

Why Do Many Taiwanese Resist Unification with the People's Republic of China?

An Overview of Explanations

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Abstract

Why do a majority of Taiwanese prefer alternatives, including the continuation of the status quo, to unification with mainland China for the foreseeable future? Understanding the sources of this preference is important because tensions over Taiwan's refusal to unify with the mainland could spark a military conflict across the Taiwan Strait. This article offers an overview of the various explanations for this phenomenon. These explanations focus on Taiwanese identity, political aspirations for liberal democratic governance, and a "commitment problem" stemming from distrust of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The article concludes by discussing the enduring nature of this reluctance to unify, reviewing recent polling data on Taiwanese willingness to resist a PRC invasion, and providing recommendations to deter the PRC from resolving the Taiwan question through military force.

Authoritative guidance identifies the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as a crucial US interest.¹ Recent events, such as multiple military incursions by the armed forces of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into Taiwan's airspace and maritime zones, have exacerbated tensions reminiscent of those witnessed in the 1950s.² Should such tensions escalate into a military conflict, the United States could find itself entangled in a war with the People's Republic of China (PRC), resulting in economic, political, and physical devastation across the region and the world.³

¹ *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2022), 23, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>. For US interests in Taiwan, see Luke P. Bellocchi, "The Strategic Importance of Taiwan to the United States and Its Allies: Part One," *Parameters* 53, no. 2 (2023): 61–77, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

² See for example, Emily Feng and Connie Hanzhang Jin, "China is subtly increasing military pressure on Taiwan. Here's how," *NPR*, 18 December 2023, <https://www.npr.org/>.

³ For an overview of the economic impacts, see Charlie Vest, Agatha Kratz, and Reva Goujon, "The Global Economic Disruptions from a Taiwan Conflict," *Rhodium Group*, 14 December 2022, <https://rhg.com/>.

At the heart of the strained cross-Strait relations lies a fundamental disagreement between the people of Taiwan and the leadership of the CCP and the PRC. The CCP leadership views Taiwan as an integral part of a unified China, asserting itself as the sole legitimate government of the nation. It steadfastly adheres to a policy aimed at ensuring that Taiwan, both legally and practically, comes under the political dominion of the PRC. This stance serves as a cornerstone of the CCP's claim to political legitimacy, positioning the party as the sole entity capable of restoring China to its historical prominence and redressing the grievances of its "Century of Humiliation," which includes reclaiming territories lost during that time.

Legally enshrined in the 2005 "Anti-Secession Law," the PRC has articulated its policy of employing military force to prevent Taiwan from formally declaring independence. Xi Jinping, the paramount leader of the PRC, has signaled that the culmination of China's national rejuvenation would be the reincorporation of Taiwan under PRC control.⁴

Successive governments of Taiwan have consistently rebuffed the demands made by the PRC to bring Taiwan under its political control. This steadfast refusal underscores the enduring lack of popular support in Taiwan for integration with the mainland under the governance of the PRC and the CCP, even under the framework of "One Country, Two Systems" proposed by Deng Xiaoping. This proposal, succinctly described by William Overholt, would "allow Taiwan to keep its economic and social systems, government, and even military in return for acknowledging that it was part of the People's Republic."⁵

It is crucial to note that under this arrangement, Taiwan would merge with the mainland within a unified political entity rather than forming a confederation of distinct states. With the passing of the generation of mainlanders who migrated with the Republic of China (ROC) government to Taiwan in 1949 and the decline of the Kuomintang (KMT) as the predominant political force in Taiwan in the late 1980s, support in Taiwan for the historical goal of unifying China and Taiwan has waned. Since the early 1990s, most Taiwanese have rejected the notion of unification for the foreseeable future, largely preferring to maintain the status quo. Recent polling data confirms the persistence of this trend (see fig. 1).

⁴ See, Xi Jin-ping, "Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China" (speech, State Council Information Office, PRC, 1 July 2021), 11, <http://english.scio.gov.cn/>.

⁵ William Overholt, *Hong Kong: The Rise and Fall of One Country, Two Systems* (Cambridge, MA: Ash Center, Harvard Kennedy School, December 2019), <https://ash.harvard.edu/>. See also, Xinqi Su and Dene-Hern Chen, "Hong Kong Crackdown Turns Taiwan Against China Doctrine," *Barron's*, 15 January 2024, <https://www.barrons.com/>; "Majority Support 'Status Quo,' Poll Shows," *Taipei Times*, 21 November 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>; and "Taiwan Public Rejects 'One Country, Two Systems'" (press release, Mainland Affairs Council, ROC, 21 March 2019), <https://www.mac.gov.tw/>.

