



## TAIWAN IS UNDER A TRIPLE SECURITY THREAT

BY DENNY ROY

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Taiwan's national security is increasingly jeopardized—externally, from two different directions, and also from within.

The largest and most direct threat, of course, is the People's Republic of China. Beijing's long-standing position is that Taiwan must not formally politically separate itself from China. The red line for military action by the PRC has never been crystal clear. Taiwan presidents from [Chen Shiu-bian](#) (2000—2008) to current president [Lai Ching-te](#) have publicly said “Taiwan is an independent, sovereign country.” Until recently it was reasonable to believe Beijing might be content to kick the can down the road indefinitely as long as the governments in Taipei did not attempt a gesture that would seem to codify juridical separation from China, such as altering the Republic of China constitution.

That has become doubtful, however, under paramount leader Xi Jinping. Xi has expressed impatience with the lack of progress toward unification, [saying](#) Taiwan's de facto independence “should not be passed down generation after generation.” Beijing implicitly announced in early 2024 the Chinese military would hold a large military exercise later in the year after President Lai's inauguration speech expected in May. The comments in [Lai's speech](#) about China were rather mild, but the People's Liberation Army went ahead with its war games anyway. The situation is much more dangerous if

cautious behavior by Taipei no longer restrains potential aggression by China.

The PRC armed forces continue not only their rapid buildup and modernization, but also specific preparations for possible military action against Taiwan. The commander of US forces in the Indo-Pacific region, Adm. Samuel Paparo, [says](#) Chinese military drills near Taiwan are “not exercises, they are rehearsals” for war. China has [reportedly](#) built barges that can transport and assemble a bridge to land military vehicles from ships directly onto coastal roads, theoretically making an amphibious invasion over treacherous beaches more feasible. A Chinese company recently [disclosed](#) it is building a million kamikaze drones for the PRC government, with delivery planned for 2026.

On top of this, of course, China carries out [gray zone](#) and [subversive](#) activities and [lawfare](#) to weaken Taiwan's ability to stand up for itself against Beijing's agenda.

Observers such as Global Taiwan Institute Director Russell Hsiao [see](#) “a comprehensive shift in Beijing's overall approach from deterring Taiwan's independence to compelling its unification” with China.

Internally, Taiwan's two major political parties have fundamentally different views about how to deal with China. For the Kuomintang (KMT), China is eternally Taiwan's mother country, even if a rival government currently rules the mainland. If Taiwan does not intend to separate from China, China should have no reason to use military force against Taiwan. Many KMT politicians are therefore lukewarm about increasing the defense budget and about deepening security cooperation with the US. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), on the other hand, reflects Taiwanese nationalism. It grew out of opposition to the dictatorship imposed on Taiwan by the exiled KMT government from 1945 until the political liberalization of the late 1980s. For the DPP, China is an enemy country, Taiwan must prepare to defend its democratic way of life from annihilation, and the US is a crucial bulwark against Chinese aggression.

The schism between the politically Blue supporters (including the KMT) and Green supporters (DPP) is an obstacle to Taiwan deploying a coherent defense policy.

KMT politicians and other conservative commentators increasingly repeat CCP talking points. The Taiwan media outlet *China Times*, for example, “has morphed from a mainstream publication into what critics call a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist party,” *Financial Times* [observes](#). The owner of *China Times* is snack food billionaire Tsai Eng-meng, who owes his wealth to business in China and has a history of making pro-China statements.

One of these shared talking points is *yimeilun*, or skepticism toward America—the idea that Washington’s master plan is to cause a war between Taiwan and China, and then abandon Taiwan, as a means of weakening China. During Taiwan’s 2024 presidential election campaign, Foxconn founder Terry Gou, originally a KMT candidate who later opted to run as an independent, [said](#) he opposed “buying weapons from the United States” because “If you don’t have a knife or a gun, [China] may not specifically attack you.” KMT candidate [Hou You-yi](#) and Blue-affiliated Taiwan People’s Party candidate [Ke Wen-je](#) both complained about the US using Taiwan as a “chess piece,” a common theme in PRC propaganda. Alleged US unreliability supports the notion that a successful military defense of Taiwan against a PLA attack is impossible, so Taiwan should instead open negotiations with Beijing about Taiwan’s political status.

