's relationship with both the United States and China underwent dramatic changes during these three political cycles, but the constant factor was the competition between the United States and China for control over Taiwan. This special issue focuses on the intense competitive relationship of powers over smaller states. This article clarifies the dynamics and key issues of Taiwan's interactions with the two great powers during these periods.

Conceptually, Taiwan resembles other contested states, such as Kosovo (Geldenhuys 2009; Fong's article in this special issue). While Kosovo is the most internationally recognized contested state, with more than 99 diplomatic allies, Taiwan, despite its substantial economic and military strength and extensive "unofficial relationships" with major states, enjoys limited diplomatic recognition. This distinction pri-

marily arises from the significant power asymmetry between Taiwan and China. In contrast to other contested states, which are often unstable and weak, Taiwan stands out as a stable and powerful example. Furthermore, Taiwan's robust democracy, its pivotal role in global semiconductor manufacturing, and the geostrategic importance of the island itself have positioned it at the center of US-China competition. As a result, Taiwan's status as a contested state provides rare and significant theoretical insights into world politics.

This article is organized as follows. As background, it first describes the start of the controversy over Taiwan's international status after World War II and Taiwan's international status by the end of the 1960s. Then, it explains how the US-China rapprochement in the early 1970s compromised Taiwan's status, shaping what we now call the "status quo." The US-China rapprochement immediately led to a severe diplomatic crisis for Taiwan. This crisis impacted Taiwan's national behavior, challenged the legitimacy of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT), and led to policy adjustments that influenced Taiwan's political trajectory thereafter. Third, the article explains the significance of Taiwan as a geopolitical subject. Like all small countries, Taiwan still has a certain degree of subjectivity and agency. The most prominent display of Taiwan's agency in this fifty-year geopolitical cycle from the 1970s to the 2010s was the process of democratization, which reshaped the national identity of the Taiwanese people, constructing Taiwan as a modern democratic state. This new identity of a democratic state can no longer be contained within its previously designated disadvantaged international status. Fourth, the article explains how the current US-China strategic competition impacts the stability of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. Fifth, it explores how the Taiwanese people perceive the so-called status quo and their assessment of the future relationship with China. The Taiwanese people's reassessment of the status quo will help to demonstrate the difficulties of maintaining it. Finally, the conclusion examines the theoretical implications of the Taiwan case. In terms of research methodology, in addition to analyzing historical archival documents, this study uses survey data to present changes in Taiwanese public opinion over the past decade.¹

Background: Taiwan's Geopolitical Landscape from 1945 to the 1970s

This section discusses Taiwan's situation from post-World War II to the end of the first geopolitical cycle (see Table 1). Since the end of World

War II, Taiwan's legal status has been uncertain, with various parties continuously contesting its sovereignty. Following Japan's defeat in 1945, the Allied Forces appointed Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese government to occupy Taiwan. However, Chiang's representatives initially governed Taiwan as a province of China despite its continued status as Japanese territory. In 1947, the Taiwanese people rose up against the corrupt regime, leading Chiang Kai-shek to deploy military forces to crack down on the rebellion. This resulted in thousands of deaths in the "228 Incident," a traumatic event for many older Taiwanese and a seed for the development of subsequent Taiwanese national identity. In 1949, following their defeat by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on the mainland, the KMT retreated to Taiwan, bringing along the entire apparatus of the Republic of China, including its bureaucracy and military. Earlier that year, Taiwan had been placed under martial law, a state that continued until 1987. At this time, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) prepared to cross the Taiwan Strait, leaving the KMT regime extremely uneasy.

The Korean War, which broke out on June 25, 1950, abruptly altered the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait. Following the war's outbreak, US President Harry Truman declared the "Neutralization of the Taiwan Strait," ordering the 7th Fleet to defend Taiwan. This provided relief to the besieged KMT and formed part of the US containment strategy against Communist China in East Asia. However, the US also stated that "the determination of the future status of Formosa (Taiwan) must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations." The US maintained a reserved attitude toward Chiang Kai-shek and the ROC government in Taiwan, leading to Chiang's ongoing suspicion of the US (Lin 2015), which was an early form of the "Doubt America Theory" (this issue will be discussed later). In 1951, the Treaty of San Francisco was signed, with the Japanese government relinquishing all rights, titles, and claims to Taiwan and the Pescadores, but without specifying a recipient country. Throughout the 1950s, the KMT government continued negotiations with the US for defense and aid to Taiwan and Chiang Kai-shek's plan to "retake the mainland" (Lin 2015, 2017; Chen 2023). In summary, during this period, the US supported Chiang Kai-shek's KMT government in Taiwan and the Republic of China's seat in the United Nations (as a permanent member of the Security Council); in 1954, both signed the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty, essentially recognizing the ROC's governance in Taiwan. The KMT regime gained a respite. On the other hand, during the 1950s, the KMT brutally suppressed leftists

in Taiwan (most of whom were underground Chinese Communist Party members), resulting in nearly 20,000 political prisoners jailed and more than a thousand executions during this period of White Terror, a shocking parallel to the Red Terror on the mainland.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union each established their own trade blocs. The United States provided the KMT government in Taiwan with military and economic aid. During this period, Taiwan and China were engaged in political and military confrontations, with no social or economic interactions between them. The United States opened its domestic market to Japan and the four Asian Tigers, catalyzing Taiwan's economic boom and contributing to the development of a rapid growth zone in East Asia. Beginning in the 1960s, the United States exerted pressure on the KMT to implement economic reforms, steering Taiwan's economy toward an export-oriented model. Within the export sector, a system of subcontracting production networks emerged, leading to the rise of the first generation of small-scale employers after the war. This cohort would go on to make significant investments in China two decades later.

At this juncture, the KMT enforced the Greater China ideological framework on Taiwanese society, emphasizing a Chinese identity through school education and mass media. In contrast, Taiwanese history was seldom taught in schools, and the Taiwanese identity was severely suppressed. The military, government, and educational personnel formed the backbone supporting the regime. The KMT government consistently held local elections under strict control, nurturing local factions loyal to it. Although some opposition groups advocated freedom and democracy, they were unable to effectively challenge the KMT regime.

