

# THE TAIWAN QUESTION IN THE EMERGENCE OF A MULTIPOLAR WORLD (2019–2024)

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**Abstract:** Geopolitical analysis of the fluctuating dynamics in cross-Strait relations between the PRC and the authorities in Taipei during the profound geopolitical changes that took place in the period 2019–2024.

**Keywords:** PRC; ROC; Guomintang; Democratic Progressive Party; Tsai Ing-wen.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the period 2019–2024, a sustained deterioration has been observed in relations between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the authorities in Taipei, coinciding with the consolidation of the emergence of a multipolar world. Although there are long-term trends that date back to the establishment of the current status quo in 1949, recent times have witnessed the convergence of a series of phenomena that have not only deepened preexisting problems but also reduced the prospects for improved ties between the island and the mainland in the short term.

In light of this, the present study seeks to analyze the dynamics between the PRC and the island of Taiwan, through a review of the most significant geopolitical events that took place between 2019 and 2024, with the aim of contributing to an understanding of their current state and possible prospects for the decade 2020–2029.

## 2. DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned in the introduction, the status quo between the island of Taiwan and the rest of China is the result of the decisive victory of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) over the Guomintang troops on the mainland and the founding of the PRC on October 1, 1949. This led to the relocation of the Guomintang, the government of the Republic of China (ROC), and its armed forces to the island of Taiwan, which to this day remains outside the effective control of Beijing.

Since then, this situation has persisted thanks to four fundamental factors. First, there is the so-called One China Principle, under which both the PRC and the ROC claim to be the sole legitimate government of all China, thus affirming that China is a single and indivisible country. Second, both the PRC and the ROC have contested each other’s diplomatic recognition on the international stage. Third, neither side has thus far possessed sufficient military capability to guarantee victory in the event of an armed conflict. Finally, the status quo was also preserved by the balance of power during the bipolar (1945–1991) and unipolar (1991–2008)<sup>31</sup> periods, which prevented either Beijing or Taipei from having the diplomatic latitude to attempt to resolve the Taiwan Question by force.

Nevertheless, these four factors have been significantly altered in recent years.

With regard to the consensus on the One China Principle, support for it has progressively declined on the island of Taiwan with the emergence, in recent decades, of a new political phenomenon: Taiwanese nationalism. Unlike Chinese nationalism<sup>32</sup>, Taiwanese nationalism arose as a political movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as a result of the democratization process of the ROC. This current, more popular among younger generations, asserts a distinct Taiwanese identity, understood as separate from the Chinese nation, with a clear tendency toward independence. This represents a sharp break with the island’s political tradition and cannot be disentangled from the increasingly evident failure of Taipei’s authorities to present themselves to the world as

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<sup>31</sup> Although periodizations of this kind are always debatable in nature, the author of the text considers that the combination of the 2008 Financial Crisis, the Beijing Olympic Games, and the expansion of the multilateral system through forums such as the G20 and BRICS are sufficiently significant milestones to mark a change of era.

<sup>32</sup> This being the characteristic political ideology of the Guomintang, which governed the island continuously between 1945 and 2000.

the sole legitimate government of all China.

The leading exponent of this current has been the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), founded in 1986, which has governed the island uninterruptedly since 2016. Both the growing popularity of Taiwanese nationalism and the DPP's eight years in power have consolidated a sense of identity among significant sectors of the population, which undermines the prospects for a peaceful reunification of China<sup>33</sup>. Notably, one of the main political events that propelled the DPP to power in 2016 was the outbreak in 2014 of the Sunflower Movement, a series of mass protests largely composed of students opposing a proposed trade agreement between Taiwan and the rest of China<sup>34</sup>.

Since the beginning of President Tsai Ing-wen's mandate in 2016, relations between Beijing and the authorities in Taiwan have suffered a sharp deterioration. The first point of conflict was Tsai's refusal to affirm support for the so-called 1992 Consensus, which had framed relations between Beijing and Taipei on the basis of agreement on the One China Principle<sup>35</sup>. This was soon compounded by a second incident that further alienated the Chinese leadership: just seven months after taking office, Tsai held a phone call with then newly elected U.S. President Donald Trump, who had conducted his campaign with the most explicitly anti-China rhetoric seen up to that point. The incident not only represented a grave violation of the One China policy, but also gave significant impetus to the deterioration of Sino-American relations<sup>36</sup>. This clear break with the status quo was the initial trigger for the sustained worsening of cross-Strait relations that has continued up to the writing of this text.