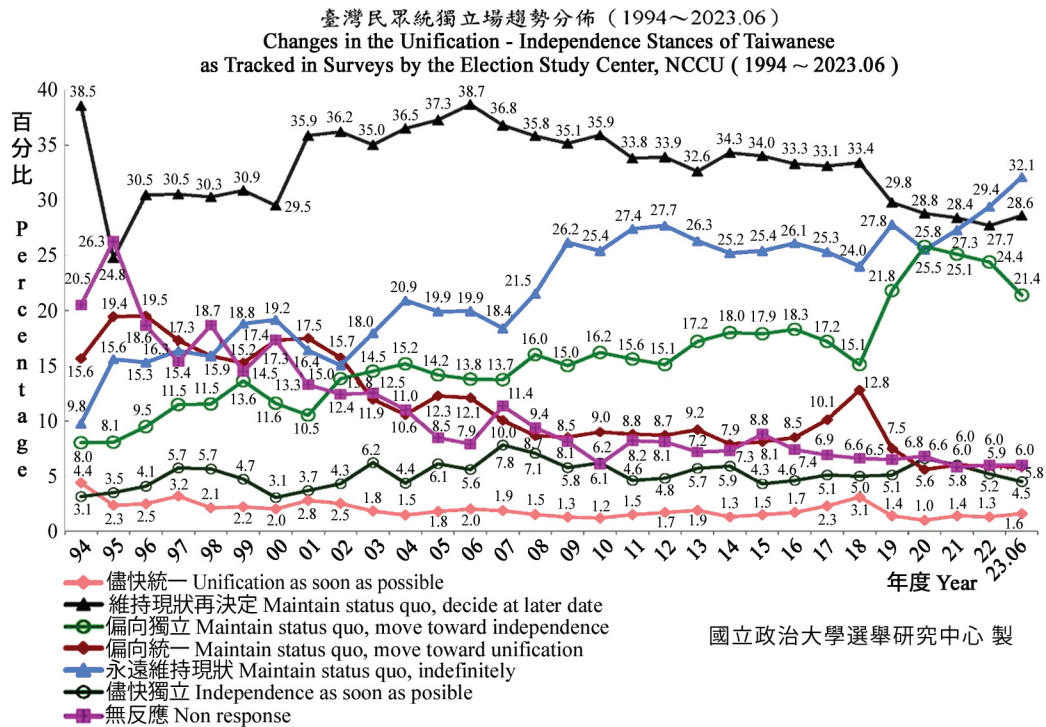


Figure 1. Changes in unification–independence stances of Taiwanese. (Source: Election Studies Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC.)

This chart highlights the fact that the PRC has been unable to compel or persuade the Taiwanese population regarding the necessity or desirability of embracing a PRC-sponsored “One China” construct.⁶ More than 80 percent of respondents to this poll either expressed support for maintaining the status quo indefinitely (which entails a de facto independent Taiwan), maintaining the status quo temporarily while deferring the unification question for the future, or maintaining the status quo while preparing for de jure independence. Options such as immediate unification or maintaining the status quo while preparing for eventual unification garnered support from less than 10 percent of respondents.

⁶ Even if these polling results potentially overemphasize backing for independence, they unmistakably demonstrate that the majority of the population does not endorse any form of unification in the near to medium term. Additional polling data indicating an even larger segment of the population supporting independence further supports this conclusion: Chung Li-hua and Jonathan Chin, “Poll shows 48.9% support independence,” *Taipei Times*, 2 September 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>.

Although the results of the most recent presidential elections, when considered alongside these data, indicate some disagreement regarding the interpretation of a preference for the status quo, the overwhelming majority of those expressing a preference associated with the status quo view it as a distinct alternative to unification in the foreseeable future.⁷

Why does the majority of Taiwanese resist unification with the PRC? This article provides a comprehensive overview of existing explanations. One explanation points to a Taiwanese identity, shaped in part by the differing histories and experiences of Taiwan and the mainland, which categorically rejects unification with the mainland on any grounds. The second explanation highlights Taiwan's adherence to liberal democratic principles of governance and its inhabitants' refusal to accept that the PRC upholds or practices them. While not outright rejecting the possibility of unification with the mainland, this explanation underscores the condition that such a union would only be acceptable if the mainland underwent significant political reform.

