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China-Taiwan Relation During Tsai's Presidency and Her Efforts in Maintaining Taiwan As Self-Governing Region

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Abstract: Tensions between China and Taiwan have escalated, particularly during President Tsai's tenure. Following World War II, China endured the Chinese Civil War between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). The KMT's defeat in 1949 marked the end of the conflict, after which it retreated to Taiwan and became an opponent force to Beijing. Since then, Cross-Strait relations have remained tense. Under President Tsai, the issue has become more apparent as she consistently rejects China's reunification agenda while strengthening Taiwan's ties with Southeast Asian countries and the United States (U.S.) in particular. This paper also adopts a qualitative desktop research, relying on secondary data collection method which includes treaties, white papers, policy documents, defense reports, and news articles. This paper is also significant because Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) prioritizes safeguarding Taiwan's autonomy and democratic values and the Kuomintang (KMT) advocates for closer ties with China. Concurrently, scholarly attention to the contemporary dynamics of Cross-Strait relations remains insufficient. Existing studies often focus on outdated analyses, such as the deficiencies in Taiwan's 2012 elections, rather than the policies and developments under Tsai Ing-wen's administration (2016–2024). Therefore, this paper examines China-Taiwan relationship during Tsai's presidency demonstrates the significance of defending Taiwan's democracy and maintaining its status quo as an autonomous territory within China.

Keywords: China; Taiwan; Democratic Progressive Party (DPP); Tsai Ing-wen; autonomous territory

Introduction

The China-Taiwan issue is a longstanding historical dispute that dates to the Chinese Civil War, which began in 1927. Although the war officially ended in 1949, it occurred in two distinct phases. The first phase, from 1927 to 1937, was suspended due to the necessity of forming a united front for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Kuomintang (KMT) against the Japanese invasion (Liu, 2025). The second phase took place after the conclusion of World War II, lasting from 1946 to 1949. The conflict ultimately ended with the defeat of the Kuomintang (KMT), which subsequently retreated to Taiwan and continued to establish their government there. Since then, the relationship between China and Taiwan has remained tense (World History Edu, 2023).

Tensions eased during the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (Wu, 2023). The relationship grew strained again under his successor, Tsai Ing-wen, of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), whose pro-Taiwan stance and differing ideology from Beijing reignited Cross-Strait tension. This ideological difference has led President Tsai to reject China's ambition of reunification, as well as to refuse acceptance of the One China Principle (Maizland & Fong, 2025) and the "One Country, Two Systems" framework (Lee, 2019), which serve

as Beijing's fundamental policies for bringing Taiwan under its authority. The One China Principle formed the basis of the 1992 Consensus, an understanding reached between the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF). Both sides acknowledged the existence of only "One China" while agreeing to interpret the meaning of "China" differently.

During President Ma Ying-jeou's administration, he accepted the 1992 Consensus, which helped ease tensions between China and Taiwan. This acceptance also facilitated Cross-Strait dialogue and cooperation between Beijing and Taipei (Chen & Cohen, 2019). However, President Tsai Ing-wen rejected the consensus upon assuming office, heightening the tension. Concurrently, she has strived to maintain Taiwan's status as an autonomous entity by implementing the New Southbound Policy (NSP), which aims to reduce Taiwan's economic dependence on China by strengthening ties with countries in the Southeast Asian region (Effendi & Blenkitni, 2023). Therefore, this paper examines China-Taiwan relationship during President Tsai's administration demonstrates the significance of defending Taiwan's democracy and maintaining its status quo as an autonomous territory within China.

Literature Review

The Cross-Strait issue has gained heightened international significance, particularly during Tsai Ing-wen's presidency. Concurrently, China's domestic political landscape underwent a fundamental transformation in 2018 with the abolition of presidential term limits (Lin, 2019), reinforcing an increasingly assertive foreign policy. This shift is particularly evident in Beijing's approach to Taiwan, where it has vigorously promoted the One China Principle (Wang, 2024) and the One Country, Two Systems framework (Ji, 2015) as integral components of its reunification strategy.