Less than three years later, the protests that shook the former British colony of Hong Kong in 2019 further alienated Taiwan's population, which expressed itself at the polls in January 2020 with a resounding victory for the DPP. The reduced autonomy of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region that emerged from the events of 2019 also had political implications for Beijing–Taipei relations, as it effectively eliminated, for the foreseeable future, the prospect of applying the "One Country, Two Systems" model to the Taiwan Question<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, in 2021, a survey indicated that around 90 percent of Taiwanese would reject "One Country, Two Systems" as a model<sup>38</sup>.

For her part, Tsai wasted no time in hardening her stance toward Beijing. In her inaugural address for her second term in mid-2020, she emphasized the need to carry out major military reforms. Since then, she has increased the defense budget for the acquisition of various weapons systems, accepted and deepened military cooperation with the United States, and extended the period of mandatory military service from four months to one year<sup>39</sup>.

Regarding the contested international recognition of the PRC and the ROC, this situation appears to be approaching a critical juncture for Taipei. Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the international community has faced the dilemma of which Chinese government to recognize, as both the PRC and the ROC have maintained their claim to be the sole legitimate government of the same country. In the early years of the Cold War, the ROC enjoyed a clear advantage in international recognition, since during the PRC's first decade it had few diplomatic relations outside the Socialist Bloc. The 1960s marked a qualitative leap in Beijing's insertion into the international community by allowing it to establish relations with newly independent nations emerging from decolonization. However, the PRC's admission to the United Nations in 1971 greatly accelerated this trend<sup>40</sup>.

Despite this, it is possible to identify periods of improvement in relations between the PRC and Taipei's authorities, during which this competition was temporarily suspended. Such was the case during the eight years of the

<sup>33</sup> Fell, Dafydd, *Government and Politics in Taiwan*, EEUU; Routledge, Segunda Edición, 2018, pág.152.

<sup>34</sup> Davidson, Helen, "How the Sunflower movement birthed a generation determined to protect Taiwan", *The Guardian*, 21/03/2024, Fuente Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/21/what-is-taiwan-sunflower-movement-china>, Consultado: 14/11/2024.

<sup>35</sup> Hass, Ryan, Glaser, Bonnie, y Bush, Richard, *U.S.–Taiwan Relations Will China's Challenge Lead to a Crisis?*, EEUU, Brookings Institution Press, 2023, pág.54.

<sup>36</sup> Lynch, Timothy J., *In The Shadow Of The Cold War American Foreign Policy from George Bush Sr. to Donald Trump*, Reino Unido, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pág.230.

<sup>37</sup> This is the name by which the political agreement between the PRC government and the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao is known, whereby both former colonies would retain their own governmental, economic, legal, financial, and commercial systems.

<sup>38</sup> Sullivan, Jonathan y Nachman, Lev, *Taiwan: A Contested Democracy Under Threat*, Reino Unido, Agenda publishing, 2024, pág.140.

<sup>39</sup> Sullivan y Nachman, 2024, pág.105.

<sup>40</sup> Friedman, Jeremy, *Shadow Cold War. The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*, EEUU, University of North Carolina Press, 2015, pág.195.

Guomindang presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016), during which the ROC did not lose recognition from a single country to the PRC<sup>41</sup>. With the arrival of Tsai's presidency and the subsequent deterioration of relations with Beijing, the situation quickly reversed, and the ROC lost recognition from ten more countries over the course of her mandate. By January 2024, the ROC retained formal diplomatic recognition from only eleven United Nations member states and the Holy See<sup>42</sup>.

This trend carries important implications for Beijing–Taipei relations, as it could lead the island's leaders to abandon the claim of presenting themselves formally as the government of China and reinvent themselves, for instance, as the Republic of Taiwan. This would open up new diplomatic horizons for Taipei in the international arena, but it would also amount to a declaration of independence from China, which would very likely result in armed conflict with Beijing.

As for the respective military capabilities of Beijing and Taipei, these are undergoing rapid transformation. Although Taipei's prospects of reclaiming mainland China have always been exceedingly slim, the ROC's continued governance over the island of Taiwan was for decades ensured by the absence of a credible naval force on the part of the PRC. However, this situation has clearly shifted in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, owing to the massive expansion and modernization of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). In the last 15 years, the PLAN has incorporated three aircraft carriers (the *Liaoning*, the *Shandong*, and the *Fujian*), while reports indicate that a fourth, the Type 004<sup>43</sup>, is currently under construction. Moreover, since 2020, the PRC has possessed the largest fleet of combat vessels in the world (although it remains well below the U.S. fleet in terms of tonnage)<sup>44</sup>.