The consequences of the Korean War provided the KMT with the external support necessary to consolidate its military-authoritarian rule. Within the Cold War structure, Taiwan remained insulated from the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution in China, effectively impeding the PRC's military threats to the island. The US strategic objectives in East Asia, including security assurances for the Taiwan Strait and the subsequent "long peace" (Gaddis 1987; Kivimäki 2014), led Taiwanese society under political suppression to prioritize economic advancement. In this context, Taiwan transformed into a society of "economic animals," a term borrowed from Bruce Cumings to describe Japan under US influence, singularly focused on material well-being (Cumings 1999a, 1999b).

Table 1. Taiwan's Three Geopolitical Cycles Post-World War II

	First Cycle: 1950–1970	Second Cycle: 1971–2017	Third Cycle: 2018–present
Transformative Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Korean War (1950-53). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The PRC's accession to the UN (1971); Nixon's visit to China and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué (1972). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ US-China rivalry: the US engages in trade and technology wars with China, viewing China as a strategic competitor and a revisionist to the status quo.
US-China Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Cold War confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union, with the US containing China. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ US-China reconciliation; the One-China policy, strategic ambiguity in cross-strait relations. ◆ Integration of China into the East Asian rapid growth zone and global capitalism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Strategic competition and confrontation. ◆ The US reorganizes global high-tech supply chains, imposing high-tech export controls on China.
US-Taiwan Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The US supports the ROC/Kuomintang regime and signs the Mutual Defense Treaty (1955) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The US breaks diplomatic relations with the ROC government; Congress enacts the Taiwan Relations Act, providing non-treaty-based, limited unilateral security assurances to Taiwan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The US provides stronger substantial security commitments to Taiwan. ◆ The US reconstructs domestic semiconductor manufacturing, diversifies TSMC's advanced processes.
Taiwan-China Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Political and military confrontation without economic and social interactions. ◆ Sporadic military conflicts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Taiwan-China relations thaw (post-1987), with Taiwan playing an intermediary role in China's economic rise. ◆ China uses a globalist strategy to achieve its irredentist goal; gradually challenging the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. ◆ Taiwan democratization redefines Taiwan-China relations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ China intensifies irredentist strategy: economic coercion, sharp power projection, cognitive warfare, escalating threats of military unification. ◆ Taiwan's enterprises decouple from China. ◆ The Taiwanese projection of future relations with China is tilting toward independence.

Source: Compiled by the author.

Taiwan as a Geopolitical Object: The Onset of US-China Rapprochement

The historical events of the US-China reconciliation beginning in the 1970s best illustrate Taiwan's role as a geopolitical object. In 1971, the PRC garnered sufficient support from nations in the United Nations (UN), leading to the passage of Resolution 2758, which expelled the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek and replaced ROC with the PRC in the UN.

The Shanghai Communiqué and China's Development Opportunities

To counterbalance the Soviet Union and resolve the Vietnam War as soon as possible, the United States decided to improve relations with China. In 1972, US President Richard Nixon visited China, culminating in the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué with Zhou Enlai. Nixon's visit indicated a shift of the East Asian Cold War frontline from the First Island Chain to the Sino-Soviet border, gradually easing US-China tensions in East Asia. The Shanghai Communiqué laid the foundation for US-China cooperation, acknowledging China's stance on sovereignty over Taiwan:

The US side declared: The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves. (Wilson Center Digital Archive 1972)

The signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, a strategic decision by the United States based on its global and national interests at the time, carried profound implications for the KMT government and Taiwan, constraining Taiwan's future international status. As a result, US-China relations shifted from confrontation to rapprochement. By the end of 1978, the United States decided to normalize diplomatic relations with the PRC, severing ties with the ROC government and terminating the mutual defense treaty. Concurrently, the US Congress formulated the Taiwan Relations Act, providing a non-treaty-based, limited unilateral security commitment. The United States temporarily set aside its dispute over Taiwan's status with the PRC, and gradually developed an

engagement policy toward China, including market access. Notably, the end of US-China Cold War confrontations in East Asia preceded the end of the Cold War in Europe by over a decade. With China adopting the opening reform post-1978, the 1980s saw global supply chains expand, integrating China into the East Asia growth zone. In a significant development, Taiwanese businesses ventured into China en masse, playing a middleman role in establishing the foundation of China's processing-export industries and indirectly contributing to China's economic rise. The export economy became a major driver of China's economic growth; China's export economy, hence, became highly integrated with global capitalism, turning China into the world's factory.

China's economic rise endowed it with substantial foreign exchange and fiscal resources, enabling industrial upgrading and global expansion. These financial capabilities allowed China to modernize its defense forces. Consequently, from the 1990s, China began showcasing its military prowess, posing threats in the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and South China Sea.

China's Janus-Faced Strategy: Globalism and Irredentism

Seizing the chance to re-enter the capitalist system, China embarked on a globalist strategy with special political implications for Taiwan. This approach was part of Beijing's broader global project, but it also served to weave its irredentist goals into the fabric of its policies. Central to this strategy was prioritizing China's own development while staging a "peaceful unification" campaign against Taiwan. Beijing skillfully leveraged Taiwanese capital and businesses to further its economic ambitions, simultaneously crafting cross-strait political-business ties as a tool to subtly absorb Taiwan and sway its internal politics. Initially, this strategy seemed to be effective.

However, this globalist approach hit a snag with the consecutive military threats against Taiwan in 1995–1996, which stood in stark contradiction to the strategy's ethos. The situation was only defused by robust US intervention. Following the Taiwanese election of opposition leader Chen Shui-bian as president in 2000, the Chinese government ramped up pressure on Taiwan, oscillating between soft and hard tactics and ultimately leading to KMT-CCP cooperation in 2005. During this period, China's strategy toward Taiwan was still largely globalist in nature but increasingly supplemented by more assertive irredentist policies, exemplified by the enactment of the "Anti-Secession Law."