Taiwan, in response, has pursued strategic diversification by deepening its security and economic ties with the United States (U.S.) while simultaneously reducing its dependence on China. Historically, the U.S. maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. However, in December 1978, Washington formally shifted its diplomatic recognition to Beijing (CRS Report, 2024). Despite this realignment, the U.S. Congress enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in 1979, ensuring continued unofficial engagement with Taiwan. This legislative maneuver provoked strong opposition from Beijing, which perceived it as a direct infringement on the U.S. commitment to the One China Principle and an implicit challenge to China's sovereignty.

Following the 1949 Chinese Civil War, the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to Taiwan after its defeat by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Meanwhile, China persistently sought to reintegrate Taiwan, culminating in the 1992 Consensus, a diplomatic framework acknowledging the concept of "One China" while allowing for divergent interpretations. As China ascended as a global power, it exerted mounting political and economic pressure on Taiwan, reinforcing reunification as a central objective under President Xi Jinping's administration. China has systematically employed economic and diplomatic coercion to isolate Taiwan on the international stage. Cheung (2023) underscores Beijing's strategy of pressuring foreign governments and international organizations to sever official ties with Taiwan, significantly reducing the island's diplomatic allies. In response, Taiwan has actively strengthened its diplomatic engagements, particularly with the United States, to counterbalance Beijing's coercive tactics.

The Cross-Strait conflict has entered a more volatile phase, particularly following China's suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong and the subsequent erosion of the "One Country, Two Systems" framework (Overholt, 2019). These developments have increased worries about what Beijing plans to do with Taiwan in the long run. In a landmark speech in January 2019, Xi Jinping reiterated his commitment to "peaceful reunification" but refused to renounce the use of force. This intensification of tensions prompted Taiwan to bolster its defence capabilities, exemplified by its procurement of 10,000 Kestrel Anti-Tank Missiles (Saballa, 2023) and increased military exercises aimed at deterring potential China's aggression.

Previously mentioned President Tsai rejects 1992 Consensus since her administration. This attracted China's immediate response which involved punitive measures, including reducing tourism to Taiwan, diplomatically isolating it, and undermining Taiwan's international standing (Wang et al., 2021). Notably, only one-third of respondents aligned with the KMT's view of the 1992 Consensus as an intergovernmental

agreement, while others perceived it as an understanding between two sovereign entities. Tsai's rejection of the consensus has therefore catalysed assertive Chinese actions, compelling calls for Taiwan to reconsider its stance (ibid). Even after the 2020 electoral setback, the KMT continued to recognize the 1992 Consensus despite rejecting the One Country, Two Systems framework. This is because KMT wanted to appease its core supporters and believed that this consensus was the foundation for the Cross-Strait dialogue which was significant of peaceful interactions (Kanapathy, 2022).

Methodology

This paper adopts qualitative research approach which involves sourcing and analysing secondary data from authoritative sources such as treaties, defense white papers, government reports, and academic publications. This method is particularly effective in constructing well-supported arguments regarding Taiwan's strategies to safeguard its autonomy. The subjective nature of qualitative research is well-suited to investigating the complex relationships between China and Taiwan, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of policies, strategies, and regional impacts that cannot be easily quantified.

In this qualitative desktop research, secondary data collection methods have been employed, incorporating primary data sources such as treaties, white papers, policies, news articles, and defence reports. Secondary data served as a foundation for exploring novel answers to specific research questions, providing concrete evidence. The utilization of secondary data involved first-hand information, such as treaties, white papers, policies, and defence reports, which were inherently unamendable. This approach enhanced the research's robustness, acknowledging the primary data aspect.

