

FREEDOM CRY

The view from Taiwan

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What do we talk about when we talk about Taiwan? In international policy discussions, Taiwan is often described as a “question”, a “problem” or, even more melodramatically, “trouble”. In such narratives, Taiwan is seen as needing to be dealt with, and the agency of the island’s 23.4 million people is sidelined, if not overlooked. Therefore, the title of this issue – *The Taiwan Choice* – is refreshing, assuming that it also includes Taiwan’s own choice. After all, as other countries are debating what decisions they should make about Taiwan, Taiwanese people will be making their own decisions as well, for themselves.

Indeed, the people of Taiwan have become well-practised in exercising their freedom of choice since its democratisation in the 1980s. Today, facing China’s increasingly bellicose threats, Taiwanese are choosing not to bow to the pressure and to continue their democratic way of life.

But such freedom has been a scarce resource for people on Taiwan throughout most of its history. The indigenous population of the island known as Formosa (“Beautiful Island”) did not have much choice when Han immigrants from the mainland took their lands. The later Taiwanese population, consisting of aboriginal peoples and the Hoklo and Hakka of the Han people, did not have much choice when the Dutch and Spanish briefly colonised parts of the island. They also did not have a choice when the Chinese Qing Dynasty incorporated Taiwan into the Manchu regime and then, after its defeat in the First Sino–Japanese War of 1894–95, ceded Taiwan’s sovereignty to Japan. Nor did they have a choice when the Allied powers after World War II handed Taiwan and its outlying Pescadores

Islands (P'eng-hu) to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek of the Nationalist Party (KMT). They had no choice when Chiang's Republic of China (ROC) government massacred tens of thousands of Taiwanese in the 228 Incident of 1947 and inflicted "White Terror" on Taiwan during the following decades.

Nevertheless, Taiwanese persisted. Even in the darkest days, when the KMT imposed what was then the longest period of martial law in history (1949–87), Taiwanese – including those who had migrated from mainland China with Chiang's troops around 1949 – sought freedom wherever they could, wresting civil, political, and labour rights from the government through some of the most sophisticated grassroots movements ever seen this side of the Pacific. These courageous efforts of previous generations led to Taiwan's transformation from an authoritarian regime to a young democracy, in which we have agency by engaging in political debate, casting our votes and making our voices heard – all without fear of retaliation from the government in power.

Tense ties with China

While the story of Taiwan's domestic affairs is one of increasing democratisation and individual autonomy, the road to "international emancipation" has been more fraught. This complexity starts close to home. Taiwan's seventy-plus-year relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) has been complicated, to put it mildly. From military skirmishes between the 1950s and 1970s to gradual, tentative contact in the 1980s and 1990s, to the present-day political stalemate, it has never been easy to navigate relations across the Taiwan Strait, even though cooperation was made possible after Taiwan's democratisation.

During the 1990s, Taipei–Beijing relations had ups and downs. There were initial, sporadic displays of reconciliation, such as the negotiations in 1992 to enable cross-Strait arrangements on practical matters such as tracing registered mail. But just getting to the negotiating table required diplomatic innovation. The PRC and the ROC, which still did not recognise each other, were reluctant to officially cooperate. To resolve this issue, both governments established nominally non-governmental institutions to act as

proxies – often called “white-glove” organisations. In March 1991, Taiwan established the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF), a government-funded non-profit organisation. In December that year, SEF’s counterpart in mainland China – the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits – was created. The two organisations are authorised by their governments to contact each other and negotiate, and to conclude and implement cross-Strait agreements. In 1993, talks between these proxy organisations led to the signing of four agreements, one of the first instances of Taipei–Beijing cooperation.

This limited progress, however, was interrupted in 1995 when Taiwan’s then president, Lee Teng-hui (1988–2000), visited Cornell University. There, at his alma mater, he gave a consequential speech about Taiwan’s democratisation and introduced a new political term, “ROC on Taiwan”. This term implied not only that the ROC ruled Taiwan and Taiwan only – demonstrating plainly that the ROC does not rule in China – but also that the ROC government was elected by Taiwanese and Taiwanese only. The PRC government was infuriated.

The movement demonstrated a growing Taiwanese national identity, forged over generations

Beijing was further enraged in 1999 when Lee, as Taiwan’s first democratically elected leader, defined cross-Strait relations as “special state-to-state” relations. Years later, Lee’s successor, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), would, in a similar effort, coin the phrase “one country on each side [of the Strait]” to refer to Taiwan’s independent status. From Beijing’s perspective, these were both attempts to separate Taiwan from the PRC.