The tenure of KMT leader Ma Ying-jeou, beginning in 2008, marked the zenith of cross-strait cooperation, with more than twenty agreements inked. Yet, this period also saw China's influence start to seep into various facets of Taiwanese politics and society. A pivotal moment came in 2013 with the signing of the "Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement" with Beijing. Had it been implemented, this agreement could have paved the way for the deep infiltration of Chinese capital into Taiwan, potentially leading to a de facto common market across the strait. This prospect triggered the Sunflower Movement in 2014, throwing a wrench into the KMT-CCP cooperative framework.

After the DPP reclaimed power in 2016, China's response was swift and harsh, launching political offensives against Taiwan. This involved information warfare, cognitive warfare, and other forms of sharp power tactics. Beijing also tightened its grip on Taiwan's diplomatic space and escalated the threats of forceful unification. In this phase, Beijing's irredentist strategy increasingly took precedence over its globalist strategy, yet the latter was not entirely discarded.

The One-China Policy and the Genesis of the Status Quo

With the long geopolitical cycle starting in the early 1970s, the US-China rapprochement significantly impacted Taiwan's international standing, leading to the establishment of what is known today as the "status quo." The PRC's entry into the UN in 1971 was a pivotal moment, signaling China's growing influence and the resulting pressure on US support for Taiwan's KMT government. The 1972 Shanghai Communiqué was a critical turning point, laying the foundation for the US's contemporary "One-China Policy." This shift in US policy recognized the PRC as the legitimate representative of China, sidelining the ROC government in Taiwan. The significance of this shift went beyond diplomatic recognition, as it essentially determined Taiwan's international status without direct input from the ROC government or the Taiwanese people. The Shanghai Communiqué is therefore often seen as a historical compromise by the United States that acknowledged China's sovereignty claims and established the One-China Policy, while China used the opportunity to reinforce its One-China Principle.

The US's One-China Policy and China's One-China Principle are nevertheless distinct (Chong 2023). It is generally agreed that the One-China Policy centers on such premises as first, the recognition of

the PRC as the sole legal government of China; second, the acknowledgment but not acceptance of the Chinese position that Taiwan is a part of China; and third, the emphasis on peaceful resolution to cross-strait differences (Goldstein 2023). China's principle firmly asserts that "Taiwan is part of China," whereas the US policy does not endorse this view but states, "The United States Government does not challenge that position." This distinction, as expressed in the three communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act, and the "Six Assurances,"² formed the basis of the currently defined "status quo" in the Taiwan Strait. However, the concept of status quo as a routine term in US policy toward Taiwan emerged during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–1996.

In retrospect, the idea of "One-China" was first formulated in the Shanghai Communiqué, but the umbrella term of "One-China Policy" itself has been evolving and cumulative over the years. The term appeared in President George H. W. Bush's speech in 1992 when he approved a major arms sale to Taiwan by citing the three communiqués (Shanghai, Normalization, and August 17, 1982). It became more frequently used by senior US officials when dealing with the 1995–1996 crisis. During this period, the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) was not specified as a constituent of the US One-China Policy, but "our 'one China' policy is predicated on the PRC's pursuit of a peaceful resolution of issues between Taipei and Beijing," and "avoiding provocative actions or unilateral measures that would alter the status quo or pose a threat to peaceful resolution of outstanding issues" were emphasized (Department of State 1996). The TRA was added to the One-China Policy when President George W. Bush held a summit with Chinese leader Jiang Zeming in 2002. Bush reiterated it in 2003: "The United States Government's policy is one China, based upon the three communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act. We oppose any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo" (White House 2003). Notably, the TRA was not mentioned in the two joint statements with China during the Barack Obama administration in 2009 and 2011. The Six Assurances were included in the formulation of the One-China Policy during the years of the Donald Trump administration. Hence, in the National Defense Authorization for 2024, the TRA and the Six Assurances, together with the three communiqués, were noted as "the foundation for United States-Taiwan relations" (US Congress 2024).

Similarly, the notion of the status quo has been evolving, gaining prominence during the George W. Bush administration and converging with the term One-China Policy. In 2001, Senator John Kerry criticized Bush's remarks on defending Taiwan, suggesting a major shift in

policy and questioning its alignment with US and Taiwanese interests (Sanger 2001). Jacques deLisle described the status quo as “US-backed de-facto-but-not-de-jure independence,” aligning with US interests and reflecting Taiwanese consensus at the time for neither reunification nor formal independence (deLisle 2001).

In December 2003, President Bush, following talks with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, emphasized the US commitment to “one China,” opposing any unilateral change to the status quo, as noted above. This stance, reiterated in Bush’s meetings with Chinese President Hu Jintao and Vice Premier Wu Yi, underscored the US policy of maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, discouraging Beijing from using force and Taiwan from declaring independence (Mainland Affairs Council ROC 2006; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2007).

The concept of “strategic ambiguity” also played a significant role, as highlighted in Kerry’s critique of Bush. Initially, this policy meant the United States maintained an agnostic stance on Taiwan’s status, insisting on a peaceful, mutual resolution (Campbell and Mitchell 2001, 21). This approach echoed the Shanghai Communiqué’s stance. Andrew Nathan characterized it as “double deterrence” during the 1996 crisis, warning Taiwan against expecting US rescue and Beijing against assuming US non-involvement (Nathan 1996, 92). It was observed that changes in the Taiwan Strait situation could undermine the delicate balance and peace upheld by strategic ambiguity, potentially destabilizing the status quo in the region.

Taiwan as a Geopolitical Subject: Democratization as a Driver for Subjectivity

In the intricate tapestry of Indo-Pacific geopolitics, Taiwan emerges not merely as an object of US-China competition but as an entity with its own unique agency. This small yet resilient island nation has, over the decades stretching from the 1970s to the 2010s, embodied its remarkable subjectivity, particularly through its journey of democratization. This transformative process has not only reshaped Taiwan’s national identity but has also redefined its role on the global stage, transcending its previously marginalized international status and establishing it as a modern democratic state.