The Findings and Discussion

1. President Tsai Ing-wen's Efforts in Maintaining Autonomous Sovereignty

The election of Tsai Ing-wen as president in 2016 marked a new stage in Taiwan political development. However, Tsai Ing-wen has adopted a more cautious and independence-minded Cross-Strait Policy than her predecessor by rejecting the 1992 Consensus and stressing Taiwan's autonomous sovereignty. That stance provoked an immediate backlash from China, which then used a variety of foreign policy tools to pressure Taiwan, including economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military deterrence. At the same time, President Tsai administration has sought to strengthen Taiwan's international standing and maintain its self-governing status by deepening cooperation with the U.S., Japan, the European Union, and other countries.

China's promise of the One Country, Two Systems framework, which, in turn, raises concerns in Taiwan. As the international system is inherently anarchic, there is no higher authority to enforce binding agreements. China can promise what they want but may do only little after it successfully reunifies with Taiwan (An, 2019). Consequently, China's actions on Hong Kong raised Taiwan's concerns. Britain accepts China's One Country, Two Systems Policy, and hands over Hong Kong to China, but Hong Kong's democracy had been violated under this policy. China allowed Hong Kong to elect chief executive officer, but those candidates could only come from the lists provided by China. At the same time, China wanted to change Hong Kong's school syllabus to inculcate China's national identity (Maizland & Fong, 2024). This shows China's violations on its One Country, Two Systems Policy.

President Tsai is concerned on Hong Kong's situation and openly shows its supports on Hong Kong's democracy. She openly states her supports for the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, notably by establishing a special office to aid Hong Kong citizens fleeing Beijing's crackdown. However, China viewed Tsai's stance as an implicit endorsement of Taiwan's and Hong Kong's independence movements, triggering stern warnings and increased military threats, including repeated claims that China would take military action if Taiwan sought formal independence (Olcott, 2023).

Due to China's violation on One Country, Two Systems framework, this framework has been compromised by the categorical rejection and abandonment by both the KMT and DPP in Taiwan. The Taiwanese stance, articulates through the rejection of China's policy white paper, underscores that the One Country, Two Systems framework, and Cross-Strait unification were not viable options for Taiwan (Chung,

2022). Consequently, this dynamic prompts China to pursue more assertive actions to achieve its reunification ambitions. President Tsai Ing-wen emphasized the incompatibility between China's interpretation of the One China Principle and Taiwan's vision, rejecting the One Country, Two Systems framework outright. This ideological impasse further deepens the deadlock, as Taiwan refuses to accept China's conditions for reunification. The 1992 Consensus acknowledges One China with differing interpretations which remains a contentious issue.

During Ma Ying-jeou's administration (2008–2016), Taiwan's government viewed "One China" as the Republic of China (Taiwan), whereas Beijing maintained that it referred to the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Mainland Affairs Council, 2011; NCUSCR, 2023). However, President Tsai from DPP rejected the 1992 Consensus (Gao, 2019), asserting that Taiwan is a self-governing democracy with its future determined by its people (BBC News, 2020). This change led to heightened tensions with Beijing, including diplomatic isolation, economic pressures, and military threats. From another perspectives, while the ambiguity of the 1992 Consensus initially facilitated dialogue, it has also fuelled political polarization in Taiwan. The KMT views it to ensure stable Cross-Strait relations, whereas the DPP perceives it as a potential tool for China to apply pressure on Taiwan toward unification. This ideological divide complicates Taiwan's national policy and its interactions with China. Thus, President Tsai strives to maintain Taiwan status quo through diplomatic, economic, and military means.

