

The Big Read **Taiwan**

Taiwan's deepening political divide over the US and China



While Tsai Ing-wen is visiting the US, her predecessor has been in China as the country's two main parties debate which superpower to side with

Kathrin Hille in Belmopan, Belize 10 HOURS AGO

Over the course of a long foreign trip that has seen her visit the US twice, Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen has delivered a consistent and blunt message. In the face of Chinese threats to annex the country, Taiwan needs to have the US at its back.

“Taiwan stands on the front lines of democracy,” she said last week in New York. “We will work hand in hand with our democratic partners.” She will drive home this point when she meets US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and 17 other members of Congress on Wednesday in California.

But while she has been rallying support from the US, her predecessor Ma Ying-jeou has been pushing a very different agenda. Ma, from the opposition Kuomintang, or KMT, [is currently touring China](#) — the first former president of Taiwan to ever make such a trip.

The symbolism of his China visit has been striking — and a stark contrast to Tsai’s travels. In strong echoes of the rhetoric used by Chinese leader Xi Jinping, Ma invoked China’s past humiliation at the hands of foreign invaders at a visit last week to the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China which toppled the last emperor in 1911.

Speaking about a delegation of young people accompanying him, Ma said they would “struggle peacefully for the revitalisation of China and sincerely hope that the two sides of the Strait will make joint efforts to pursue peace and prevent war”. He added: “This is the common responsibility of Chinese on both sides of the Strait.”

The duelling trips suggest that the question of where [Taiwan](#) belongs in the world might be coming to a crunch point amid the ever-sharper antagonism between China and the US.





Ma Ying-jeou at the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing, China, where the ex-Taiwan president has described the Taiwanese people as members of a big Chinese family © CNS/AFP/Getty Images

Targeted by rivalling empires for centuries but only ever sitting on the edges of any of them, Taiwan has experienced arguably the most peaceful period in its history over the past 30 years. It has been transformed from an authoritarian regime under the KMT into a vibrant democracy and gained a distinctive national identity, while also benefiting from the growth of the huge Chinese market on its doorstep — a combination that allowed it to straddle both the then-sole superpower, the US, and a rising China.

But the illusion that Taiwan could have it both ways is over. Xi has made clear he wants to see the Chinese Communist party's longstanding claim on Taiwan resolved in his lifetime. Watching Russia attack Ukraine last year has forced Taiwan's government and its people to acknowledge that they face an acute threat. When Nancy Pelosi, then US House Speaker, visited Taipei last summer, Beijing used unprecedented military manoeuvres around the island to make sure that the message got across.

With Beijing openly challenging the world order Washington built and the US embarking on an all-out campaign to contain its new rival, Taiwan is caught in the middle. As US generals warn that China could attack Taiwan within years, Washington is pushing Taipei to rapidly strengthen its defences. Meanwhile, American efforts to exclude Chinese technology are forcing Taiwanese companies to unravel the China-centred global supply chain networks built by companies like iPhone manufacturer Foxconn.

Tsai and Ma are in agreement about the existential danger their country faces. But Tsai's Democratic Progressive party and the KMT have radically different views on how to deal with the problem.

The president argues that Taiwan must fortify itself. As long as the country was determined to resist and defend its freedom, “we know others will support us”, she said at an event in New York last week hosted by the Hudson Institute, a conservative think-tank. Over the past year, her national security team has been scrambling to speed up arms procurement and enhance military training, both with help from the US.



Tsai Ing-wen visits soldiers in Chiayi. During her US visit, Taiwan's president said it was 'unfortunate' to live next to an authoritarian country 'because they might invade you' © Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters

According to participants at the Hudson event, she told the audience with her trademark dry humour that Taiwan was “unfortunate” to live next to an authoritarian country “because they might invade you”.

The opposition, however, believes that Taiwan must avert the risk of war by reassuring Beijing that Taiwan’s separation from China is not irreversible and that there may still be a chance for unification. Ma is spending 12 days meeting Chinese officials, including the head of Beijing’s office for dealing with Taiwan matters and various provincial chiefs. He has used multiple public appearances to describe the Taiwanese people as members of a big Chinese family and to invoke sentimental ties to China.

The contrasting visits point to how Taiwan’s two main parties will try to win next

January's presidential and legislative elections: The DPP is likely to cast themselves as defenders of the nation, while the KMT is likely to portray the incumbents as a war risk.

According to people close to Tsai, whose second and final term in office will end in May next year, evaluating and countering the security challenges posed by China has become almost the single focus of her daily work and now takes up almost all of her time.

"This may be her last Hurrah," says Patrick Cronin, Asia-Pacific security chair at the Hudson Institute.

Geopolitical sparring

External powers have vied for Taiwan for centuries. The Dutch first colonised part of the island in the early 17th century, followed by Spain setting up an outpost. Chinese-Japanese pirate general Koxinga expelled the Dutch and installed his own kingdom before eventually China's Qing dynasty defeated him in 1684 and installed a governor. In turn, the Qing ceded the island to Japan in 1895. The KMT took over in 1945 but lost the mainland only four years later following its defeat in the Chinese civil war.