The third explanation identifies a "commitment problem" rooted in distrust of the PRC's and CCP's sincerity in honoring promises should Taiwan's government express willingness to pursue a unification arrangement. This position again precludes unification with the mainland as long as the CCP and the PRC are part of any One China framework. These explanations intersect, as multiple factors may characterize the viewpoints of different segments of Taiwan's population.

The responses of the CCP leadership to these data are critical for maintaining stability across the Strait. In recent years, Taiwan's refusal to commit to a timetable for unification, coupled with its efforts to bolster defenses and assert *de facto* autonomy, has prompted the CCP to undertake a series of potentially destabilizing military actions. The frustration stemming from the realization that the likelihood of a voluntary union with Taiwan in the near to medium term is minimal could prompt the CCP leadership to escalate further and resort to military force to achieve its nationalist objectives. In such a scenario, recent data regarding the willingness of Taiwan's residents to resist an invasion becomes crucial, along with proposals for what actions US officials might take to deter the PRC from pursuing a military solution.

⁷ It is also notable that these data indicate the success of the PRC's efforts to dissuade Taiwanese from openly expressing a preference for declaring independence. However, recent polling suggests that a majority of Taiwanese now perceive independence as the most probable outcome, fueled by optimism regarding the United States' potential victory in the ongoing competition with the PRC. According to the poll, 58 percent believed independence was more likely, while 41 percent believed "cross-strait unification" was more probable. See Meng Chih-cheng, "Support for independence grows," *Taipei Times*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>.

Identity and Resistance to Unification

Taiwan's historical connection to classical China is tenuous. Initially inhabited by Austronesian people around 3,000 BCE, who comprised the majority of the island's permanent residents until the thirteenth century CE, Taiwan remained outside the sphere of Chinese authority. Significant migration from the mainland to Taiwan commenced in the thirteenth century, yet Chinese control over the island was absent during this period. During the 1600s, both the Dutch and the Spanish attempted colonization efforts on parts of the island. Though these endeavors had limited impact, they highlight the historical disregard of Chinese officials towards Taiwan and infrequent engagement with its inhabitants.

Official Chinese control over Taiwan commenced in the 1680s, when Qing dynasty military forces, suppressing die-hard Ming loyalists on the island, integrated Taiwan into the Chinese political system. However, significant Qing administrative presence or developmental efforts on the island did not materialize until the later part of the nineteenth century. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mainland officials predominantly perceived Taiwan as a source of raw materials and a refuge for pirates, inhabited primarily by "savages" (the indigenous Austronesian peoples) and Chinese migrants, the latter often depicted unfavorably in Chinese cultural narratives.⁸

Taiwan's path toward integration into modern China was hindered by the late Qing dynasty's inability to maintain control over all Chinese territories. Following the conclusion of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki stipulated that the Qing cede Taiwan to the Empire of Japan. This decision profoundly influenced Taiwan's historical trajectory and the formation of its people's identity.

Under Japanese rule, efforts were made to impose Japanese identity and culture upon the Taiwanese populace. These attempts led to tensions, fueling the emergence of an early Taiwanese identity movement that rejected Japanese identity and gradually distanced itself from a Chinese state perceived as having forsaken Taiwan's Chinese inhabitants.⁹

While Taiwan served as an agricultural outpost for the Japanese empire, the treatment of the Taiwanese was relatively less oppressive compared to the experiences of Koreans, Filipinos, and mainland Chinese under Japanese rule. The effects

⁸ For contemporary attitudes, see Yu Yonghe, *Small Sea Travel Diary* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 2004).

⁹ Andrew Morris emphasizes the perception of abandonment that informed attempts by some Taiwanese elites to resist the Japanese takeover after the Qing accepted the Treaty of Shimonoseki. See Andrew Morris, "The Taiwan Republic of 1895 and the Failure of the Ching Modernizing Project," in *Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan*, ed. Stéphane Corcuff and Robert Edmondson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–24.

of the Japanese presence in Taiwan persisted for decades after Japan's control ended, shaping the Taiwanese experience.