2. Diplomatic Efforts

As President Tsai rejects China reunification proposal and refuses to accept 1992 Consensus, President Xi condemns her actions as separatist and applies diplomatic, economic, and military pressure on Taiwan. President Tsai also mentions Taiwan does not need to declare independence because Taiwan is an independent country already which has its own government (Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), 2020). However, her administration advocates for peace and stability while acknowledging that the need of reciprocity in dialogues with China. She further stated that Taiwan would not bow to China's pressure (BBC News, 2021). In fact, Taiwan's decision not to declare independence serves as a protective measure. China has no reason to attack Taiwan if it does not declare independence. In 2016, President Tsai implements NSP to enhance its relationships with countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia and New Zealand, etc. There are four pillars of the NSP like promotion of economic collaboration, people-to-people exchanges, resource sharing enhancement, and forge regional links. For example, Taiwan's company cooperated with Japan and Indonesia to build the first mass rapid transit line of Jakarta (Glaser et al., 2019).

In order to counter China's pressures, she uses diplomatic strategy to shift its focus to other countries such as the U.S., Japan, and Europe. During her administration, she strengthens ties with those countries as an alternative way to face China's pressures while increasing its diplomatic partners. For example, the U.S. signed Taiwan Travel Act into law in 2018 to encourage visits between the U.S. officials and Taiwan at all level (Wees, 2018). Consequently, the U.S. also approved a \$330 million arms sale to Taiwan (Selby-Green, 2018). Apart from that, Japan was also shifting its views on Taiwan security compare to the past. It shifted from careful navigation in the past to openly mention that Japan wanted to protect Taiwan as a democratic country. Although this statement had not put into binding document, it showed Japan's intentions to protect Taiwan if China were to attack it (Ashley, 2021). Moreover, the European Parliament also passed a resolution related to China's misinterpretation of the UN Resolution 2758 and condemned its military provocations in Taiwan area (Tien & Kao, 2024). This shows Europe's supports for Taiwan and its intention to enhance Taiwan's international visibility.

3. Economic Efforts

In response to China's political and economic pressure, Taiwan has pursued a strategy of economic diversification, reducing its dependence on China by strengthening partnerships with other nations. A key element of this strategy is fostering economic relations with countries such as the U.S., Japan, and members of the European Union. However, China's opposition has hindered Taiwan's participation in regional economic agreements, most notably the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (Dreyer & deLisle, 2021). In response, Taiwan has pursued bilateral trade agreements with nations that share democratic values and have geopolitical interests aligned with Taiwan's security needs.

The U.S. plays a crucial role in bolstering Taiwan's international economic standing, advocating for its participation in global economic forums and facilitating trade agreements. Taiwan's leadership in the semiconductor industry, particularly through Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), provides a unique economic advantage. TSMC's advanced chip manufacturing capabilities are indispensable to industries such as telecommunications, defence, and automotive, positioning Taiwan as a key player in global technological supply chains. This technological dominance not only strengthens Taiwan's economic position but also aligns it with countries, such as the U.S. and the European Union, that are eager to secure their technological sovereignty (Tung, 2024).

Taiwan's TSMC produced advanced chips that were essential for various fields like military and aerospace, computing, and electronic, artificial intelligence, and etc (Tung, 2024). Simultaneously, through the Chip 4 Alliance proposed by the U.S. which included Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. showed Taiwan's position in semiconductor field. If the Chip 4 Alliance was successfully implemented, the reliance on China's chips could be reduced because it could cover major areas of the semiconductor value chain (ibid). Taiwan's global significance, particularly in the semiconductor industry, underscores its strategic role in the global economy. In 2022, Taiwan's semiconductor output reached \$90.7 billion, commanding 63.8% of the global wafer fabrication market (Tung, 2023a). TSMC's dominance in producing advanced chips, especially those under 7nm, further solidifies Taiwan's indispensable role in global technology supply chains. The expansion of TSMC's operations to the U.S., Japan, and Germany illustrates Taiwan's international outreach and its critical position in the semiconductor industry (Tung, 2023b).