The continued expansion of China's naval resources has been accompanied by a comprehensive modernization of its armed forces, a sustained emphasis on increased combat readiness, recurring military exercises, and qualitative advances in its weapons systems (exemplified by the production of fifth-generation J-20 fighter aircraft, DF-21D missiles, and GJ-11 stealth drones, among others). In addition to these improvements in equipment and weapon systems, the PLA has also undergone major organizational reforms in recent years, with strong emphasis placed on the Eastern Theater Command—the only one of the PLA's five theaters of operations that would play a leading role in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. Due to these transformations, the U.S. Department of State estimates that by 2027 the military balance in the region will have definitively shifted in favor of the PRC<sup>45</sup>.

Although a conflict over Taiwan would involve serious strategic, logistical, and operational challenges, the current trajectory implies that Taipei's ability to eventually declare independence from China and successfully resist the inevitable ensuing armed conflict will systematically diminish over time. While it could be argued that this scenario makes a Taiwanese separatist attempt less likely as time passes, it could also be suggested that this trend adds a sense of urgency to the agenda of pro-independence sectors, who might feel compelled to act decisively before their window of opportunity closes entirely.

Nevertheless, an analysis of the dynamics between Beijing and Taipei would be incomplete without considering the geopolitical context in which they unfold. Given that an exhaustive analysis of all the factors present in the strategic calculations of Beijing and Taipei would exceed the limits of this study, we will restrict ourselves to examining the impact of the most important foreign factor on the Taiwan Question: the United States.

U.S. involvement in the Taiwan Question has been a continuous reality since Washington's strategic decision to defend Chiang Kai-shek's regime on the island as a consequence of the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–1953). Since then, the United States has repeatedly interfered in the region, with the most notable cases being the so-

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<sup>41</sup> Hass, Glaser, y Bush, 2023, pág.61.

<sup>42</sup> "Countries that Recognize Taiwan 2024", *World Population Review*, Fuente Online: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-that-recognize-taiwan>, Consultado: 26/11/2024.

<sup>43</sup> Wong, Hayley, "China's aircraft carrier No 4 on track with 'no technical bottleneck', admiral reveals in first official confirmation", *South China Morning Post*, 06/03/2024, Fuente Online: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3254415/chinas-aircraft-carrier-no-4-track-no-technical-bottleneck-admiral-reveals-first-official>, Consultado: 07/11/2024.

<sup>44</sup> "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China.", Office of The Secretary of Defense, EEUU, 2020, pág.vii.

<sup>45</sup> Sullivan y Nachman, 2024, pág.100-101.

called three Taiwan Strait Crises (1954–1955<sup>46</sup>, 1958<sup>47</sup>, 1995–1996<sup>48</sup>).

Although Washington severed formal diplomatic relations with Taipei when it officially recognized the PRC in 1979<sup>49</sup>, the United States quickly reaffirmed its support for the island's government through the provision of arms and the development of the doctrine of "strategic ambiguity." According to this posture, for decades Washington never stated explicitly that it would intervene militarily on behalf of the island's government in the event of a conflict with the rest of China, but neither did it categorically deny the possibility. This ambivalent stance allowed the United States to implicitly threaten the PRC while avoiding formal commitments, thus preserving greater room for maneuver in the face of any contingency.

Although the history of Sino-American relations has experienced numerous ups and downs over the decades, a marked deterioration in relations between Washington and Beijing can be observed beginning with Barack Obama's second presidency (2012–2017). Among the most significant developments of this period were a U.S. "pivot to Asia" and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a regional trade agreement project aimed at excluding China<sup>50</sup>.

However, with the arrival of Donald Trump's first presidency (2017–2021), there was a clear worsening of relations, fueled by harsh anti-China rhetoric, the launch of the so-called Trade War against the PRC, global efforts to boycott Chinese technology companies<sup>51</sup>, and the arrest of Huawei executive and daughter of the company's founder, Meng Wanzhou<sup>52</sup>.

It was within this context that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019 occurred, not only causing major economic disruptions worldwide but also exposing the vulnerability of global trade chains and accelerating processes of economic isolationism—particularly in the case of the United States. Furthermore, the fact that the virus was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan was quickly incorporated into the anti-China rhetoric of the U.S. government, which led not only to greater tension in bilateral relations between Beijing and Washington but also to a sharp increase in cases of sinophobia and racially motivated attacks in the United States<sup>53</sup>.

The transition from the Republican administration of Donald Trump to the Democratic administration of Joe Biden did not result in improved bilateral relations; on the contrary, tensions increased. Among the most noteworthy events were several packages of anti-China legislation, such as those targeting technology and propaganda, Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, and the boycott of the Beijing 2022 Olympic Games.