Furthermore, Taiwan's historical circumstances diverged from key events in modern Chinese history that helped mold contemporary political identity and social views on the mainland. It remained part of the Japanese Empire during pivotal moments such as the 1911 revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty on the mainland and the May 4th Movement of 1919, which expressed defiance against Japanese demands. Taiwan also remained insulated from the brutality of the Japanese occupation of mainland China during the 1930s and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Additionally, Taiwan did not participate in the military campaigns orchestrated by the Kuomintang (KMT) to unify the mainland in the 1920s and 1930s, nor did it experience the tumultuous relationship between the KMT and the Communists that culminated in the Chinese Civil War.¹⁰ The Taiwanese populace was also spared the hardships endured during China's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

Partially stemming from these divergent historical narratives and experiences, the Taiwanese perspective often contrasts with that of the mainland. Taiwanese residents frequently lack the antagonistic views towards Japan commonly held by many mainlanders, and many do not frame their identity within the context of memories of Japanese aggression or the broader Century of Humiliation. Moreover, Taiwan's younger generation tends to embrace a cosmopolitan outlook and is receptive to fostering connections with other East Asian communities.¹¹

In addition, the Taiwanese interpretation of their history diverges significantly from the version of Chinese history accepted and taught on the mainland. While narratives emphasizing China's decline in power and prestige, and its humiliation by foreign powers, including Japan, prevail in mainland education, Taiwan's educational materials extract the island's history from that of China. They underscore Taiwan's multicultural reality and integrate Chinese history into a broader regional context.¹²

Furthermore, despite efforts by the Kuomintang (KMT) government, which assumed control of Taiwan in 1945, to instill a Chinese identity among several generations of Taiwanese, suppress expressions of Taiwanese identity, and quash calls for independence, these endeavors did not effectively establish an exclusive Chinese identity among the majority of Taiwanese.

¹⁰ For a useful discussion of these historical contributions to a Taiwanese identity, see Ho Ming-sho, "Desinicizing Taiwan: The Making of a Democratic National Identity," *Current History* 121, no. 836 (2022): 211–17, <https://homepage.ntu.edu.tw/>.

¹¹ These assertions are based on the author's observations.

¹² Lyu Zhaojin and Zhou Haiyan, "Contesting Master Narratives: Renderings of National History by Mainland China and Taiwan," *China Quarterly* 255 (2023): 768–84, <https://doi.org/>.

First, the KMT's governance over both Taiwan and the mainland lasted only approximately four years (from 1945 to 1949). Taiwan's separate administration from the mainland since 1895, except for this brief period, means that Taiwanese residents lack a recent extensive history of concrete political ties with the mainland.

Second, the KMT government's perceived favoritism towards mainlanders, insistence on reasserting Chinese identity, culture, and the Mandarin dialect over popular objections, and its readiness to oppress, marginalize, discriminate, and use force against the Taiwanese people poisoned perceptions of mainlanders, Chinese identity, and the One China concept among a significant portion of the population. The characterization of Chiang Kai-shek (the KMT president who ruled Taiwan from 1945 until his death in 1975) and his associates as colonizers further fueled the development of a contemporary Taiwanese identity that harbors enduring anti-Sino sentiments.

These characteristics defined the identity that emerged during Taiwanese political and social resistance to KMT rule, beginning in the mid-1940s and persisting through Taiwan's transition to democracy in the 1990s and up to the present day. They also characterized the identity of university students who spearheaded recent associations like the Sunflower Movement, protesting economic measures implemented by the KMT government as part of its engagement policy with the PRC in the 2010s.¹³

Furthermore, following the democratic transition both official and unofficial entities in Taiwan have played a role in fostering the development of a distinct Taiwanese political identity. Successive governments, including those led by the KMT, have encouraged allegiance to an ROC, which, despite residual language in the constitution, governs and only claims to govern Taiwan and associated islands.¹⁴

The impact of these factors on identity is evident in recent polling data. While it has never been universal for all Taiwanese to adopt a singular Taiwanese identity, the proportions of those identifying as Taiwanese or Chinese have varied over time. Current data indicate that the overwhelming majority of Taiwan's population no longer identifies solely as Chinese. Approximately 60 percent now reject a Chinese identity altogether, marking a substantial increase since 1992, while less than 5 percent maintain an exclusive Chinese identity, representing a notable decrease from 1992 (refer to fig. 2).

¹³ Anson Au, "The Sunflower Movement and the Taiwanese National Identity: Building an Anti-Sinoist Civic Nationalism," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 27 April 2017, <https://berkeleyjournal.org/>; also Ho, "De-sinicizing Taiwan."

¹⁴ Dalton Lin, "'One China' and the Cross-Taiwan Strait Commitment Problem," *China Quarterly* 252 (2022): 1094–116. <https://doi.org/>.