As a result, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was keen to find a political ally in Taiwan. Many politicians in the KMT, a party established on the mainland when the ROC was founded in 1912, are ideologically and sentimentally tied to China. On the other hand, many in the DPP have seen KMT governments as émigré regimes that are obstacles to Taiwan’s autonomy. The KMT and the DPP, since the founding of the latter in 1986,

have competed fiercely, especially over Taiwan's relationship with China: the KMT insists that Taiwan is part of China (although the KMT's "China" is the Republic of China, not the People's Republic of China), while the DPP holds that Taiwan is not part of China/PRC and should not claim to represent "China" at all on the world stage.

As a result, when the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou was elected president in 2008, the CCP and the KMT shared an agenda to deter what they saw as the growth of "Taiwan independence" that Chen Shui-bian's rule (2000–2008) had encouraged. From 2008 to 2016, when Ma was in office, Taipei and Beijing – through their proxy organisations and party-to-party forums – signed twenty-three cross-Strait agreements in multiple areas, including transportation, tourism, judicial assistance, and trade and investment.

Yet the opaque way in which these negotiations were conducted, compounded by the KMT's aggressive pushing of the agreements through Taiwan's legislature, agitated many Taiwanese, especially young people anxious about closer ties with Beijing. This democratic deficit was a prologue to the landmark 2014 Sunflower Movement, in which Taiwanese students stormed into and occupied the legislative chamber for twenty-four days. In support, an unprecedented half a million people took to the streets in a peaceful protest.

That movement put a dampener on CCP–KMT cooperation and halted any new agreements. Even a history-making meeting between Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou in 2015 in Singapore was not able to rekindle cross-Strait relations, especially as the KMT was about to lose its presidential platform.

Taiwanese identity

When a dispute drags on for decades, its underlying nature can change with each generation. Just as Taiwanese have chosen a different domestic social contract to that in China, they also desire a different relationship with China, one that is not dictated by the continuing influence of the past authoritarian regime under Chiang Kai-shek or his heir, Chiang Ching-kuo, both of whom unrealistically pledged to "recover the mainland" after their KMT had fled mainland China in 1949. The Sunflower Movement's pushback reflects not only a widespread outlook in Taiwan that refuses

political absorption by China but a rejection of the sentimentality – common among older KMT members – that cooperation, or even some kind of integration, with the mainland is a necessary denouement to the saga of cross-Strait separation. Instead, the movement demonstrated a growing Taiwanese national identity, forged over generations. This evolving identity has been a political boon for the DPP. It helped Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP secure two landslide victories, in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, and has given the DPP legislative majorities since 2016.

This increasing aversion to closer links with China is also clear from various polls. A survey by the National Chengchi University's Election Study Center on stances on unification and independence since 1994 has steadily demonstrated that people in Taiwan favour the "status quo". For many Taiwanese, the "status quo" is essentially code for the independence we currently enjoy. However, the status quo is also a kind of coerced choice, made with an awareness that if Taiwan declares a desire to unequivocally separate from China, it will likely suffer an attack by the People's Liberation Army. As of December 2021, 55 per cent of the Taiwanese population preferred to maintain the status quo, which included 28 per cent who wished to "decide at a later date" and 27 per cent who wanted to maintain the status quo "indefinitely".

But the past few years have witnessed an unusually swift opinion shift. Since 2018, support for "independence" has climbed quickly, while the already low support for unification with China has plummeted. The two most notable changes were in the position of "move toward independence (while maintaining the status quo in the meantime)", which rose from 15 per cent support in 2018 to 25 per cent in December 2021, and the position of "move toward unification (while maintaining the status quo in the meantime)", which fell precipitously from 13 per cent support in 2018 to 6 per cent in December 2021.

Another survey by the same centre is similarly insightful. It asked people whether they identify as "Taiwanese", "both Taiwanese and Chinese", or "Chinese". The trend is clear: a Taiwanese-only identity is becoming the norm. As of December 2021, 62 per cent of people in Taiwan identified as exclusively "Taiwanese", up from 55 per cent in 2018. People who identify as "both Taiwanese and Chinese" dropped to 32 per cent, one

of its lowest levels since 1992, while those identifying as exclusively “Chinese” remained a low 3 per cent.

