



**THE 16TH STRAITS FORUM: HOW
TAIWANESE PUBLIC OPINION
UNVEILS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
CROSS-STRAIT INTEGRATION**

BY EMERSON TSUI

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On June 14, the [16th Straits Forum](#) took place in Xiamen, Fujian Province, across from Kinmen Island in Taiwan. Wang Huning, a member of the CCP Standing Committee of the Political Bureau, [addressed](#) the forum with three key messages:

1. **Policy reform for strategic advantage:** Comprehensive policy reform is essential for Xiamen and Fujian Province to enhance their strategic advantages in developing a “demonstration zone for [cross-strait integration](#).”
2. **Cultural and historical unity:** Emphasizing shared cultural identity and kinship, Wang asserted that unity under one country and one nation is unchangeable.
3. **The historical necessity of unification:** Wang highlighted unification as a historical necessity backed by China’s unwavering will and capacity to counter Taiwan separatism, claiming that peaceful unification is the preferred option among the mainstream Taiwanese public.

However, the PRC’s declarations urging the necessity for cross-strait unification are sharply at odds with the views of the Taiwanese public, making peaceful unification an unlikely option. Public opinion data from [National Chengchi University’s Election Study Center](#), which has surveyed Taiwanese sentiments on cross-strait relations for 29 years, reveals clear preferences. As of December 2023, only [7.4%](#) of participants supported unification, with “unification as soon as possible” at [1.2%](#) and “maintain status quo, move toward unification” at [6.2%](#). Unification has consistently been the least-favored option over the past three decades. Conversely, preferences for independence remain high, and Taiwanese identification with Chinese identity fell to an all-time low of [2.4%](#) in 2023.

In June 2023, only [2.4%](#) of Taiwanese identified as solely Chinese, down from [3.8%](#) in 2013. In 2020, only [35%](#) of Taiwanese adults viewed mainland China favorably, a sentiment exacerbated by the PRC’s [crackdown on Hong Kong](#) and [coercion policy](#) toward Taiwan. As reported by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, the [decline of Hong Kong’s democracy](#) movement and the growth of a separate Taiwanese identity have incentivized a robust recognition of its de jure autonomy preference, further [disincentivizing](#) Taiwanese integration with mainland China.

Therefore, the decline in support for unification is not a mere shift in public sentiment, but a direct response to Beijing’s intensified [domestic crackdowns](#) and [hardline governance](#) in Hong Kong post-2019. The passing of the [national security law](#) and the activation of [Article 23](#) have significantly undermined civil liberties and the rule of law in Hong Kong, challenging Beijing’s credibility in fulfilling its policy promises. This, in turn, has profoundly impacted [public sentiment](#) in Taiwan.

Marked by a net outflow of [68,300](#) residents in 2022 and a [\\$270 billion](#) property market wipeout, the dim future of Hong Kong, a real-world example of the “[one country, two systems](#)” model, has further questioned the efficacy of such a system and alerted the Taiwanese public to the problems associated with peaceful unification. Soon thereafter, a significant

shift in public sentiment was clear, with "maintain status quo indefinitely" becoming the most embraced policy among the Taiwanese public since 2022, with a support rate of [33.2%](#) one month before the 2024 election.

The preference for maintaining the status quo was established via the [1992 Consensus](#) with "[one China, respective interpretations](#)" ("一中各表") in practice throughout administrations on both sides of the Strait. Hence, cross-Strait integration, a variant of unification, contradicts not only Taiwanese public opinion but also the status quo long implemented by the [Kuomintang](#) (Nationalist Party).

In summary, most Taiwanese reject peaceful unification proposals, making cross-Strait integration unachievable and unwelcome. The political landscape in Taiwan further demonstrates authentic Taiwanese public preference for de facto autonomy rather than integration with mainland China. The Democratic Progressive Party's unprecedented [third term in 2024](#) affirms the Taiwanese preference for maintaining the status quo. As a pro-independence party, consecutive DPP administrations have underscored the importance of an independent [Taiwanese identity](#), which is integral to the preservation and strength of Taiwan's democratic values and institutions.