We would anticipate that embracing a Taiwanese identity would lead individuals to oppose unification efforts. First, the mainland holds little appeal given the dearth of shared understandings and experiences. Second, there is a sense of aversion. Embracing a *non-Chinese* identity signifies a preference for a state and political system that aligns with Taiwan's unique history and experiences, rather than being overshadowed by an unfamiliar identity associated with a contentious past. Public opinion studies confirm these expectations, revealing strong correlations between Taiwanese identity and opposition to unification. Most significantly, individuals who identify solely as Taiwanese are much more inclined to reject unification proposals compared to those with either a mixed Taiwanese/Chinese identity or a Chinese identity.¹⁵

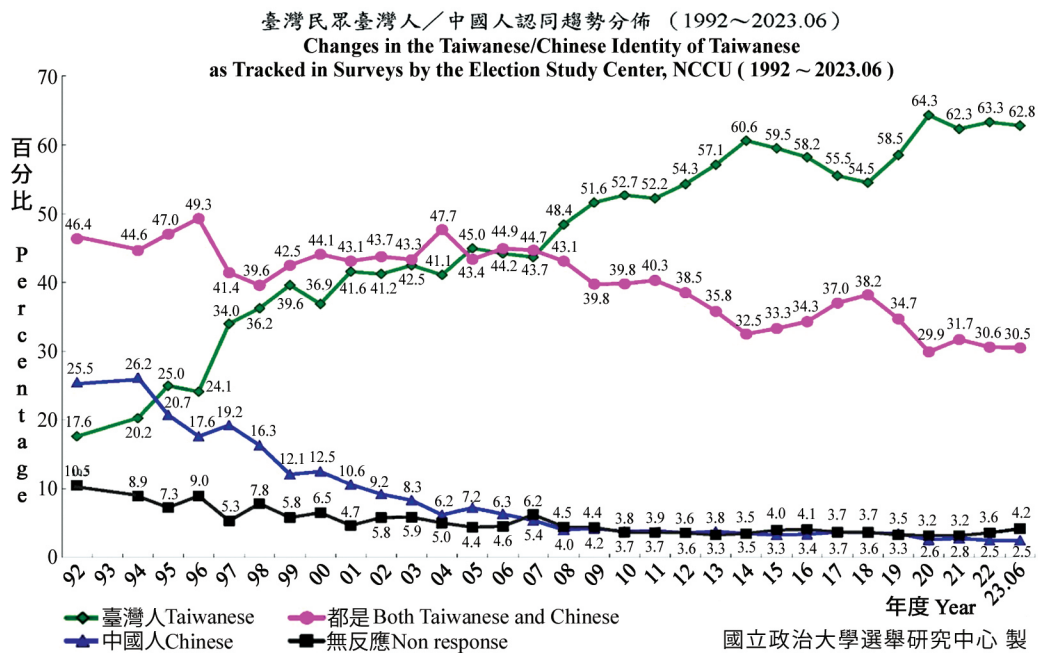


Figure 2. Changes in Taiwanese/Chinese identity of Taiwanese. (Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC.)

¹⁵ See Wang Te-Yu and Liu I-Chou, "Contending identities in Taiwan: Implications for cross-strait relations," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 4 (2004): 568–90, <https://doi.org/>. For later discussions that confirm these findings, see Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, "In Taiwan, Views of Mainland China Mostly Negative," *Pew Research Report*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>; Timothy Rich and Andi Dahmer, "Taiwan Public Polling on Unification with China," *China Brief*, no. 18 (2020), <https://jamestown.org/>; and Chen Yu-Jie, "One China' Contention in China-Taiwan Relations: Law, Politics and Identity," *China Quarterly* 252 (2022): 1025–44, <https://dx.doi.org/>.

Political Views and Resistance to Unification

Political perspectives represent another significant factor in Taiwan's resistance to unification. Even prior to Taiwan's transition to democracy, the prevailing political discourse challenged the legitimacy of the PRC government on ideological grounds. Despite their own authoritarian tendencies, leaders like Chiang Kai-shek maintained that the KMT regime adhered to Sun Yat-sen's principle of popular sovereignty and aimed to eventually establish a democratic system across China. This narrative, disseminated through various speeches and educational campaigns, established a standard that, at the very least, called for a form of democracy characterized by substantial accountability to the populace.¹⁶ This stance established a foundational expectation regarding democracy that many in Taiwan believe the PRC does not and cannot meet.