The semiconductor sector is not just economically crucial but also geopolitically sensitive, with its strategic importance equating to that of oil. Semiconductors are integral to national security, military capabilities, and economic power, making Taiwan's technological prowess a focal point in global competition. The ongoing rivalry between China and the U.S. over semiconductor technology has intensified, with the U.S. imposing restrictions under the CHIPS Act to limit China's access to advanced microchips. The U.S. CHIPS Act stated that the chipmakers who received the U.S. funding are prohibited to expand their facilities in China (Kurilla, 2024). The National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) from Taiwan has also imposed restrictions on the export of raw materials to China that could be used to produce microchips smaller than 14nm (Pao, 2023). Furthermore, Taiwan's NSTC has officially restricted 22 advanced chip-making technologies from being shared with China. However, the restrictions imposed by the United States pressured China to develop its own microchip with a 7nm processor, which had been used in the Huawei Mate 60 Pro. This breakthrough had raised suspicions in the U.S., prompting a reassessment of whether China may have violated the sanctions imposed by the U.S. (Ho, 2023; Tung, 2023c).

Taiwan's resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated its capacity to maintain economic stability, with the country outperforming economic forecasts through effective public health measures. By containing the virus early, Taiwan ensured that its semiconductor production remained uninterrupted, solidifying its global influence in this crucial industry. Despite the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s initial projection of a 4% decline in Taiwan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the country experienced economic growth, driven largely by the continued success of its semiconductor exports (Yu & Klingler-Vidra, 2021).

Concurrently, TSMC was expanding its fabs not only in Taiwan but also in the U.S., Japan, and Germany. As the largest contract chipmaker in the world, TSMC had partnered with Arizona in the U.S. and planned to build two mega wafer fabs, which are set to produce chips using the 4nm and 3nm processes in 2025 and 2026, respectively (Tung, 2023b). TSMC also built a wafer fab in Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan, where the plant is expected to begin commercial production at the end of 2024, primarily using the 16nm, 22nm, and 28nm processes. Additionally, TSMC expanded its operations to Germany, approving an investment of \$3.84 billion as part of a joint venture to build a semiconductor fab in Dresden. Unlike in the U.S. and Japan, TSMC collaborated with auto parts maker Bosch, semiconductor maker Infineon, and the

Netherlands-based NXP to establish the plant (Tung, 2023b). The expansion and cooperation with other countries showed Taiwan's significance to the global supply chain of the semiconductor and its international influence.

In short, semiconductor had become the key component which could affect the national security of many countries. It was also a signal of technological prowess which semiconductor was vital and scarce resource that could be used in various fields such as final integration of electronic devices. The importance of semiconductor could be said as same level as oil because country's military, geopolitical and economic strength were linked with the semiconductors. However, the technology of manufacturing the most advanced semiconductor was held in the hand of certain countries such as the U.S., Japan, Netherlands, South Korea, and Taiwan (Tung, 2023c). This brought China and the U.S. into competition for the advantage over the technology of semiconductor.

As mentioned previously, Taiwan's efforts in combating and eliminating the coronavirus provided opportunities for the country, with its semiconductor industry accounting for 15% of Taiwan's GDP. Concurrently, the U.S. Semiconductor Industry Association (SIA) mentioned that the global electronic industry's revenue was going to fall at approximately \$500 billion if Taiwan could not manufacture chips for the whole year. In December 2023, Taiwan accounted for approximately 40% of the total market value of all mentioned companies in Taiwan, while the semiconductor and ICT-related industries made up 60% of the total market value (Tung, 2024). This drastic increase during the pandemic demonstrated Taiwan's international influence, not only as a good example to other countries in eliminating the coronavirus but also through its strategy and capability to nearly monopolize the semiconductor sector.