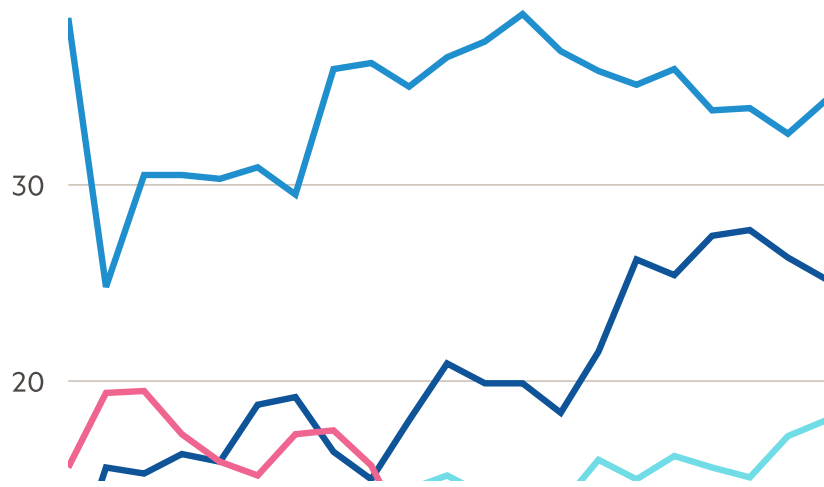
The country is now a central part of the growing geopolitical sparring between Washington and Beijing. "Look at where Taiwan sits, right in the middle of the First Island Chain — how do you support Japan and the Philippines if Taiwan is gone?" says Chip Gregson, a former US assistant defence secretary and former commander of US Marine Corps forces in the Pacific.

Some observers argue that due to Taiwan's dominant role in global chip production and other electronics manufacturing and its rich reservoir of related talent and intellectual property, the island falling into Beijing's hands could also change the course of the US's tech contest in China's favour. "It could well decide the competition between the US and China," says Gregson.

Changing Taiwanese views on China and independence

Position of surveyed public (%)

40



As a result, the KMT's new overtures to China are being watched very closely in Washington.

Given Tsai's landslide re-election in 2020, it might seem hard at first glance to see how rapprochement with Beijing could ever be a winning strategy for the opposition. Tsai won with the biggest margin ever in a Taiwan presidential election in a vote seen as a clear rejection of China's demand that Taiwan acquiesce to unification and shock over the fate of Hong Kong.

China can use high-intensity psychological warfare: For example, what if suddenly transactions on our stock market could not be completed anymore

The public has long shown overwhelming opposition to unification and an increasingly strong Taiwanese, rather than Chinese, identity. Only 1.2 per cent are in favour of unification as soon as possible, while another 6 per cent prefer the status quo now and moving towards unification at an unspecified future date, according to the latest instalment in a long-running poll by National Chengchi University.

Meanwhile, 60.8 per cent identify as

Taiwanese only, almost double the ratio who see themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese. Only 2.7 per cent define themselves as Chinese only.

However, Taiwan identity politics may be much less entrenched than such figures might suggest. The Chengchi University polling data “indicates that identity fluctuates considerably”, notes James Lee, an assistant research fellow at Academia Sinica in Taipei.

Taiwanese identity rose sharply and dual Chinese-Taiwanese identity declined sharply between 2018 and 2020, in what analysts believe reflected Beijing’s crackdown on Hong Kong and more hardline rhetoric on Taiwan from Xi. But that trend has since reversed. “This suggests that identity is in flux and exhibits considerable responsiveness to developments in cross-Strait and international politics,” Lee says.



The US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi with Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei. Beijing showed its dissatisfaction with Pelosi's trip to Taiwan last year by staging military manoeuvres around the island © Taiwan Presidential Office/Handout/Reuters

Data from a recent Academia Sinica study which Lee co-authored suggests that the public perceives an increase in the threat from Beijing, but that this has not had a big impact on national identity or preferences regarding independence or unification.

However, growing tensions between the US and China and Beijing’s heightened military activity around Taiwan appear to make many Taiwanese more ambivalent

towards Washington. Although 60 per cent of Taiwanese believe that high-level visits from US officials increase the likelihood that the US would send troops to help defend Taiwan against a future attack from China, according to the Academia Sinica survey, 42 per cent want US-Taiwan relations to continue on the same level as they are now, and only 39 per cent are in favour of pursuing closer ties.

“That indicates that the public has mixed feelings about more of these visits,” says Lee. Only 33 per cent of respondents said they view the US as credible, while more than 56 per cent say it is not — a result which injects at least some doubt over Taiwan’s inclination to count on the US at a time of high tension.