With Taiwan's transition to a liberal democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s, this expectation and the corresponding criticisms of the PRC's regime have intensified. Despite the imperfect nature of democratic governance and the liberal ethos on the island, Taiwanese residents now experience significantly greater economic and political freedoms compared to those on the mainland.¹⁷ Many individuals in Taiwan have grown accustomed to the elections, freedoms, and rights afforded by a liberal democratic system.¹⁸

Shelley Rigger and her colleagues contend that while identity remains significant, the primary factor driving Taiwanese reluctance to unify lies not solely in cultural disparities, but rather in political values that Taiwanese do not associate with the PRC. These researchers conclude that many Taiwanese believe "they are citizens of a state that is not the PRC. What makes their state different from the PRC—and from Taiwanese states in the past—is that it is a liberal democracy, one built and sustained by Taiwanese themselves." Due to this disparity, numerous Taiwanese harbor negative sentiments toward the PRC government. Moreover, they perceive the PRC as hostile toward Taiwan and actively seeking to

¹⁶ These expectations probably assisted democratic learning in Taiwan and helped set the stage for Taiwan's democratic transition. See my *Conceptions of Chinese Democracy: Reading Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Chiang Ching-kuo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). For specific examples, see "Answers to Questions Submitted by Albert Kaff, Manager of UPI Taipei Bureau, Oct. 22, 1959" in *Selected Address and Messages of President Chiang Kai-shek in 1959* (Taipei: Good Earth, 1960); and "New Year's Message for 1963," *Free China Review*, February 1963.

¹⁷ All major surveys of democracy hold that Taiwan is a liberal democracy. For a recent overview, see Kharis Templeman, "How democratic is Taiwan? Evaluating twenty years of political change," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 2 (2022): 1–24, <https://www.tfd.org.tw/>.

¹⁸ See Frédéric Krumbein, "The human rights gap in the Taiwan Strait: How China pushes Taiwan towards the US," *Pacific Review* 35, no. 3 (2022): 383–414, <https://doi.org/>.

undermine its political institutions. As a result, those who hold such views naturally lack the desire to unify with the mainland as long as the PRC and its ruling CCP remain in power.¹⁹

Distrust of the PRC and Resistance to Unification

A third explanation references distrust.²⁰ In this interpretation, the reluctance to unify with the mainland stems not only from identity and political disparities but also from Taiwanese skepticism regarding the PRC officials' dedication to upholding their promises regarding the unification process and its aftermath. It could be argued that this skepticism arises not only because of the emergence of a distinct Taiwanese identity and disparities in political values but also as an independent factor. Even if the population were to overcome issues related to identity and political preferences, some would still oppose unification due to their lack of confidence in the PRC's credibility.

This distrust stems from observations of bad faith exhibited by PRC officials. Many in Taiwan were disillusioned by the failure of Taipei's efforts to engage with the PRC between 2008 and 2016 under then-President Ma Ying-jeou's KMT government, which did not result in the anticipated changes in PRC behavior as promised. Instead, despite public assurances of fostering engagement, PRC officials implemented policies aimed at limiting Taiwan's international space and gaining political and economic advantages. Numerous Taiwanese, especially university students, also perceive these officials as exploiting steps toward greater economic integration by seeking control over Taiwan's economy and media. Additionally, revelations of PRC misinformation campaigns targeting Taiwan's public opinion have further fueled distrust.²¹

This lack of trust in PRC and CCP officials specifically concerns their ability to uphold promises necessary to address issues of identity and political governance. If a Taiwan government and the PRC were to reach an agreement incorporating a version of One Country, Two Systems, ensuring that Taiwan could maintain its

¹⁹ Shelley Rigger et al., "Why is unification so unpopular in Taiwan? It's the PRC political system, not just culture," *Brookings*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/>. For a comparison with Hong Kong, see Syaru Shirley Lin, "Analyzing the relationship between identity and democratization in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the shadow of China," in *Democratization, National Identity and Foreign Policy in Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (New York: Routledge, 2021).

²⁰ The argument holds that the mistrust operates on both sides of the Strait. See Lin, "'One China' and the Cross-Taiwan Strait Commitment Problem'."

²¹ Chien Li-chung, "PRC targets Taiwan with new disinformation ploy," *Taipei Times*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>; and A.A. Bastian, "China Is Stepping Up Its Information War on Taiwan," *Foreign Policy*, 2 August 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

governing system and preserve current rights and freedoms—essential components for any successful negotiation outcome from the Taiwanese perspective—would PRC officials honor such assurances? Or would they disregard their commitments, using the demands they impose on Taiwan—such as formal acceptance of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan and an irreversible commitment to unification governed by a strict timetable—as leverage to isolate Taiwan from allies and set the stage for unification on PRC terms? Alternatively, might they initially adhere to the process but later impose authoritarian policies on Taiwan?