Apart from that, President Tsai implemented NSP to gradually shift Taiwan's economic focus from China. Before the establishment of NSP in 2016, there was Southern Policy introduced by former President Lee Teng-hui in 1993 which aimed to reduce Taiwan's economic dependence on China while diversifying investment from China to Southeast Asia region. However, Taiwan's Southern Policy failed because the Southeast Asia was affected badly by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (Huang, 2018). Although the Southern Policy failed in Lee Teng-hui's era, she had advanced his ambition and established NSP. There are flagship programmes under NSP like development on regional agriculture programme to enhance agricultural connections, the cooperation in medical and public health to improve healthcare cooperations, and cross-border e-commerce to form business cooperations in South and Southeast Asia. To summarize, these programmes are used to ensure the mutual benefits for Taiwan and its partners (Office of Trade Negotiations, 2019).

The prospect of NSP is to attract countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia to reduce Taiwan's reliance on China. Taiwan's economic over-dependence on China will put itself in a risky situation as China has used its economic power as a penalty to countries that do not align with China's interests (ibid). For instance, China imposed trade manipulation on Taiwan like banning Taiwan's exports on agriculture products and textiles which could interrupt important sector of Taiwan's economy. Consequently, China also used the legal measures against Taiwanese executives and established bureaucratic obstacles to restrict company of Taiwan to open business and transfer funds (Singleton et al., 2024).

Apart from that, Taiwan's NSP is also designed to strengthen mutual exchanges and cooperation across various sectors between Taiwan and countries in ASEAN and South Asia. To facilitate this, the government has established the "New Southbound Policy Office" and plans to launch an "ASEAN and South Asia Scholarship Programme" to promote educational collaborations (Chao, 2018). Additionally, the NSP adopts a strategy centred around four key connections which include leveraging soft power, establishing supply chain partnerships, integrating regional markets, and fostering people-to-people interactions.

However, Taiwan faces challenges in implementing its NSP due to threats from China, which could undermine Taiwan's influence in Southeast and South Asia through diplomatic and economic pressure. This pressure may be exerted to discourage these countries from strengthening ties with Taiwan. Moreover, it is crucial to address the biases prevalent in Taiwanese society towards Southeast and South Asian countries. Therefore, Taiwan must effectively manage both external pressures from China and internal societal biases to enhance its relations with ASEAN and South Asian countries (ibid).

4. Military Efforts to Enhance Taiwan's Defence Capabilities

On the military side, Taiwan has sharply increased its defence budget and stepped-up weapons purchases. For example, it purchases advanced weapons such as F-16V fighter jets, MIM-104 Patriot and seahorse rocket launchers. In addition, Taiwan is also promoting the development of indigenous weapons, such as "Submarine-made" program to enhance self-defence capabilities.

In 2019, US-Taiwan relations strengthened with the approval of a \$2.2 billion arms sale, signalling the increasing alignment between Taiwan and the U.S. in resisting Chinese aggression (Browne, 2019). This arms deal, coupled with Taiwan's growing defence budget, demonstrated Tsai's administration's strategic focus on military preparedness as a countermeasure to China's assertive posturing. In parallel, China continued its aggressive manoeuvres, including the frequent incursions of People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), further escalating Cross-Strait tensions (Lewis, 2023).

The second term of Tsai's presidency saw continued efforts to strengthen Taiwan's military capabilities. In 2021, Taiwan secured a \$750 million arms deal with the U.S., and by 2026, defence spending was projected to reach \$8.69 billion (Wang, 2022; Reuters, 2022). This was accompanied by a proposed defence budget increase of 6% for 2025, signalling Taiwan's clear intent to enhance its military deterrence against China's increasingly provocative actions (Teng, 2024). The visit of the U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in 2022 further solidified US-Taiwan relations, but it also provoked China, which responded with military exercises and economic sanctions, including the suspension of Taiwanese food producers, costing Taiwan \$20 million in exports (Weaver-Lee, 2023).

