



## THE SILENT FRONT PROJECT: THE ROLE OF CHINESE PUBLIC OPINION IN TAIWAN'S SECURITY

BY EMERSON TSUI

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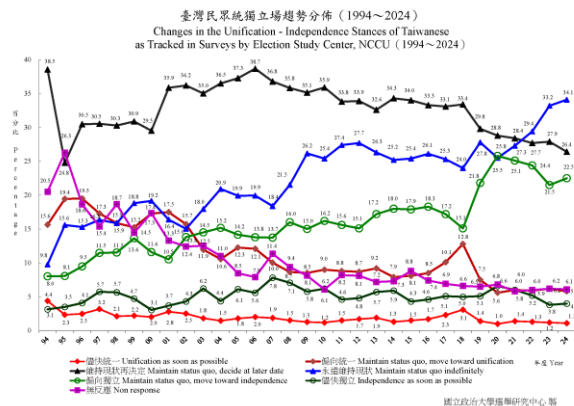


Image: Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1994/12~2024/12). Sources: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University

### Introduction

A Taiwan contingency is not inevitable. The general public from both sides of the Taiwan Strait prefers the [status quo](#) rather than a conflict. Therefore, Chinese public opinion is an underutilized asset, ensuring peace and security across the Taiwan Strait while complementing Taiwan's defense.

### The Role of Chinese Public Sentiment in CCP Decision-Making

Chinese decision-making on an armed unification or military operation against Taiwan involves a balanced calculus. The central incentive is regime survival

rooted in [public opinion](#), stemming from secondary incentives, including economic impacts, human costs, and global audience costs. Notably, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) demographics also raised the decision threshold on force application. The increasing percentage of [one-child family soldiers](#) in the PLA could also hinder public support for the armed conflict, further raising war costs for the CCP leadership.

For instance, a [public lecture](#) at UC San Diego's 21st Century China Center (February 22, 2024) highlighted widespread reluctance to “[send my kid to the battlefield](#).” Polling data supports this sentiment. According to [research](#) by Dr. Adam Liu and Dr. Xiaojun Li (March 7, 2023), while a slim majority of the Chinese public supports the concept of 'armed unification' (武統) with Taiwan, a significant portion still favors less aggressive solutions. The most recent [survey](#) by the Carter Center and Emory University (April 29, 2025) found that over half of respondents oppose 'armed unification' under any circumstances.

As suggested by these findings, Chinese public attitudes on cross-strait dynamics are shaped by a mix of factors, including nationalism, peer pressure, and concern over war's human and economic costs.

The Chinese public is not just a passive observer in the CCP regime's survivability and legitimacy in cross-strait conflict decision-making. They play a dual role - both potential combatants and domestic audiences - making them decisive in shaping the CCP's strategic calculus. As a result, their potential opposition against war could incentivize CCP leaders to lean toward a peace-oriented option, similar to the “[honeymoon](#)” during the Ma Ying-jeou administration; The optimal scenario would be China's acceptance of Taiwan's status quo (de-jure autonomy), an option not entirely impossible to manifest if implementing [strategic empathy](#) (Danile Rice).

Notably, the rising [Taiwanese identity](#) (public opinion tracker, National ChengChi University) and [unfavorable views](#) of China (Pew Research Center) are incentives and factors pushing China to pursue pro-force options. In addition, effectively communicating Chinese mainlanders' peace-oriented preference may also increase Taiwanese positive views on China, thus disincentivizing the CCP from applying force for the sake of necessity and legitimacy.