The spectacle of the PRC undermining the rights, freedoms, and autonomy of Hong Kong's citizens under the same One Country, Two Systems model, despite promises to refrain from interference in Hong Kong's affairs for 50 years following its reversion in 1997, has only reinforced skepticism regarding the PRC's trustworthiness.²²

Conclusion

The preceding discussion highlights various factors contributing to resistance to unification, which can overlap but also operate independently. Identity is shaped by political values but is not solely determined by them, whereas political values derive support from identity but are also influenced by other aspects of Taiwan's history. Skepticism, likewise, may stem from identity and political values, but it can also be influenced by recent developments. Eliminating one source of resistance does not guarantee an overall reduction in resistance.

In contrast, while Taiwan's population has increasingly moved away from an immediate desire to unify with the mainland over the past 25 years, or to engage in a close relationship allowing significant mainland involvement in Taiwan's economy (as evidenced by the Sunflower Movement), a significant majority of people on the mainland express a desire for unification. Recent polling indicates that while large-scale military force is their least preferred method for achieving this objective, a majority still supports such action. Additionally, majorities favor other coercive measures, while an even larger majority rejects Taiwan independence.²³

²² For discussions of the impact of the events in Hong Kong on Taiwan's trust in the PRC, see Overholt, *Hong Kong*; Chih-Jou Jay Chen and Victor Zheng, "Changing Attitudes toward China in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the Xi Jinping Era," *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 134 (2022): 250–66, <https://doi.org/>; and Ja Ian Chong, David WF Huang, and Wen-Chin Wu, "Stand up like a Taiwanese!": PRC coercion and public preferences for resistance," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 24, no. 2 (2023): 208–29, <https://doi.org/>.

²³ See Adam Y. Liu and Xiaojun Li, "Assessing Public Support for (Non) Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 33, no. 145 (2024): 1–13, <https://doi.org/>.

Given the hurdles posed by public opinion in Taiwan to the PRC and CCP leadership's aspirations for imminent and voluntary unification, the evident implication is that, unless significant developments occur in the PRC or Taiwan, the likelihood is increasing that those leaders will need to pursue their unification goals through coercion, potentially resorting to military force. The central question arises: how long will they tolerate their success in deterring Taiwan from declaring independence before succumbing to frustration over their failure to achieve unification and resorting to military action? One answer, based on statements from Xi, suggests a timeframe of 25 years. However, a more pessimistic analysis points to less than 5 years, given the CCP's stated objective of developing the military capability to execute a successful invasion of Taiwan by 2027.²⁴

If the CCP leadership does indeed resort to military force, how would the Taiwanese populace react? Polling conducted immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine indicated that as many as seven in ten Taiwanese would actively resist an invasion.²⁵ However, more recent polling data suggests that only 30% would do so, while indicating that a majority would support the government's implementation of military mobilization policies akin to those observed in Ukraine. This stance prevails despite a majority expressing skepticism regarding Taiwan's ability to resist an invasion independently, doubting that the Taiwan government has taken the necessary steps to defend the island,²⁶ and lacking confidence that the United States would deploy military forces to assist in Taiwan's defense.²⁷

These data have the potential to influence the decisions facing US policy makers for the next several decades. The prospect of Taiwanese resistance to a PRC invasion suggests a scenario wherein US officials could face pressure to intervene militarily in support of Taiwan. Advocates of such action would highlight the

²⁴ This discussion assumes that Xi remains in control of the CCP and that future leaders will embrace the CCP's historical One China policy. A variety of domestic and international factors would also influence decisions to use force as well as any timetable.

²⁵ See "Sixty percent are willing to fight if China invades: poll," *Taipei Times*, 22 May 2022, <https://www.taipetitimes.com/>; and "30% more Taiwanese willing to fight for country after Russian invasion of Ukraine: 70% Now Willing to Defend Taiwan Against Invasion From China," *Taiwan News*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/>.

²⁶ "Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS)" (Taipei: Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica, December 2022), <https://sites.duke.edu/>.

²⁷ "August 2022 Public Opinion Poll – English Excerpt" (Taipei: Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation, 16 August 2022), <https://www.tpof.org/>. Roughly 44 percent of those polled believed the United States would intervene with troops, while 48 percent did not. This represents a significant decline in confidence. For an overview of earlier polling results, see Yuan-kang Wang, "Taiwan public opinion on cross-strait security issues: implications for US foreign policy," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 93–113, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

determination of the Taiwanese people to defend their homeland and argue that the United States has a responsibility to aid fellow democracies facing aggression. Moreover, a crisis prolonged by Taiwanese resistance could afford the United States the opportunity to deploy military forces to the region before Taiwan is conquered, undermining arguments suggesting that the United States is powerless and should accept Taiwan's forcible return to the mainland as a *fait accompli*.