These surveys suggest a steady, long-term shift by Taiwanese away from ever wanting to unite with China. China’s unpopularity has likely been enhanced by events in Hong Kong since June 2019. Taiwanese closely observed these events and understood their implications in a way few other nations could. They watched the fierce street protests, mostly peaceful, by millions of Hong Kongers in that hot summer and the continued resistance through the autumn. They witnessed the Hong Kong government’s violent suppression of protesters, including the widespread police brutality and over 16,000 rounds of tear gas permeating the city. They also saw Beijing’s harsh reaction, especially the stunning imposition of the national security law for Hong Kong, which brooks no political dissent.

This democracy is all that most young Taiwanese have ever known

Taiwanese were used to protests in their own streets, but the contrast between their government’s response to dissent and that of the Hong Kong government spoke volumes, and triggered memories of Beijing’s 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. It prompted further sympathy for Hong Kong’s democratic movement and antipathy towards China’s “One Country, Two Systems” formula, which was originally designed for Taiwan in 1981 by Deng Xiaoping and later applied to Hong Kong and Macau.

Moreover, many in Taiwan have been put off, even repelled, by Xi Jinping’s aggressive unification agenda. Of particular note was his January 2019 speech marking the fortieth anniversary of the PRC’s “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan”, in which Xi advanced One Country, Two Systems as the “best approach” to unify Taiwan with the mainland. While calling for a peaceful transition, he made it clear that China may use force, at its discretion, to achieve unification.

Naturally, the prospect of unification through threats or use of force alienated the already apprehensive Taiwan society, and Xi’s mention of One Country, Two Systems was poorly timed, given what Taiwanese would later

see as a terrifying application of the formula in Hong Kong. President Tsai Ing-wen responded swiftly and firmly, emphasising that her government has never accepted that Taiwan is part of China. Xi's speech was so unpalatable in Taiwan that it even elicited a response from the KMT, which confirmed that the ROC is an independent, sovereign state and that Xi's One Country, Two Systems cannot at this stage win the majority support of Taiwanese.

These developments have precipitated a rare convergence in Taiwan's domestic politics: people in Taiwan, as well as the two leading parties, have formed a consensus that favours their nation continuing as a democratic, sovereign state in which they can sustain their democratic way of life.

The independence myth

Through individual and collective choices, large and small, Taiwanese have built a thriving, modern democracy with hard-won civil and political freedoms. This democracy is all that most young Taiwanese have ever known.

Taiwan (including its offshore P'eng-hu, Quemoy and Matsu islands) has never been ruled by the PRC. For more than seven decades, Taiwan has had a government called the Republic of China; it has an autonomous, liberal democratic system entirely different from China's one-party state; and it has the capacity to engage in foreign relations (albeit often under significant restraints imposed by Beijing through its international influence). For most Taiwanese, this is bona fide independence as we know and live it.

Taiwan's formal international legal status, on the other hand, is more fraught. Much ink has been spilled over this subject, and the focus of this essay does not allow for elaboration. It suffices to note that Taiwan meets all qualifications of statehood under the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States; that is, it has a permanent population, a defined territory, a government and the capacity to enter into relations with other states.

What burdens Taiwan's statehood are two major questions.

The first question concerns diplomatic recognition. While most international law scholars do not regard recognition as a requirement of

statehood, some argue that Taiwan's relative lack of diplomatic recognition in the international community undermines its statehood. This view, however, is misguided, because recognition is the result of intergovernmental, political negotiations, rather than of international legal capacity (statehood). While most states do not recognise Taiwan because of pressure from China, Taiwan is able to maintain informal relations with many countries on all matters except in name (think of Taiwan's relationship with the United States and Japan, for example), and Taiwan has formal diplomatic relations with a small number of countries.

The second question is its relationship with mainland China. Some scholars have claimed that because Taiwan has not unequivocally asserted its separation from China, it cannot be recognised as a state distinct from China. This view fails to acknowledge that the PRC consistently threatens to use force if the ROC on Taiwan chooses to have its sovereignty recognised internationally. Taiwanese prefer the independence they already enjoy to Taiwan being destroyed. What would be the point of being recognised as a state if the state was shattered by war to begin with? There is also little gain for Taiwan in "declaring separation" – at this juncture, most countries would not support what they would see as a provocative action by Taiwan.

Indeed, the myth that Taiwan has to declare what it already has is misguided – the ROC constitution was amended in 1991 to reflect that the government only controls Taiwan, P'eng-hu, Quemoy and Matsu, not the mainland (it was meant to "tailor the suit to the size of Taiwan", according to one of the participants in the amendment process); Taiwan's president and legislature are directly elected by the Taiwanese people only; Taiwanese continually exercise their rights and freedoms in a democratic society, all without the PRC's involvement. This is the embodiment of self-determination.