Even some in the DPP argue that Taiwan needs more exchanges with China to understand its neighbour better and reduce risks through dialogue. “We have such a solid Taiwan identity now, we should be confident enough to engage in some exchanges,” says Hong Chi-chang, a founding member of the DPP and a good friend of vice-president Lai Ching-te, the likely DPP nominee to run to succeed Tsai.

Hong believes that the dynamics driving next year’s election could be very different from 2020 due to a slowing economy and unprecedented Chinese threats and manipulation.

Chinese attempts to warn Taiwanese off choosing candidates Beijing dislikes have backfired in the past. But Taiwanese politicians and experts say there is no precedent for the kind of interference tactics China might apply in the future. “China can use high-intensity psychological warfare: For example, what if suddenly transactions on our stock market could not be completed anymore because of an information warfare attack?” says Hong. “How would our voters react? This scenario has never been tested.”





Protesters in New York hold Chinese flags during Tsai Ing-wen's visit, where she told an audience that 'Taiwan stands on the front lines of democracy' © Timothy A Clary/AFP/Getty Images

Exploiting fissures

While analysts in Taiwan and the US do not believe Taiwanese would voluntarily side with China, they point to the existing faultlines in Taiwanese society that the CCP could try to exploit.

When the KMT government fled to Taiwan after being overthrown in the Communist revolution in China, it transferred the Republic of China, the state it had founded in 1911, and forced a Chinese nationalist ideology upon a population that had lived under Japanese rule for the previous 50 years.

The US constantly pushes for containment of China, and they engage in military aggression against China, sailing their ships and flying their aircraft around here all the time

However, its authoritarian rule laid the seed for a drive to self-determination among the existing population of Taiwan and helped to drive a wedge between them and the newcomers from China.

Although most of the descendants of the so-called mainlanders have as little desire to become a part of China as their Taiwanese brethren, they are more likely to embrace a broader Chinese identity. During elections, economic downturns or other kinds of social tension, this group can be mobilised with

promises of economic benefits from closer ties with China or accusations of warmongering against the DPP or the US.

Asked whether he is worried about rising tension with China, Chris Chiang, a technology entrepreneur in Taipei with a mainlander background, blames the problem on Washington. "The US constantly pushes for containment of China, and they engage in military aggression against China, sailing their ships and flying their aircraft around here all the time," he says.



People look out over Taipei. Analysts in Taiwan and the US have pointed to the existing faultlines in Taiwanese society that China could try to exploit © Alberto Buzzola/LightRocket/Getty Images

Tsai is keenly aware of the risks such undercurrents in Taiwan's society hold. In her Hudson Institute speech last week, she observed that Ukraine was divided on what kind of relationship with Russia the country should pursue. She added that Taiwan was divided too, and had not come to a conclusion whether it wants a relationship with China or prefers to be on its own.

Beijing has an elaborate toolkit to exploit such fissures. "It will be a mixture of soft and hard," says a senior Taiwanese government official.

On the soft side, the CCP has begun re-engaging with the KMT. It had largely given up on the party as a channel for pursuing unification after Ma's policies for closer cross-strait ties triggered a protest movement and led to a collapse in public support for the KMT.

Despite the extraordinary nature of his China visit, Ma was given only a low-key reception at the airport in Shanghai which featured just a deputy director of the Taiwan Affairs Office — a level suited to greeting provincial leaders in China — and no red carpet. Taiwanese journalists covering his tour were instructed by Chinese officials to not address their former head of state as "president", and even Ma himself studiously avoided mentioning the word.

But his CCP hosts used symbolic gestures similar to when it first engaged with senior KMT leaders more than a decade ago. On Monday, Yuan Jiajun, party secretary of the western Chinese municipality of Chongqing and a member of the CCP Central Committee, surprised Ma with a gift of historic photos of his parents, who met each other in Chongqing as students, which government officials had made a big effort to dig up in official archives, according to Ma's office. The former president's office said he was "very moved" and told Yuan that "as long as the two sides have common memories and goodwill, nothing is impossible".



Taiwanese soldiers practice assaulting a building. As US generals warn that China could attack Taiwan within years, Washington is pushing Taipei to rapidly strengthen its defences © Ceng Shou Yi/NurPhoto/Reuters

Andrew Hsia, a KMT deputy chair, says Wang Huning, Beijing's top official on Taiwan policy, second only to Xi, displayed an open, flexible and friendly attitude when he met him twice last August and this January. Right after Hsia's latest trip, the Chinese government lifted import restrictions on some Taiwanese agricultural products it had imposed in retaliation against the Pelosi visit, in a not-too-subtle hint that political compromises could be rewarded with economic benefits.

Chao Chun-shan, a China scholar who has advised four successive Taiwanese presidents on cross-Strait relations, predicts that Beijing will massively step up such tactics right after the elections.

“They will put us on a fast track to unification,” he says. “If the KMT wins, that will be done with carrots, to encourage us to start political negotiations, but if the DPP wins, it will be done with an even heavier use of the military to threaten Taiwan.”

Either way, Taiwan knows it cannot escape the shadow of its imposing neighbour.

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