Perhaps the most consequential and, at the same time, most difficult to quantify change has been Biden's repeated statements regarding a potential conflict over the island of Taiwan. Breaking with decades of "strategic ambiguity," Biden on three separate occasions asserted that the United States would directly intervene on behalf of Taipei in an armed conflict with the PRC<sup>54</sup>. Although these statements were later denied by White House officials and came from a president whose cognitive faculties were called into question to the point that his presidential candidacy in 2024 was withdrawn by his own party, they remain declarations that neither Beijing nor the rest of the international community can easily ignore.

<sup>46</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, EEUU, University of North Carolina Press, 2001, pág.170-171.

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, Jay *The Generalissimo. Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, EEUU, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, pág.493.

<sup>48</sup> Lampton, David M. *Following the Leader. Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2014, pág.114-115.

<sup>49</sup> Chi-kwan, Mark, "To 'educate' Deng Xiaoping in capitalism:

Thatcher's visit to China and the future of Hong Kong in 1982", *Cold War History*, 2015, pág.2.

<sup>50</sup> Lynch, Timothy J., *In The Shadow Of The Cold War American Foreign Policy from George Bush Sr. to Donald Trump*, Reino Unido, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pág.215.

<sup>51</sup> Segev, Hiddai, Ella, Doron and Orion, Assaf, "My Way or the Huawei? The United States-China Race for 5G Dominance", *Institute for National Security Studies*, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Horowitz, Julia, "Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou arrested in Canada, faces extradition to United States", *CNN Business*, 06/12/2018, fuente online: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/05/tech/huawei-cfo-arrested-canada/index.html>, consultado: 20/03/2020.

<sup>53</sup> Edara, Inna Reddy, "Anti-Asian Racism in the Shadow of COVID-19 in the USA: Reported Incidents, Psychological Implications, and Coping Resources", *Journal of Psychological Research*, Vol 2, pág.13-22, 30/07/2020, pág.13.

<sup>54</sup> Hass, Glaser, y Bush, 2023, pág.86-87.

Moreover, Biden's presidency unfolded in an increasingly complex geopolitical context for the United States across the Eurasian space. The chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, the subsequent and almost immediate collapse of the pro-U.S. regime governing the country, and the surprisingly swift reconquest carried out by the Taliban dealt severe blows to Washington's prestige in the eyes of the world<sup>55</sup>.

At the same time, the U.S. departure from Afghanistan also represented strategic gains for Beijing. First, the PRC quickly opened communication channels with the new Taliban regime to establish a *modus vivendi* between the two<sup>56</sup>. Second, for the first time since 2001, Beijing no longer had to contend with the presence of a large U.S. occupying army in a neighboring country.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan was quickly followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022 and continues at the time of writing. While the outbreak of the war initially provided the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with renewed purpose in supporting Ukraine's war effort, as the conflict has dragged on and both military and financial transfers have accumulated, the initial enthusiasm experienced in the West during the first months of the conflict has waned.

Furthermore, as the war approaches its third year, Russia has been steadily accumulating victories while Kyiv's position appears increasingly precarious. Added to this was Donald Trump's new victory in the presidential election held on November 5, 2024. Unlike his predecessor Biden and Democratic candidate Kamala Harris, who repeatedly expressed unconditional support for Ukraine, Trump adopted a stance prioritizing the negotiation of a peace agreement rather than the pursuit of a military victory. This position may not only generate increasing tensions with the Ukrainian government but also with Washington's European allies, who view the conflict as a central element of their foreign policy.

In parallel with the war in Ukraine, the Gaza War has been ongoing since October 2023, in which the State of Israel—an extremely close ally of Washington—has become embroiled in a conflict that has expanded beyond Palestine and reached Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. This increasingly regional war, with the potential for further escalation, has once again seen the United States directly and indirectly involved in the Middle East—a strategic urgency that divides its attention and strains its resources at a time when its hegemony appears increasingly challenged.

Although this second presidency of Donald Trump may signify an acceleration of the deterioration in Sino-American relations, his isolationist stance, personalist foreign policy, and unpredictable character cast doubt on his capacity to carry out an effective anti-China policy within an increasingly disorderly global system.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has briefly analyzed the evolution of relations between Beijing and the authorities in Taiwan within a fluctuating internal and external context. These transformations undermine the fundamental pillars on which the cross-Strait status quo has been built since 1949. In the absence of a viable political solution, relations between Beijing and the authorities in Taipei appear to be moving toward increasingly uncertain waters.

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