

Cross-strait relations with China in Taiwan politics

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By far the most dominant issues in Taiwan's national - but not local - politics are Taiwanese identity, views on sovereignty and relations with China.

Taiwan has five parties represented in the legislature, with the biggest being the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), with an outright majority of 61 seats. At one time openly advocating declaring a Republic of Taiwan, their current stance is best summed by President Tsai Ing-wen's comment to the BBC when asked if Taiwan will "declare independence": "We are an independent country already and we call ourselves the Republic of China (Taiwan)." [1]

The Chinese Nationalist Party, also referred to as the Kuomintang (KMT), is the second-largest party with 38 seats. Originating out of a Chinese revolutionary movement dedicated to overthrowing the Manchurian Qing Empire in China, they remain committed to maintaining the Republic of China, while also advocating for eventual unification with China.

The other three parties are much smaller. The biggest of those, the Taiwan People's Party with five seats, officially espouses a line very similar to that of the DPP. Their chairman, however, often takes stances that are between that of the DPP and KMT. The New Power Party (NPP, 3 seats) and the Taiwan Statebuilding Party (TSP, 1 seat) are widely perceived as being stronger on Taiwan sovereignty than the DPP, with some members openly espousing dropping the Republic of China (ROC) name, constitution and trappings.

To understand the party positions, some basic history is crucial for context. Taiwan for thousands of years was under the control of various indigenous peoples who may have been the original Austronesian progenitors.[2] In the 17th century the Dutch--and briefly the Spanish--colonized portions of Taiwan. They brought over Chinese as workers and farmers, to develop their colony and establish a tax base. Their colonial rule ended when forces, led by Chinese Ming dynasty loyalists fighting against the Manchurian Qing invaders, defeated the Dutch and took over their colony, declaring an independent Kingdom of Tungning. It lasted a mere 20 years.

The Manchurians, along with China, Tibet, the Uighur lands and Mongolia, folded Taiwan into their empire - though they never occupied more than two-thirds of Taiwan. This set off a sustained period of Chinese immigration that was very similar to that of English North America both in time frame and in the destructive impact it had on the indigenous population.

In 1895, following defeat at the hands of the Japanese over Korea, Taiwan was ceded to the Japanese Empire "in perpetuity". The Japanese invaded the remaining indigenously held lands, unifying Taiwan for the first time. They set about - especially in the later years - trying to make Taiwan more Japanese, including schooling done in the Japanese language. Though they had some success, it was during this period that a Taiwanese political consciousness began to appear.

At the end of WWII, like occupied Germany, the Japanese Empire was partitioned between allied powers, with the USA occupying the Japanese home islands and the ROC taking Taiwan. Not long into the ROC occupation, in 1947, the Taiwanese people rose up in revolt against the corruption, violence and looting of the economy that was being done by ROC soldiers to feed the Chinese Civil War.

The Japanese signed the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951 renouncing any claims to Taiwan - though it did not specify who would take over sovereignty of the island.

There is controversy over the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty post-WWII. Proponents of ROC sovereignty point to the Cairo Declaration made by the Allied powers, which states that Taiwan would be handed over to China after the war. Opponents of ROC sovereignty note that the Cairo Declaration wasn't a legal document, was unsigned and was fundamentally a press release. The US position on Taiwan's sovereignty remains to this day that it is "undetermined".

Regardless of the legality of the matter, in 1949 the KMT-led ROC government in China lost the civil war against the communists and moved the government to Taipei.

The KMT launched a campaign of brutal oppression under martial law to try to make Taiwan more “Chinese”. Mandarin was used in schools – which almost no Taiwanese spoke at the time – and the KMT enforced the line that Taiwan was a province of China and that “Free China” would “reclaim the motherland” one day.