Democratization and New National Identity

The US-China détente, symbolized by the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, found Taiwan under Chiang Kai-shek's authoritarian grip, its society tightly controlled under martial law, bereft of democratic freedoms. The Taiwanese people's ability to express their political identity was stifled, and their primordial Taiwanese identity was suppressed, only occasionally surfacing in isolated protests calling for independence.

This geopolitical shift exerted immense pressure on the KMT government, compelling it to balance a complex web of relationships with both the United States and China. Taiwan's domestic politics was equally in flux, with the economic challenges of the 1970s and the rising democratic movement culminating in significant incidents like the Chungli (1977) and Kaohsiung (1979) incidents. Despite these tumultuous times, marked by harsh crackdowns and the ensuing "Second White Terror," the winds of change were unstoppable. In 1986, the establishment of the DPP broke through decades of martial law, signaling a new era of political openness. Chiang Ching-kuo's subsequent liberalization policies, including lifting the party and press bans and ending martial law in 1987, further catalyzed this transformation. That same year, a thaw in cross-strait relations began, symbolized by policies allowing veterans to return to China, thus opening the door for Taiwanese entrepreneurs to invest in the coastal regions of southern China.

The 1990s marked a significant acceleration in Taiwan's democratization, with the 1996 presidential elections serving as a critical juncture. China's military posturing backfired spectacularly, bolstering support for the incumbent KMT candidate, Lee Teng-hui. Though originally appointed by Chiang Ching-Kuo as his successor, Lee was a native Taiwanese with a pro-Taiwan platform, enjoying high popularity. He won by a landslide in a four-way race. This period saw the rise of a distinct Taiwanese identity, rapidly overshadowing any semblance of a Chinese identity.

During its pursuit of political power, the DPP faced two primary challenges. It needed to demonstrate governance competence while dispelling fears of an extreme pro-independence stance. Moreover, the party had to navigate its position toward the ROC regime: acceptance or rejection? The DPP's recalibration of its independence narrative culminated in the pivotal "Resolution on Taiwan's Future" in 1999, stating:

The Democratic Progressive Party and the entire people have struggled hard for years to force the KMT to abolish martial law and one-party dictatorship and accept democratic reforms. The political reform projects, such as the 1992 general re-election of the Legislative Yuan, the 1996 direct election of the president, and the amendment of the Constitution and abolition of the province-level government, have realized the establishment of Taiwan as a democratic and independent country. . . . Taiwan does not belong to the People's Republic of China. The "One-China Principle" and "One Country, Two Systems" unilaterally advocated by China do not apply to Taiwan. . . . Although constitutionally known as the Republic of China, Taiwan is not subordinate to the People's Republic of China. Any change in the status quo of independence must be decided by a referendum of all residents of Taiwan. (Democratic Progressive Party 1999)

This groundbreaking resolution not only rejected the "One-China Principle" and "One Country, Two Systems" framework but also refrained from declaring a "Republic of Taiwan," suggesting that Taiwan's existing democratic status rendered such a declaration superfluous. This nuanced approach might have been designed to avoid provoking Beijing and could be interpreted as the DPP's tacit acceptance of the ROC regime, a significant departure from its earlier stance.

Despite internal divisions, this pragmatic shift set the tone for the DPP's approach toward the ROC post-2016, as echoed by President Tsai Ing-wen in her Double Tenth Day speech in 2021 (see above). The resolution marked the end of the DPP's campaign against the émigré regime, recognizing the ROC as representative of Taiwan while affirming the Taiwanese people's right to self-determination.

Retrospectively, the DPP's view of Taiwan as an independent state differed from the US government's perspective but did not adversely affect Taiwan-US relations. Since the DPP's electoral victory in 2000, Taiwan has witnessed three peaceful transitions of power, signaling the maturation of its democratic system. This era, spanning from the legitimacy crisis of the KMT in the 1970s to the consolidation of democracy in the 2010s, represents an extraordinary historical arc characterized by phases of limited liberalization, suppression, democratization, and eventual democratic consolidation.

The Shifting Meaning of Taiwan Independence under the China Threat

As democratization took root and Taiwanese national identity became mainstream, the connotation of Taiwanese independence (Taidu)

evolved. Initially, Taidu held a dual meaning: externally, it signified resistance to annexation by China; internally, it represented a rejection of the KMT émigré regime. During the Cold War, the perceived threat from China was filtered through the KMT's anti-Communist discourse, with the KMT utilizing the Communist threat as a pretext for its authoritarian rule.

The reconstitution of Taidu unfolded as Taiwan re-engaged with China in the late 1980s, intensifying Taiwanese consciousness in the face of Beijing's escalating sovereignty claims. The younger generation, increasingly identifying with Taiwanese identity and Taidu, became the driving force behind this transformation. This shift not only consolidated democracy but redefined independence as freedom from authoritarian Chinese control, especially as the ROC regime underwent indigenization.

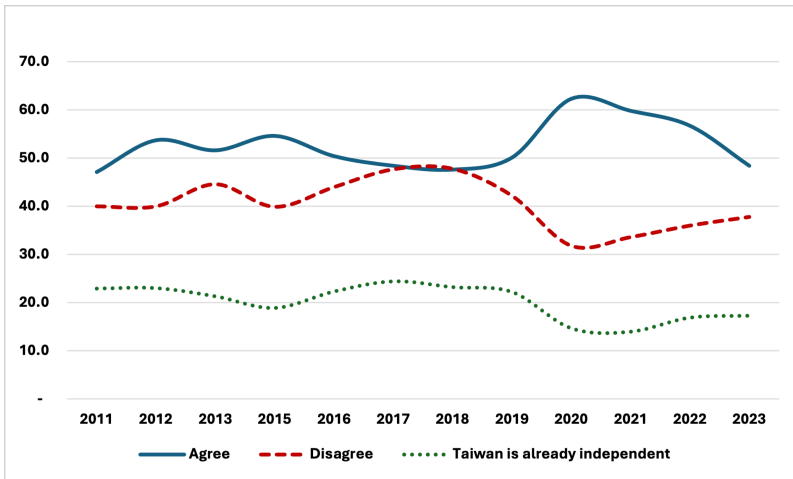
Public opinion surveys reveal that the primary obstacle to Taiwan's independence is China's military intimidation. In the absence of this threat, most Taiwanese would likely support independence (see Figure 1). The evolving national consciousness has led the majority of Taiwanese to perceive Taiwan and China as distinct political entities, with a preference for maintaining this separation even in the event of China's democratization (see Figure 2).