The problem for the region as a whole is that this Taiwanese identity, independent from the PRC, challenges Beijing's interests; a Taiwan leaning further away from unification challenges Chinese strategic ends, especially the "[Chinese Dream](#)" (中國夢). First proposed by Xi Jinping in 2012, the Chinese Dream aims for the PRC's comprehensive prosperity, international prestige, and global leadership. This vision calls for the CCP-led PRC to retrieve the nation's ancient glory, defining the "[complete reunification of the motherland](#)" (實現祖國完全統一) as a historical mission (歷史使命). Consequently, such a mission necessitates unification with Taiwan for Chinese territorial integrity. Despite President Lai Ching-te's promises of maintaining the status quo in his May 20

[inauguration address](#), Beijing reacted with a two-day [live-fire drill](#), the [largest PLA exercise](#) since [April 2023](#). Such actions are typical of Beijing's [short-of-war coercion course of action](#) (SoWC COA), utilizing non-peaceful means to achieve unification.

Understanding and countering Beijing's coercion tactics is vital for sustaining peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region. Following Xi Jinping's statement in 2022 about "[never promising to renounce](#)" the use of force, the PRC has employed comprehensive coercion across [diplomatic, informational, military, and economic \(DIME\) domains](#) to pressure Taiwan into unification. These tactics, notably [cyberattacks](#) and [disinformation campaigns](#), were evident during [Taiwan's 2024 elections](#). With a strategic end to coerce Taiwan into unification, such PRC efforts erode political leadership and [public confidence](#), the gravity center for Taiwanese democracy.

By targeting and diminishing Taiwanese identity, PRC coercion threatens not only Taiwan's democracy but also the broader stability of the Indo-Pacific region. If left unchecked, the erosion of democratic institutions in Taiwan could incentivize Beijing's coercive expansion, undermining [the multinational security architecture](#) established by the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. These tactics align with the PRC's strategic goal of "[winning without fighting](#)" (不戰而屈人之兵), which emphasizes [cognitive and informational warfare](#) to achieve political objectives without direct military confrontation. The [ongoing escalation in the South China Sea](#), marked by [recent clashes](#) with the Philippines, demonstrates the necessity and urgency of prioritizing counteraction against PRC intimidation tactics. By bolstering Taiwan's defenses against PRC coercion, the US can help preserve the democratic frameworks that underpin regional stability. Furthermore, a stable and secure Taiwan is a critical counterweight to the PRC's coercive policy, ensuring a [free and open Indo-Pacific](#).

With cross-Strait tensions intensifying following Lai Ching-te's inauguration, Taiwan can expect more

[gray-zone](#) tactics from the PRC, necessitating robust measures to protect its democracy and public confidence. Therefore, the following policies are suggested for Taiwan to defend its democracy.

Strengthen Cyber Defense: Establish an [Information Center of Excellence](#) co-founded by Washington and Taipei to centralize efforts against misinformation and enhance cyber defenses. This center would promote media literacy and empower citizens to identify and counteract disinformation. Existing initiatives, such as [Zero Trust Architecture](#) and the Taiwan Information Security Center, exemplify effective practices under Taiwan's [National Cyber Security Strategies](#).

Enhance Partnerships: Collaborate with like-minded [democracies and partners](#), including NATO, to share intelligence and experience combating information warfare. Leveraging NATO's experience in [countering the Russian disinformation campaign](#) can provide valuable insights for Taiwan in countering the PRC's SoWC COA and cyber-attacks during a cross-Strait contingency. [Increased](#) interactions with like-minded countries also increases their stake in the survival of Taiwan as a democracy, and thus their support for it.

Promote National Unity: Foster a positive and inclusive national identity that resonates with [younger adults \(ages 18-34\)](#) to reinforce public support for Taiwan's democratic values. Overcoming the partisan divide and fostering collaboration is crucial to countering the PRC's [divide-and-conquer](#) tactics to maintain internal cohesion, especially given the fragmented political landscape [since 2008](#). [This](#) may be difficult, but not impossible, given that the KMT has begun to [shift its own messaging](#) in favor of democracy and civic nationalism, and away from emphasizing a Chinese identity.

With limited Taiwanese support for cross-Strait integration, maintaining the status quo is the most viable policy option for both sides of the strait. However, the stakes and risks of a Chinese military operation over Taiwan increase as Beijing's [strategic patience](#) wears thin. Sustaining peace requires

[credible assurance](#) and comprehensive diplomatic efforts.

Consequently, policy specialists with language expertise and source-intelligence capabilities are crucial for Taiwan's security and democracy. These experts play a vital role in interpreting Beijing's tactics and providing insights into public opinion trends, enabling effective policy responses. By leveraging their expertise, Taiwan can better navigate the complex geopolitical landscape and reinforce its democratic institutions.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.