Public opinion, therefore, serves as a gravitational center for Taiwan's security. For Taiwan (Republic of China), public confidence in its democracy reinforces

domestic resilience against political coercion and provides moral strength in times of crisis. On the mainland, public preferences regarding cross-Strait policy options directly influence CCP decision-making. As such, Chinese public opinion represents an underutilized strategic asset in sustaining cross-Strait peace. However, challenges against the efficacy of surveying Chinese public sentiments could compromise the authenticity and credibility of survey results:

First, fear of [government persecution](#) could deter survey participants from offering authentic feedback. Lynchings, untried accusations, and detention are common repression tactics to discourage public criticism against government policy, thus demoralizing the Chinese public from freedom of speech on public policy critical to national interests. Second, internet-based censorship and investigation lower the cost threshold for the authority to persecute individuals who spread dissident opinions. Critically, with the help of artificial intelligence, scrutiny and digital monitoring contribute to the retention of digital footprint targeting dissenting opinions, deterring the Chinese public from voicing unsolicited sentiments. As a result, when surveyed for politically sensitive topics, [preference falsification](#) among the Chinese public could be more common in scale and extraordinary in degree than external perception. Initiated by Timur Kuran in diminishing public sentiments of the Soviet Union, the term refers to an individual's fabrication of preferences under perceived pressure while masking their true thoughts.

Therefore, the fear-based coping mechanism of Chinese public participants in internet and phone-based surveys could compromise data authenticity and thus hinder research credibility.

### **Leveraging Chinese Public Sentiment for Taiwan Strait Stability**

As a result, the gap between authentically capturing Chinese public opinion and the limits of popular research methodologies (phone and internet-based questionnaires) urges methodological innovation to shield the survey participants from fear of persecution and "surveillance." Therefore, researchers must find new methods to consider the following three factors:

First, both the source (surveyed Chinese public) and the target (research team) should be shielded from the watchers (internet-based and electronic censorship). Second, the research should minimize contact between the human source and digital space to retain authenticity and avoid compromises with Chinese

authority. Third, ensuring secure communication between surveyed individuals and the research end is pivotal for the success and retention of authentic intelligence.

In short, minimizing the digital footprint is the key criterion to ensure research efficacy, shielding surveyed individuals and researchers from surveillance mediums.

### **Application of Chinese Public Opinion in Strategic Deterrence**

Ensuring peace across the Strait requires integrating Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economy, Finance, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement. Chinese public opinion, therefore, complements the information and intelligence domains. Pro-peace Chinese sentiment conveys to the CCP leadership the [political costs](#) associated with an armed conflict, deterring the CCP leadership from choosing the war option. Therefore, strategic communication of research findings is the key to convincing CCP leadership of the costs of abandoning the status quo. Diversified channels, including academia and diplomacy, would be vital.

A political conflict involving the military domain and the public mindset is the key leverage for Taiwan's security and cross-Strait peace. Public preference will play a critical role in solving cross-Strait relations peacefully, given that the status quo remains the most desired option by audiences on both sides of the Strait. Industry leaders have recognized the conditionality of a cross-Strait conflict: Dr. Ely S. Ratner (former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs) and Bonnie S. Glaser (Managing Director of the Indo-Pacific Program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States) both agreed on the Chinese war decision contingent on "[acceptable costs](#)." During a podcast with War on the Rocks on February 13, 2024, Dr. Ratner urged the importance of risk assessment for Beijing's war calculus.

Therefore, strategically demonstrating a highly likely domestic opposition against the cross-Strait military operation incentivizes Chinese leadership to stick to the status quo option.

### **Conclusion**

Maintaining the status quo indefinitely is the only alternative to cross-Strait conflict. A peaceful solution to the Taiwan issue centralizes the sustainability of the U.S.-China Relations and global interests. According to [Richard C. Bush](#), nonresident senior fellow with the Center for Asia Policy Studies (CAPS) of Brookings, the Taiwan issue arises from political conflict and

identity. Leveraging Chinese public sentiment as a "silent front" to defend Taiwan aligns with non-violent conflict resolution, an innovation to supplement collective security. Thus, the silent front project proposes a people-oriented approach to conflict resolution, utilizing the public mindset to fortify the national security of the three parties: Taiwan, China, and the United States.