In this critical era, Taiwan's journey toward democratization and the emergence of a new national identity reflects its unique geopolitical positioning and evolving relationship with the global powers of the United States and China. The island's trajectory has been shaped by internal dynamics and external pressures, creating a multifaceted narrative of national development and identity formation.

US-China Grand Game Impacting the Status Quo

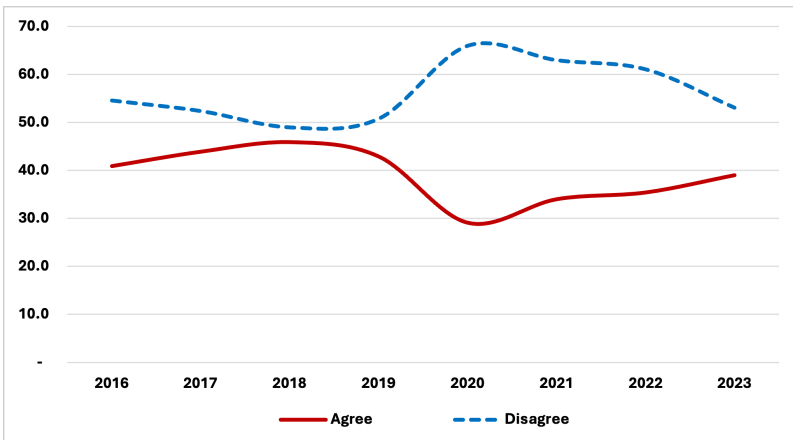
Commencing in 2008, China's recognition of its economic rise spurred an ambitious drive to overtake the United States. This included a forceful push for industrial advancement, swift acquisition of raw materials and strategic positions, and the launch of key initiatives like "Made in China 2025," the Semiconductor Big-Fund, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This era marked a burgeoning clash of interests between Chinese capital and that of the United States and the West (Hung 2022). China's actions, including its crackdown on Uyghur "separatists" in Xinjiang, labeled as genocide, military expansion in the Western Pacific,

Figure 1. "Some people say, 'If declaring independence won't lead to war, then Taiwan should declare independence.' Do you agree with this statement?" (%)



Source: The China Impact Studies Group (CIS) surveys at the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, various years.

Figure 2. "If mainland China becomes a democratic country, then the two sides (mainland China and Taiwan) should unify.' Do you agree with this statement?" (%)



Source: CIS surveys, various years.

Xi Jinping's amendments of the PRC Constitution for potential lifelong rule, and ambitions toward Taiwan, catalyzed a profound transformation in US-China relations since the 2010s. The strategic trust the United States held in China dwindled significantly by the end of the Obama era. In late 2017, President Trump's National Security Strategy report redefined the US-China relationship as competitive. He criticized the prior engagement policy, and hence embarked on a trade and technological confrontation with China, ushering in an era of heightened bilateral tensions.

US-China Dynamics in the Taiwan Strait

The relationship between Taiwan and China, inherently contentious, is further complicated by the US-China rivalry. The United States has implemented high-tech export controls against China, with semiconductor products being particularly significant for Taiwan. These controls use extraterritorial jurisdiction to enforce compliance among allies and partners. As a key US partner, Taiwan has been compelled to impose stricter regulations on China. China has countered with strategies like high-tech sector talent poaching and illicit investments in Taiwan. These developments exacerbate the already strained cross-strait relations. The tension originates from the US-China competition, yet paradoxically, as many American scholars argue, the United States also urges Taiwan to maintain restraint and initiate dialogue with China. This paradox places Taiwan in a difficult position, struggling to navigate between these conflicting pressures.

These two mutually-skeptical superpowers emerged as the primary drivers of geopolitical shifts in the Indo-Pacific. The United States has been recalibrating its military deployment in the region, enhancing alliances, and expediting the delivery of high-performance weapons to Taiwan. The routine incursions of Chinese military aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), their crossing of the Taiwan Strait's Median Line, and the launching of large-scale military drills encircling the island following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's 2022 visit exemplify this tension. Pelosi was the first such high-ranking official to visit Taiwan in decades. In a more measured response, the United States regularly transits warships through the Taiwan Strait and publicly announces these operations.

The erosion of stability in the Taiwan Strait by the Chinese People's Liberation Army is an evolving reality, yet perceptions vary markedly

among stakeholders. The United States reiterates its steadfast One-China policy, purporting it to be conducive to stabilizing Taiwan Strait relations. Conversely, Beijing perceives a subtle shift in US policy, evidenced by (1) Explicit security assurances to Taiwan as iterated by President Biden, diverging from the US's historical strategic ambiguity. Thus far, Biden has on five occasions expressed willingness to defend Taiwan in case of Chinese aggression. (2) Support for Taiwan's military enhancement and expediting arms shipments to Taiwan. In April 2024, the US House of Representatives approved a joint aid bill that included military financing funds for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. (3) Recent statements by US officials on UN Resolution 2758, stating that it did not determine the status of Taiwan (Drun and Glaser 2022), challenging China's One-China Principle. This new US posture can be interpreted as a rebuttal of the PRC's sovereignty claim over Taiwan. (4) The increased frequency of high-level US visits to Taiwan. Besides Pelosi, US cabinet-level officials and congressional leaders have visited Taiwan more frequently (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2022; Xie 2023).