China's military exercises, including the launch of ballistic missiles and joint air and naval manoeuvres around Taiwan, underscored its readiness to escalate tensions to demonstrate its opposition to Taiwan's growing international engagements (Klare, 2022). In 2023, President Tsai proposed an increase in Taiwan's defence budget, marking a 7.7% rise from the previous year and bringing the total defence spending to an unprecedented 2.5% of Taiwan's GDP (Dotson, 2023). This significant boost in military spending, coupled with ongoing diplomatic engagement with the U.S., reflected Taiwan's strategic shift towards bolstering its defence against China's aggressive tactics while preserving its de facto independence.

Apart from that, President Tsai also focuses on Taiwan's military troops. She accepted the personnel from the U.S. to train Taiwan's army. For instance, the U.S. had assigned its special forces to train Taiwanese troops which located only 10 km from China (Honrada, 2024; McCartney, 2024). She also extended Taiwan's military service from four months to one year (Wu, 2022). This change has received mixed reactions from the Taiwanese public, with only 35.6% of young adults (aged 20–24) supporting the extension (Valentine, 2022). This shows many Taiwanese, particularly the younger generation, are not fully aware of national defence issues. The president of Taiwan also does not enforce strict rules, making the policies appear merely formalities. Despite Taiwan facing one of the most precarious geopolitical situations, much of the population remains indifferent to military service, viewing even the previous four-month term as a waste of time. Without a clear commitment to strengthening its military capabilities, Taiwan risks creating doubts among its foreign partners about its seriousness in defending itself.

In a nutshell, Taiwan-China relations reached a nadir, with escalating tensions driven by Taiwan's efforts to resist unification under China's terms during President Tsai's administration. Tsai's strategic initiatives, including the NSP and increased defence spending, were aimed at reducing Taiwan's dependence on China while maintaining the status quo as an autonomous, democratic territory.

5. Implications for Taiwan's Democracy and Autonomy

Taiwan's pursuit of maintaining autonomy while resisting China's push for reunification highlights its distinct political identity, rooted in democratic values contrasting sharply with China's socialist-communist framework. Taiwan, closely aligned ideologically with the U.S., has rejected China's One Country, Two Systems framework, an offer allowing for the maintenance of Taiwan's status quo post-reunification. President Tsai decisively opposed this framework, citing the deteriorating political freedoms in Hong Kong as evidence of its ineffectiveness. The erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy under Chinese control galvanized

President Tsai's support for Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, reinforcing her commitment to safeguarding Taiwan's democratic system.

China's failure in effectively implementing the One Country, Two Systems policy in Hong Kong sowed deep distrust within Taiwan. President Tsai's administration, interpreting China's actions as a threat to Taiwanese democracy, rejected the 1992 Consensus, a pivotal moment in Taiwan's resistance against unification. Tsai's stance provoked sharp condemnation from China, which saw her rejection as an affront to its long-standing goal of reunification. In retaliation, Beijing employed a multifaceted strategy aimed at destabilizing Taiwan's democracy, including media manipulation, cyber-intrusions, and economic isolation. Taiwan, under constant pressure from the PRC, faced intimidation through disinformation campaigns and attempts to sway public sentiment against pro-independence movements, thus challenging Taiwan's democratic processes. Dissatisfaction among Taiwan's public with its democratic governance, as evidenced by protests and calls for referendums, further complicated the internal political landscape (Bush, 2021).

China's economic leverage exacerbated Taiwan's diplomatic isolation, strategically pressuring nations to sever ties with Taiwan. As a result, Taiwan's international recognition shrank to 12 countries, including Belize, Guatemala, and the Holy See (MOFA, 2020). China's influence, grounded in its One China Principle, effectively curtailed Taiwan's global diplomatic standing, further marginalizing the island on the world stage (Rich, 2023). Nevertheless, Taiwan's dedication to upholding its democratic identity has earned it support from select countries. For instance, under President Tsai's leadership, Taiwan has forged partnerships with Guatemala and Belize, engaging in cooperative projects on tourism, energy transition, and sustainable development. Guatemala, a staunch ally, reaffirmed its solidarity with Taiwan, positioning itself as a fellow member of a "democratic alliance" (Blanchard and Baptista, 2022). Belize, too, has benefited from Taiwan's educational and agricultural assistance, underscoring Taiwan's capacity for meaningful international engagement despite its diplomatic limitations (Sanchez, 2023).