The DPP was formed out of a collection of dissidents against martial law and, as democratization took hold in the 1990s, activists within the party wanting a Taiwan republic became dominant. However, over time a debate within the party began to take place between two groups, those espousing “Taidu”, and declaring a Taiwan republic and those supporting “Huadu”, who thought maintaining Taiwan as an independent ROC was more practical considering the People’s Republic of China’s stance that if Taiwan dropped the ROC name it would be a pretext for war. Under President Tsai, the “Huadu” stance has dominated the party. Polling has shown this is by far the preferred stance of the public, though when asked if they would support dropping the ROC name if there was no threat of war, they would do so.[3] [4]

Support for Taiwan sovereignty and Taiwan identity has been growing for years, especially following the 2014 Sunflower protests against the then-KMT led government over increasing ties with China. Recent threatening actions by China, as well as the examples set by Beijing in Hong Kong and Xinjiang have deepened this trend.[5]

Tsai’s DPP have positioned themselves in the centre of Taiwan opinion on these issues, which has led to two back-to-back landslide victories in national elections.

This has put the KMT in a quandary. Their support for “one China” and the “1992 consensus” is far outside of mainstream politics. The “1992 consensus” is a reference to meetings between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1992. Though no such consensus was actually reached, and the term was coined in 2000, it had taken on a life of its own as a diplomatic construct. There are two big problems with this as far as the public is concerned. To the CCP, the consensus simply meant “one

China”, while the KMT stated it meant “one China, each side with its own interpretation” – a position the CCP never accepted. In mainstream public opinion, however, it was dealt a death blow when the People’s Republic of China’s Chairman Xi Jin-ping, in January 2019, explicitly tied it to the “one country, two systems” imposed on Hong Kong.[6] [7]

Current KMT party Chairman Johnny Chiang understands that continuing to support the “1992 consensus” is widely unpopular with the public at large, and attempted to get it removed from the party platform at a party congress in September, 2020. He was defeated by two factors, and withdrew the attempt. First was opposition ex-President Ma Ying-jeou, whose legacy is tied to achievements made in China relations, and party elders whose families came from China in 1949 and often maintain business, family or emotional ties there. The second factor is the self-selected nature of KMT supporters, which is far outside the mainstream. An internal poll of KMT members showed 81.5% of them supported the “1992 consensus”. [8] Unless there is a complicated three-way race or they drop the “1992 consensus”, it will be very hard for them to win back the presidency or the legislature. The recently established Taiwan People’s Party has been making moves that suggest they may be attempting to woo more moderate members of the KMT with a more pro-Taiwan stance, though it remains to be seen if they will succeed in becoming a major force large enough to challenge the DPP’s current dominance.

[1] Sudworth, John (14 January 2020) “China needs to show Taiwan respect, says president”. BBC News.

[2] Thomas, David R. (January 2011) In book: Alam Melayu: Satu Pengenalalan (Malay World: One Contribution to Knowledge) (pp.15-21)Chapter: Origins of the Austronesian PeoplesPublisher: Institut Alam Dan Tamandun Melayu, Universiti Kebangsaan MalaysiaEditors: N. H. S. Abdul Rahman, Z. Ramli, M Z Musa, A Jusoh

[3] Hsiao, Russell (2 August 2019) “New Polling Data Reflect Deepening Taiwanese Identity”. Commonwealth/Global Taiwan Institute.

[4] Rich, Timothy and Dahmer, Andi (19 October 2020) “Taiwan Opinion Polling on Unification with China”. Jamestown China Brief.

[5] Pan, Jason (11 December 2020) “Survey finds 85 percent define as Taiwanese”. Taipei Times.

[6] Everington, Keoni (24 September 2024) “Only 2% of Taiwanese consider themselves ‘Chinese’”. Taiwan News.

[7] Sands, Gary (11 January 2019) “Is This the End of the ‘1992 Consensus?’”. The Diplomat.

[8] 陳弘志 (2 September 2020) “路線定調！藍：81%黨員支持「基於中華民國憲法的92共識」”. Nownews.

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