Supporting Taiwan's defense is viewed by the United States as a defense against revisionism aimed at maintaining the status quo rather than endorsing Taiwan's progression toward formal independence. Scholars suggest that while deterring China, the United States should also offer reassurances, such as maintaining prospects for the Chinese goal of peaceful reunification (Mastro 2023). Proposals have been made to suspend the independence clause in the DPP's charter (Glaser, Chen Weiss, and Christensen 2023). However, as previously analyzed, the independence clause was effectively frozen by a DPP resolution in 1999.

China Staging Cognitive Warfare Against Taiwan

China, traditionally hesitant to engage in dialogue with the DPP due to its advocacy for democracy and indigenous rights, experienced further strained relations after the DPP regained power in 2016. Following the DPP's rejection of the "1992 Consensus"—interpreted by China as the One-China Principle with no allowance for the ROC within this framework—Beijing responded by exerting economic and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan. This included measures such as suspending tourist groups from China and stripping Taiwan of several of its few diplomatic recognitions. The intensifying US-China rivalry further exacerbated the deteriorating relations between Taiwan and China.

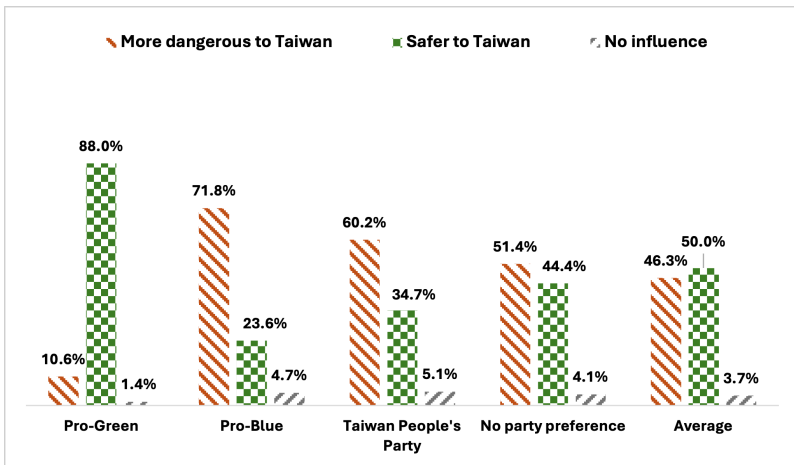
Besides the well-known economic absorption and boycott, military threats, and grey-zone operations, China's information and cognitive warfare against Taiwan have become routine. The 2018 "Kansai Airport Incident," originating from fake news about Taiwanese diplomats' incompetence compared to the super-efficient Chinese "wolf warriors," fabricated by a Chinese troll farm—an organized operation that spreads disinformation, propaganda, or inflammatory content on social media platforms to manipulate public opinion—led to the suicide of a Taiwanese diplomat in Japan and a political crisis. This incident exemplifies a typical Chinese influence operation aimed at Taiwan, utilizing tactics often characterized as "sharp power" to assert influence and manipulate public perception (Chiang and Wu 2021). During the COVID pandemic, the "Vaccine Chaos" bore traces of Chinese troll farm manipulations and media collaborators in Taiwan (IORG 2021). Amid a major outbreak and vaccine shortage in Taiwan in 2021, Japan and the United States airlifted large quantities of vaccines, highlighting the geopolitical competition between major powers. The "Egg Shortage Crisis" in the 2023 election year caused significant damage to the DPP government (IORG 2022).

During the January 2024 national elections (presidential and legislative), signs of China's interference in Taiwan's elections included tax investigations and land use inquiries targeting Foxconn (the primary supplier of Apple products) in China, strong discouragement of its founder, Terry Gou, from running for office (Lee and Blanchard 2023), the funding of candidates (Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau 2024), and the initiation of cognitive warfare. Central to China's cognitive strategy is the undermining of the DPP government's efficacy and legitimacy. This strategy recently pivoted toward promoting the "Doubt America Theory" (Yimeilun), which refers to skepticism or mistrust toward the United States, particularly in relation to its strategic intentions toward Taiwan. This skepticism gained momentum after the US military's exit from Afghanistan, was further fueled by the Ukraine conflict, and was intensified by incidents such as Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.

Historically, skepticism about US commitment to Taiwan dates back to the 1950s, a sentiment exploited by both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong for their respective political agendas. The notion of the United States "abandoning Taiwan" has been a persistent theme in cross-strait discourse. Due to Taiwan's highly polarized political opinion, the impact of the Doubt America Theory varies among different party supporters. Most pro-Green voters, who support the DPP and parties with similar values, believe that close US-Taiwan relations enhance

security. Conversely, pro-Blue voters, who back the KMT and parties with similar ideologies, are highly skeptical of the United States; Taiwan People’s Party supporters and non-partisans are in between, though their skepticism is above average, as shown in Figure 3. The theory evidently has little effect on pro-Green voters; it significantly influences pro-Blue voters, who are already the base supporters of the pro-Blue camp, and the main impact is on the centrist voters and Taiwan People’s Party supporters. According to our polls, the Doubt America Theory indeed influences the decisions of some voters. This effect may stem from fears of war and the belief that Taiwan’s closeness to the United States provokes negative reactions from China, leading them to oppose the DPP’s pro-America stance.

Figure 3. “In recent years, Taiwan’s relationship with the United States has become increasingly close. Do you think this makes Taiwan safer, or does it actually pose more danger?”



Source: CIS surveys, October 2023.

Taiwan’s Shifting Outlook: The Future of Preserving the Status Quo

In the rapidly evolving geopolitical climate, the perspectives of the Taiwanese people toward China and the cross-strait relationship have

undergone significant transformations. The alteration in their stance on maintaining the status quo is particularly noteworthy. Traditionally, opinions on the independence-unification spectrum were divided into three categories: unification, independence, and preserving the status quo. This distribution had been relatively stable for years, with the majority leaning toward maintaining the status quo, a smaller fraction favoring independence, and an even smaller group advocating unification, as depicted in Figure 4. The Taiwanese people seem highly risk-averse, mostly choosing the “status quo” for the present, as this conforms to the image of the “economic animal.”