Therefore, President Tsai introduced the foreign policy of "steadfast diplomacy" to build a "democratic alliance" by strengthening ties with other democratic countries based on shared values of freedom and democracy. Consequently, Taiwan's foreign policy follows a strategic approach, employing pragmatism to maintain formal diplomatic allies and exert pressure on China. Taiwan focuses on democracy and human rights, which are considered part of its pragmatic approach, but it also faces China's efforts to isolate it diplomatically. Taiwan strives to prevent other countries from shifting their allegiance from Taiwan to China (Kelter, 2024). Therefore, China's assertive foreign policy forces Taiwan to formulate its strategic approach, and align more to Southeast Asia countries and the U.S.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper examines China-Taiwan relationship during Tsai's presidency demonstrates the significance of defending Taiwan's democracy and maintaining its status quo as an autonomous territory within China. Taiwan's efforts to resist unification under President Tsai Ing-wen's leadership highlight Taiwan's commitment to democratic values and autonomy. The NSP aimed at reducing Taiwan's economic dependence on China by fostering ties with Southeast Asian nations, reflects this strategic shift. While the U.S. has not directly engaged with the policy, it continues to support Taiwan through the TRA and Taiwan Travel Act, underscoring shared values of democracy, security, and economic cooperation. Additionally, Taiwan's semiconductor industry has become a powerful tool of influence, with its technological capabilities expanding its international presence. The proposed Chip 4 Alliance, including Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S., exemplifies efforts to curtail reliance on China's microchip industry, further securing Taiwan's place in global technological supply chains. These actions not only bolster Taiwan's international standing but also serve as a safeguard against potential economic coercion from Beijing, contributing to Taiwan's efforts to maintain autonomous sovereignty amidst increasing geopolitical pressure.

Despite Taiwan's diplomatic and economic efforts, it remains vulnerable to China's growing hard power. China retaliated by leveraging its diplomatic and economic power to isolate Taiwan on the international stage, coercing countries such as São Tomé and Príncipe to sever ties with Taiwan through chequebook diplomacy. Taiwan's refusal to engage in excessive financial incentives for diplomatic recognition, such as

turning down São Tomé and Príncipe's \$210 million aid request which further highlighted Tsai's commitment to a principled foreign policy. China's military expansion and assertive actions in the Taiwan Strait has raised serious security concerns for Taiwan. Taiwan's inability to compete with China's military power compels it to seek external alliances, notably with the U.S., to balance China's influence and deter aggression.

In summary, Beijing asserts that the Cross-Strait issue is a domestic matter in which external actors should not interfere. Nevertheless, U.S. support, combined with Taiwan's efforts to seek such backing, has enabled Washington to remain actively involved in the dispute. Taiwan, however, must carefully navigate its relationship with the United States, as Washington often treats Taiwan as a strategic instrument in its broader competition with China.

The 2024 United States presidential election became a highly polarising event and an important topic of discussion. At the same time, President Trump's post-election actions attracted significant global media attention (Lim, 2025). After winning the election, President Trump adopted a more aggressive approach in handling international affairs, particularly regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Historical precedent, such as the case of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who relied heavily on U.S. military support but ultimately faced devastating consequences, highlights the risks of overdependence. Similarly, Taiwan's reliance on U.S. military assistance could prove precarious if American strategic interests were to shift.

Lastly, this paper focuses on President Tsai's administration and her management of Cross-Strait relations with China. While this study is limited to secondary data, future research could incorporate primary sources, such as interviews. Furthermore, subsequent studies could examine the administration of President Lai, whose stance appears more assertive and direct compared to that of President Tsai, potentially intensifying tensions between China and Taiwan.

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