Taiwan's independence is a lived history and a living reality. This was why Lee Teng-hui called the nation the "ROC on Taiwan" in 1995. This was also why, in 1999, the DPP incorporated the "Resolution on Taiwan's Future" into the party's charter, according to which Taiwan is already a democratic, independent country under the name of the Republic of China.

Any change to “Taiwan’s independent status quo” must be decided by all residents of Taiwan through a referendum.

If Taiwan’s independence from China were not plain enough, President Tsai Ing-wen’s 2019 National Day speech confirmed it. She emphasised that the Taiwanese people have together experienced a seventy-year journey and have forged shared memories. She used the term “Republic of China (Taiwan)” for the first time. Slightly, yet significantly, different from Lee’s “ROC on Taiwan” nomenclature, “ROC (Taiwan)” further intertwines the ROC with Taiwan.

The 1992 Consensus was actually a dissensus on the question of “one China”

Her speech resonated with most Taiwanese because it reflected their reality on the ground: the ROC is Taiwan and Taiwan is the ROC. People in Taiwan are bound by their collective choices over the past seventy years, including building a constitutional democracy. Their three generations of memories are distinct from those of people on the mainland, and they have fashioned an independent body politic.

The spell of “one China”

Then why is the ROC (Taiwan), which functions as an independent sovereign state, still confronted with immense difficulties in its relations with the PRC and other countries? The obvious answer is Beijing’s strict insistence that the whole world, including Taiwan, should abide by its “One China principle”, which essentially asserts that Taiwan is “an inseparable part” of the PRC’s territory.

Some states disagree. They do not accept Beijing’s claim that Taiwan is part of the PRC. The notable example is the United States, which has its own “One China policy” to differentiate its position from the PRC’s. According to this policy, Washington takes note of Beijing’s position that Taiwan is part of China, but has made it clear that the United States is

neutral on the question of Taiwan's sovereignty and that any dispute should be resolved peacefully.

Hence, the question for the ROC (Taiwan) is not whether to declare independence from China but how to reject Beijing's "One China principle" without giving the PRC an excuse to start a war. The KMT attempted a version of this during Ma Ying-jeou's rule. It coined what has become known as the "1992 Consensus", which the party claimed resulted from the brief exchanges during the 1992 negotiations between the two governments' proxies. Based on the 1992 Consensus, the KMT was able to cooperate on economic fronts with the PRC between 2008 and 2016.

Just as the classic ambiguous illustration of the duck-rabbit blurs boundaries between perception and interpretation, the 1992 Consensus was intended by the KMT as an illusion, connoting different meanings for the KMT and the CCP. The KMT used it to refer to its own formula of "One China, Respective Interpretations", in which "China" referred to the Republic of China. But, to the CCP, "China" of course means the People's Republic of China. The KMT acknowledged that the CCP had a different interpretation of "China". Yet, Beijing has never acknowledged the KMT's formula.

The 1992 Consensus was actually a dissensus on the question of "one China", but it provided a convenient cover at a time when the two parties were eager to cooperate. Neither the KMT nor the CCP wished to publicly challenge the other's rhetoric. In essence, the 1992 Consensus was a diplomatic manoeuvre to feign unison while avoiding confrontation.

Its intentional ambiguity worked at the time, but it was also confusing to the Taiwanese public. In a 2019 survey, more than 80 per cent of Taiwanese did not accept the 1992 Consensus being defined as "One China (PRC)" without acknowledging the existence of the ROC. There are also diverse understandings of what the 1992 Consensus even means: as many as 44 per cent of Taiwanese think that it refers to "the two sides of the Strait being two separate countries".

Whatever the proper understanding of the 1992 Consensus, its original illusion no longer seems to satisfy Beijing or Taipei. From the DPP government's perspective, the KMT's word play smuggles the idea of "one China" into Taiwan. The DPP rejects that there has ever been a 1992

Consensus, and it refuses any notion that Taiwan is part of China. In the meantime, Xi Jinping's CCP has pushed One Country, Two Systems, building on its interpretation of the 1992 Consensus. This has put the KMT into a bind, as it undercuts the strategic ambiguity intended by the original formulation. The more Xi presses for unification, the less the KMT can sell any "one China" stances to Taiwan voters and maintain the veneer of the 1992 Consensus as a harmonious consensus. Moreover, with the threat of China's increasing military activities around the island, any "one China" notion will further lose its already limited appeal in Taiwan.