However, recent developments have brought a shift in this paradigm. When we delved deeper into what respondents meant by “maintaining the status quo,” we uncovered a more complex picture. This exploration into the next envisioned step—unification, independence, or a perpetual status quo—revealed a changing pattern. While the status quo remained a popular choice, its dominance waned, as shown in Figure 5. The gap between maintaining the status quo and opting for independence narrowed significantly. In the landmark year of 2020, marked by the DPP’s overwhelming victory in the presidential election, those favoring independence (49.3 percent) surpassed those preferring to maintain the status quo (41.8 percent). This change was most pronounced among the younger generation (aged 18–34), where support for independence peaked at 68.2 percent. This dramatic shift can be traced back to the influence of the Anti-China civic movement, which gained momentum with the 2014 Sunflower Movement.

In an attempt to gauge future outlooks, we posed a new question: “What do you think is the most likely outcome for future cross-strait relations?” The responses, as illustrated in Figure 6, were remarkable. A minority now sees preserving the status quo as a viable outcome, with unification and independence emerging as more prevalent options. The preference for independence reached its zenith in 2020, and though it has since decreased, it still overshadows the likelihood of unification. As of 2023, 29.8 percent of respondents envisioned eventual annexation (unification) with China, 34.0 percent foresaw independence, and only 21.3 percent believed in the continuation of the status quo. These findings necessitate a reevaluation of the concept of maintaining the status quo.

The time horizon matters. The Taiwanese have come to perceive the status quo in the Taiwan Strait as a transient choice rather than a permanent solution. This shift in perspective began to manifest itself significantly between 2019 and 2020. Events such as China’s crackdown on

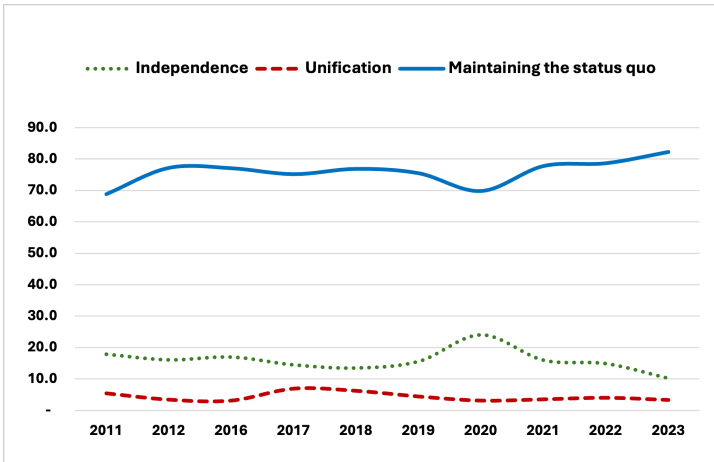
Hong Kong and the implementation of the National Security Law laid bare its unreliability and the failure of its “One country, Two systems” promise. These developments, predating Pelosi’s 2022 visit to Taiwan, signaled a growing disillusionment with the status quo as a viable future option.

This evolving sentiment may indicate a growing impatience with the status quo, nudging people toward more definitive stances of either independence or unification. My analysis of these trends suggests that China’s assertive policies and the subsequent crisis in the Taiwan Strait have galvanized a significant portion of the Taiwanese population toward a firm defense of democracy and autonomy. Meanwhile, a smaller yet notable segment appears to either favor unification with the mainland or is resigned to the possibility of annexation. This divergence in opinion highlights the unsustainability of the status quo.

Taiwanese society is acutely aware that the so-called status quo cannot endure indefinitely. While it remains the preferred choice for the majority in the foreseeable future, a day of reckoning in cross-strait relations seems inevitable. The public’s understanding of the status quo, as inferred from our survey, aligns more closely with the United States’ stance of neither unification nor *de jure* independence, rather than the DPP government’s portrayal of the status quo as the sovereign independence of the Republic of China (Taiwan). If the latter were the case, most respondents would have likely chosen to maintain the status quo in response to the third question (“What do you think is the most likely outcome for the future cross-strait relations?”). This alternatively suggests a belief that the Taiwan formula may be untenable in the long term.

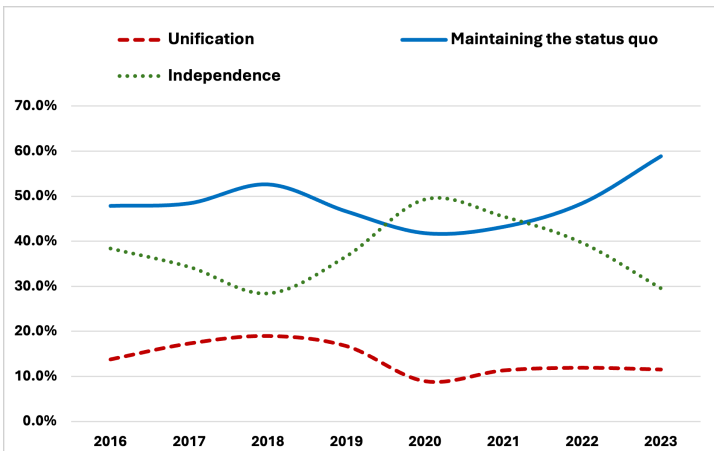
These shifts in public opinion are undoubtedly alarming for China. If the current trajectory persists, Beijing is aware that time is not in its favor. The long-anticipated “peaceful unification” appears increasingly elusive, prompting Xi Jinping’s declaration that unification across the strait cannot be indefinitely postponed—a clear departure from the patient approach of previous Chinese leaders. Xi’s irredentist policy has evidently overridden the Deng Xiaoping generation’s globalist approach.

Figure 4. "Which view do you personally favor more: (a) Taiwanese independence as soon as possible, (b) unification with Mainland China as soon as possible, or (c) maintaining the status quo?"



