

Opinion **Global Insight**

China has a point about Taiwan's new leader

Lai Ching-te's language on sovereignty has already strayed from the path taken by his more cautious predecessor

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Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te, left, vice-president Hsiao Bi-khim, centre, and former President Tsai Ing-wen during the inauguration ceremony at the Presidential Office Building in Taipei © Taipei News Photographer Association/AFP/Getty Images

Kathrin Hille in Taipei 3 HOURS AGO

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The Chinese Communist party was never going to trust Lai Ching-te. Taiwan's new president has long viewed his homeland as an independent country — a stance irreconcilable with Beijing's insistence that the island is part of China and must come under its control sooner rather than later.

Sure enough, after [Lai](#) delivered his inaugural address on Monday, Beijing lashed out at what it called a “dangerous signal of provocation”. State media thundered that Lai “revealed his true colours” and dismissed his calls for dialogue as “deceitful political lies”.

It is easy to dismiss China's vitriol as the predictable bluster of a belligerent autocracy. But policymakers and scholars familiar with the arcane world of cross-Strait relations say Beijing, this time, may just have a point.

For [China](#) is right to say that Lai is straying from the path of his predecessor Tsai Ing-wen — a leader whom China refused to engage but who managed to keep a delicate peace. And some question the wisdom of taking such a gamble at a time of high tension.

“Lai's stance is a step back towards more confrontation, undoing much of Tsai's line,” says Chao Chun-shan, a Taiwan academic who advised Tsai and her three predecessors on China policy. He argues that it puts China's leader [Xi Jinping](#) in a difficult spot. “Xi doesn't want a showdown now, before the result of the US election is clear.”

Lai ran for president with a pledge to follow Tsai's China policy and preserve the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

He did follow that pledge by the letter, vowing to “neither yield nor provoke” and to “maintain the status quo” — phrases coined by Tsai. He also called for restarting tourism and student exchanges with China to promote mutual understanding.

But critics say Lai deviated from his promises this week during an inaugural address that used conspicuously different language, while also spelling out some of the facts that most jar Beijing.

So while Tsai would refer to the “Beijing authorities” or “the other side of the Strait” — phrases that do not highlight the existence of two different countries — Lai spoke of “China” throughout.

He also tackled the controversial issue of sovereignty head-on. Tsai had previously stated that the two sides of the Strait are not subordinate to each other — but rarely tied this description of reality to the names of the two countries.

Lai by contrast linked that statement to the Republic of China, the state the Communists overthrew on the mainland in 1949 but which continues to exist in [Taiwan](#). He cited the ROC constitution's language that sovereignty resides with the people, who are of ROC nationality. "This tells us clearly: the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to each other," he concluded.

While this textual analysis may verge on hair splitting, China policy experts say Lai is in danger of upending the ambiguity that has provided political space to allow Beijing's territorial claim to sit alongside Taiwan's de facto independence without sparking conflict.

"He is raising the stakes by stressing a difference in sovereignty between the two countries," says Tso Chen-dong, a professor at National Taiwan University who has advised the Kuomintang [KMT], the opposition party that embraces the notion of Taiwan being part of a greater Chinese nation. The KMT argues the ROC's territory, under its constitution, still includes all of China; what divides it from Beijing is not a battle over sovereignty, but a question of jurisdiction.

Lai's Democratic Progressive party takes a very different stance. The DPP emerged from a movement for democracy and for an independent Taiwan during the KMT's 46-year-long dictatorship, which followed the surrender of the island's former colonial ruler Japan in 1945.

Senior officials in Lai's government say that for him, embracing the ROC instead of pushing for a Taiwan Republic — a move that Beijing has said would prompt it to attack — is already a big concession.

"Yes, Lai is shaking off some of the vagueness of past cross-Strait policy," said one official, while admitting that Lai's new clarity is likely to complicate relations with China.

DPP politicians argue Taiwan has been left with little choice. "China keeps removing the space for ambiguity," says Chiu Tai-san, chair of the cabinet-level China policy body under Tsai. "So the more ambiguous we are about our sovereignty, the more ground we will lose."

It took Lai less than a day as president to start tweaking Taiwan's cross-Strait language. Beijing will be watching closely how far he might go in the next four years.

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