Taiwan’s 2020 Anti-Infiltration Act was controversial. The DPP said the law was necessary to prevent PRC influence over Taiwan’s elections, but both the PRC government and the KMT opposed it. A Taiwan journalist [alleged](#) that the PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office was in daily communication with *China Times* and CtiTV, also owned by Tsai, to coordinate opposition to the law.

Lai’s government is trying to increase defense spending, but a divided legislature is resisting. Although the DPP controls Taiwan’s executive branch, a Blue coalition led by the KMT holds a slight

majority in the legislature. In January, the legislature passed a budget that held back half of the funds allocated to Taiwan’s submarine building program and cut funding for other military equipment including drones. It also trimmed 60% from the military’s publicity budget, which pays for recruitment campaigns. KMT legislators argued they were targeting wasteful spending.

Many analysts have long argued that a robust civil defense program would help dissuade China from attempting to conquer Taiwan. KMT politicians, however, have joined the PRC government in specifically attacking Taiwan’s Kuma Academy, a private company that teaches civil defense skills.

A third set of challenges to Taiwan’s security comes from its long-time security partner. The Trump administration wants Taiwan to spend more to build up its armed forces, which would imply buying more weapons from the US, Taiwan’s only major foreign arms supplier. Both [Trump](#) and his nominee for Under Secretary of Defense [Elbridge Colby](#) have said Taiwan should be spending 10% of its GDP on defense. Taiwan’s government has [said](#) meeting that goal would be impossible. Developed countries typically have government budgets equivalent to 40 or 50% of GDP. Taiwan’s national budget, however, is relatively small at only [14 percent](#) of GDP. Even an increase of the defense budget to 5% of GDP would eat into other kinds of investment, such as education and infrastructure, that are also vital to national security.

The US has allowed its defense industrial base to wither to the point where it’s uncertain America could prevail in a war against China. Even if many US weapons systems are qualitatively superior, China might win on the strength of its ability to [out-produce](#) the US in munitions and platforms. This means Taiwan might not be able to hold off a PLA assault even with US military intervention.

Finally, the willingness of the US to intervene is in question. Trump is markedly less enthusiastic about defending Taiwan than his [predecessor](#). He appears to hold a grudge against Taiwan for allegedly “[stealing](#)” America’s semiconductor business.

He [accuses](#) Taiwan of free-riding on US protection, similar to his criticism of Japan and South Korea. He [emphasizes](#) that Taiwan is difficult to defend. He [said](#) publicly he would respond to a Chinese military attack with economic sanctions.

Beijing offers Taiwan a way out: a soft surrender in the form of voluntarily accepting annexation to the PRC. This would remove the threat of attack from China, would do away with the need for US protection, and would halt the conflict between Chinese and Taiwanese nationalisms among Taiwan's people.

In practice, however, this would gain national security at the expense of human security. China's rapid and vindictive crackdown on civil liberties on Hong Kong since 2019, even with the knowledge that Taiwan was watching, was illustrative. Previous assurances about how Beijing would treat Taiwan after unification—such as Taiwan retaining retain control of its own military, government, and economic affairs and the PRC not stationing troops or administrative personnel in Taiwan—are excised from the Chinese government's 2022 [white paper](#) on Taiwan.

It was the Chinese mainland government's rough treatment of Taiwan after liberation from Japan in 1945 that led to the Feb. 28, 1947 uprising. KMT bureaucrats and soldiers looted the island and treated its people contemptuously, considering them brainwashed by 50 years of Japanese colonial rule. A chilling echo of this attitude is a [sentiment](#) common on today's Chinese social media: "keep the island, don't keep the people."

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