Source: CIS surveys, various years.

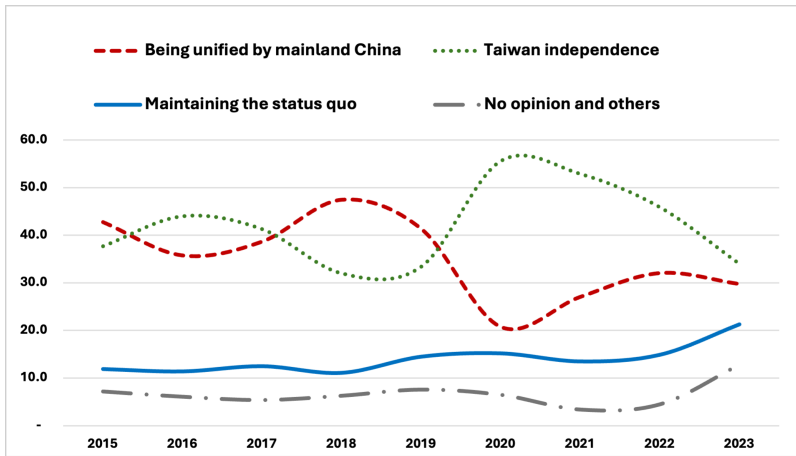
Figure 5. Unification, independence, maintaining the status quo: A Combination of two questions*



Note: * This figure presents the results by combining two questions: (1) "Which view do you personally favor more: (a) Taiwanese independence as soon as possible, (b) unification with Mainland China as soon as possible, or (c) maintaining the status quo?" (2) "What do you mean by maintaining the status quo?" Four options: (a) Maintain the status quo for now, move towards independence later; (b) Maintain the status quo for now, aim for unification with the mainland later; (c) Permanently maintain the status quo; (d) Maintain the status quo for now, decide based on future circumstances.

Source: CIS surveys, various years.

Figure 6. "What do you think is the most likely outcome for the future cross-strait relations?"



Source: CIS surveys, various years.

Conclusion

This study explores Taiwan as a contested state in its post-World War II dynamic interaction with the United States and China. Initially, the ROC, an émigré regime in Taiwan, enjoyed full-sovereign status in the UN, strongly supported by the United States. However, after the ROC was expelled from the UN and the United States adopted a conciliatory policy toward China, Taiwan gradually lost its diplomatic allies and became a contested state. Despite this, Taiwan’s spectacular performance as a “self-governing democracy” in recent decades has earned worldwide acclaim, though not diplomatic recognition. Situated in the core zone of the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan has used informal means to bolster international support, including a limited, non-treaty security guarantee from the United States and recent advances in international parliamentary diplomacy.

The second key point addresses the erosion of the status quo due to changing circumstances in the region. The so-called status quo, previously dependent on US-China cooperation and several other factors, is now constantly contested. The original context of the United States’ One-China policy, as outlined in the Shanghai Communiqué, has evolved as well. The communiqué’s view of Taiwan as part of China

now conflicts with the democratic principles and the evolving national identity of Taiwanese society, as indicated by the survey data presented above. The notion of “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait,” presupposed in the Shanghai Communiqué, has historical roots dating back to the beginning of Kuomintang rule during the Cold War. This presupposition contradicts the general principle of the right to self-determination. Since democratization, Taiwanese identity has become mainstream, with the majority no longer identifying as “Chinese.” The discrepancy increasingly challenges the US stance on maintaining the status quo, which is predicated on the Shanghai Communiqué. Essentially, the status quo is being eroded by pressures from China’s rising irredentism with military measures (as opposed to the US insistence on peaceful resolution), US-China rivalry, and the strengthening of Taiwanese democracy and identity.

Taiwan, striving to maintain autonomy and security, faces the challenge of balancing engagement with the United States while avoiding provocation toward China. The intensifying US-China rivalry complicates this, exemplifying a security dilemma as conceptualized by Jervis (1978) and Glaser (1997). Taiwan’s situation reflects regional reactions to China’s actions, influenced by efforts to prevent Taiwan’s separation (Christensen 1999) and concerns over China’s potentially revisionist economic and military expansion (Liff and Ikenberry 2014).

China’s aggressive policy and the United States’ strategy to preserve the status quo pose a serious challenge to Taiwan’s future political survival. Taiwan’s geopolitical identity, which combines the vulnerabilities of a small state with the assertiveness of a middle power, represents a unique intersection of historical legacies and contemporary realities. This makes Taiwan a dynamic case study for comparative analysis and theoretical innovation.

In the final analysis, international systemic factors alone, such as great power competition, cannot fully explain how the “status quo” over Taiwan has transformed. While the great powers have impacted the original equilibrium in the structure of geopolitical stability, Taiwan, as a relatively small power, enjoys a certain degree of autonomy in deciding its foreign behavior by defining its own version of the “status quo” amid the democratic process. This autonomy is evidenced by Taiwan’s emerging strength in the global economy, as well as the transformation of public opinion regarding its relationship with the neighboring great power (the PRC) and Taiwanese self-understanding of a new national identity. In this way, the agency of the small power has influenced how the great powers treat it. Therefore, in explaining the dynamics of the

grand game between the United States and China, the Taiwan experience poses a clear theoretical challenge to the conventional “great power–small state” paradigm.

Notes

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

The author would like to thank the CIS colleagues at Academia Sinica; Lin Cheng-yu and Kuo Ching-huan for their research assistance; as well as Brian Fong, Kuo Ming-sung, and anonymous referees for their helpful revision suggestions.

1. I use the statistical findings from the telephone polls conducted by China Impact Studies group (CIS) at the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, spanning from 2011 to 2023.

2. While the American Reagan administration signed the “August 17th Communiqué” with China in 1982, the assurance given to Taiwan was focused on continuing to provide weapons to Taiwan, and it promised not to pressure Taiwan into negotiations with China (American Institute in Taiwan 1982).

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