The future of Taiwan

This is not to say there is no room for Beijing–Taipei cooperation. If – and this is a big if – Beijing is willing to set aside One Country, Two Systems and accept the ambiguity of whatever formula the two sides can agree on, there will be an opportunity to reduce tension and resume contact.

But China is taking the opposite approach. The People's Liberation Army has been penetrating Taiwan's air defence identification zone with unprecedented frequency. Its aircraft carriers have led naval drills off Taiwan. It has also held amphibious-assault and island-control exercises that focus on Taiwan. The circumstances are so tense that *The Economist* published a headline last year that referred to Taiwan as "the most dangerous place on Earth".

I am often asked how we in Taiwan react to this perilous situation. The Taiwanese people are not panicking. After all, generations of Taiwanese have lived under China's military threats. Many Taiwanese believe that Beijing is using this tactic to engender fear, a kind of PSYOP muscle-flexing. A recent survey shows that almost two-thirds of Taiwanese do not believe that "sooner or later, the CCP will ultimately invade Taiwan". As to whether Taiwanese are willing to defend their country if worst comes to worst, polls point to different results. Taiwan's Foundation for Democracy found that almost 80 per cent of Taiwanese were willing to fight for Taiwan. In a poll conducted by Duke University that had more open-ended questions, however, only 23 per cent were prepared to commit acts of resistance.

Taiwan's democracy is a rare success story in the Indo-Pacific region

But Taiwanese cannot afford to succumb to the numbing effects of Beijing's constant scare tactics. We should do more to bolster our own asymmetrical defence capabilities. President Tsai Ing-wen has announced plans to establish the All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency in 2022 to reform the military and prepare Taiwan's reserve force as a back-up. The government should also organise and ready the civilian response to hold out as long as possible until international aid, if any, arrives.

In addition, Taiwan needs unity. Political competition is normal in a dynamic democracy, but facing a potential invader, all parties in Taiwan should come together to defend the island. The KMT and the DPP have more in common than they would like to admit: both view our nation as a democratic, sovereign state, and both reject One Country, Two Systems. A healthy democracy requires not only vigorous political competition but also resilience and a united will to defend its institutions.

While Taiwan can and should do its part, it cannot do it alone. It will require support from other like-minded democracies that have the foresight to recognise that the authoritarian advances on Taiwan also represent a threat to them and their national interests. Support does not simply mean military defence during war. Peacetime support is also crucial, including helping Taiwan strengthen its economic relations with other nations so that it does not overly rely on China, and allowing greater Taiwanese participation in an international environment that has largely isolated Taiwan. The United States' invitation for Taiwan to join the Summit for Democracy was a good gesture, and Taiwan is in need of more meaningful, practicable steps, such as allowing it to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. What is unhelpful is the kind of short-sighted view held, for example, by former Australian prime minister Paul Keating, who said last November that Taiwan was "not a vital Australian interest" and labelled it a "civil matter" for China.

How wrong he was. Taiwan stands on the front lines of China's belligerence and is not just a territory it wishes to absorb – Taiwan signifies

a counter-narrative that the CCP is determined to erase. Taiwan's democracy is a rare success story in the Indo-Pacific region, undermining China's claims to its own people that the democratic age is coming to an end and that its political model is superior. Taiwan's per-capita income is among the highest in the world; it provides a competing development model to China's state capitalism, which disrespects democratic values and human rights but is rapidly winning converts throughout the developing world. Taiwan has produced technological innovation and sophistication that China is yet to attain and desperately desires. Home of the world's most valuable chipmaker, Taiwan is vital to the electronics and high-tech supply chains that fuel global technological and economic growth. Taiwan's vibrant democracy, its prosperity and its technological dynamism are more critical than many realise to the success of the democratic project and the continuation of the international economic order as we know it. These achievements are also the shared inheritance of 23 million Taiwanese – a hard-won birthright that we will continue to defend.

Taiwan's choice is increasingly clear: the Taiwanese people want what they already have – to continue the democratic self-rule that has provided economic prosperity without compromising human dignity. They want to be able to decide their own future, just as people in other liberal democracies do. What about the rest of the world? What is your Taiwan choice? ■

This essay is in memory of Chih-Yi Cameron Chen, who is dearly remembered as a beloved friend.