However, it is conceivable that Taiwanese resistance to a PRC invasion could be weakened by economic considerations. One strategy employed by the PRC is to promise Taiwan's future economic prosperity under a unified regime, targeting Taiwanese business interests and historically supported by the PRC's economic success.²⁸ Another tactic involves exerting economic pressure. A Taiwanese population enduring an extended economic downturn caused or exacerbated by mainland coercion may be less inclined to defend the status quo and more receptive to the PRC's incentives or susceptible to further coercive and military measures.²⁹

Given the US policy objective of preserving peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and promoting the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue with the consent of both sides, US policy makers have worked diligently to deter the PRC from invading Taiwan. The significance of this endeavor has been amplified in recent decades by Taiwan's expanding role in the global economy, its strategic location along crucial trade routes, and its adherence to liberal democratic values.

There are notable parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine illustrates that authoritarian revisionism remains a contemporary concern. Neither Ukraine nor Taiwan has a formal defense pact with the United States or its allies, despite their strategic importance. This circumstance likely factored into Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. However, there may be differences between the two situations. Unlike Ukraine, Taiwan may not be as susceptible to invasion due to its lack of a land border with the PRC. Conversely, the PRC may not be as susceptible to external pressure as Russia. While observing the impact of international sanctions on Russia may give pause to CCP leadership considering replicating Russia's actions, the PRC's larger and more diversified economy may give them confidence that they could reconstruct their economy to weather economic repercussions. Threats of sanctions cannot serve as the sole deterrent for the United States in discouraging the PRC's military intentions toward Taiwan.

²⁸ John Dotson, "What is the CCP's Plan for 'Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem'?", *Global Taiwan Brief* 7, no. 3 (2022): 7, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

²⁹ This is in part suggested by Tse-Min Lin, Chun-Ying Wu, and Theodore Charm, "When Independence Meets Reality: Symbolic and Pragmatic Politics in Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2023): 1–22, <https://doi.org/>.

Various forms of deterrence can compensate for Taiwan's absence of formal defense alliances and aid US policy makers in potential intervention scenarios. Despite lacking alliances, Western military support for Ukraine's resistance has prolonged the conflict, inflicted significant losses on Russia, and cast doubt on the success of Putin's endeavors. Taiwan's historical and current readiness to resist a hostile takeover suggests it could mirror Ukraine's situation in the eyes of PRC leaders. This underscores the importance of ongoing efforts to equip Taiwan with arms and training and suggests that more should be done to escalate the perceived costs to the PRC of a forcible takeover. Additionally, given that a PRC military seizure of Taiwan threatens key US national interests, such as economic concerns and political values, policy makers should reinforce recent clarifications of US policy, emphasizing a commitment to defend Taiwan against unprovoked PRC aggression.³⁰ The implicit message to the PRC should be that it would confront not only the United States but also a substantial portion of Taiwan's population in the event of an invasion.

Actions on the other side of deterrence—reassurance—are equally necessary.³¹ Messaging to the PRC should stress that while the US supports Taiwan's desire to resist coerced unification, it does not endorse hostility toward the mainland or unilateral declarations of independence by Taiwan.³² Furthermore, it should convey that if the PRC abandons its aggressive intentions toward the island, its security will not be compromised. While avoiding concessions regarding Taiwan's neutralization or "Finlandization,"³³ assurances could be given that there are no plans to utilize Taiwan as a base for offensive kinetic operations against the PRC.³⁴ Finally, the United States should underscore the importance of responsible global citizenship. PRC adherence to the current Rules-Based International Order, rather than pursuing its revisionist nationalist agenda in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, would alleviate tensions in Asia, reduce friction with the United States and its allies, and foster US willingness to engage with the PRC on mutually beneficial economic and trade matters. 🌐

³⁰ For example, "Biden Says US will Defend Taiwan if China Attacks," *BBC*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

³¹ For the importance of reassurance on this topic, see Bonnie S. Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen, "Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs*, 30 November 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

³² Steve Holland, Nandita Bose and Trevor Hunnicutt, "U.S. does not support Taiwan independence, Biden says," *Reuters*, 13 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

³³ Bruce Gilley, "Not So Dire Straits: How the Finlandization of Taiwan Benefits US Security," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 1 (January–February 2010): 44–60, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

³⁴ Such a position is in keeping with the previous US interpretation and application of the mutual defense treaty it held with the Republic of China from the mid-1950s until 1979.

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