

# FROM PERSUASION TO COERCION: BEIJING'S APPROACH TO TAIWAN AND TAIWAN'S RESPONSE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beijing's goal concerning Taiwan is decidedly revisionist. It wishes to end the island's separate political existence and incorporate it into the People's Republic of China under terms similar to those employed for Hong Kong — known as one country, two systems (1C2S) — and so place limits on Taiwan's sovereignty and democracy.

That formula was unacceptable to Taiwan's authoritarian leaders when it was first developed in the late 1980s. Once Taiwan made the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, the public rejected it as well. Democracy also opened the door to the minority on Taiwan who wanted *de jure* independence and total separation from China, a source of great concern in Beijing. Still, Beijing held out the hope that Taiwan could be persuaded to accept 1C2S, and those hopes rose when Ma Ying-jeou, then head of the main conservative party, the Kuomintang, became president in 2008. Thereafter, cross-Strait relations did improve economically, but for a variety of reasons the political relationship stalled. Worse yet for China, Ma was succeeded in 2016 by Tsai Ing-wen, the leader of the Democratic Progressive Party, which Beijing associates with the goal of independence.

Beijing therefore faces a choice among several options. Hypothetically, it could make 1C2S more palatable to Taiwan, but there is no sign that it will do so. It could return to persuasion if the Kuomintang returns to power, but there is a good possibility that it would not be able to move Taiwan closer to unification than it did with Ma. China's military power is growing, but the risks of war and American intervention are too

high. The "just right" option is a mix of intimidation, pressure, and cooptation, which is what China has done in response to President Tsai's election. The risks are lower and over time Taiwan's will to resist might falter. Indeed, division and mistrust in Taiwan's politics sap its ability to cope with an increasingly clever and aggressive China.

## INTRODUCTION

Of all the targets of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) external policy, Taiwan is unique. From its beginning in 1949, the PRC regime has claimed the island as part of China's sovereign territory.<sup>1</sup> Control of Taiwan was important because it had been part of the last imperial dynasty, and it was there that Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang (KMT)-led Republic of China (ROC) government retreated after his defeat on the mainland at the hands of Mao Zedong's communists. For Beijing, the civil war would not be over until the PRC flag flew over the island. Nor was Taiwan's strategic value as a key link in the western Pacific's first island chain lost on China's leaders. From 1949 on, therefore, ending Taiwan's separate existence has been a core objective of the PRC regime.

Taiwan was also different from some of the other territories in the East or South China Seas that the PRC has claimed. Unlike the Senkaku or Spratly islands, people live on Taiwan — nearly 24 million today. Moreover, since Taiwan made the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the island's adults vote in elections and so have a say over their destiny.

## UNIFICATION THROUGH PERSUASION

Yet the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime was realistic about how to pursue the objective. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) long lacked the capabilities to mount an invasion of Taiwan, particularly after 1954, when the United States pledged by treaty to protect the island. Beijing's prospects improved in 1979 when the Carter administration established diplomatic relations with the PRC — terminating diplomatic ties with Taiwan and the defense treaty.



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Cutting the American cord made Chinese leaders more optimistic that they might *persuade* Taiwan's leaders to accept an end to cross-Strait division (war was not an option because economic growth was a much higher priority). They gradually elaborated a blueprint for the post-unification relationship between Taiwan and the central government in Beijing, similar to what was envisioned for Hong Kong. This blueprint was dubbed “one country, two systems” (*yiguo liangzhi*, or 1C2S). Note that the “two systems” were not political but economic — socialism and capitalism.

The basic substantive elements of 1C2S were as follows:

- The Republic of China, the international rival to the PRC, would cease to exist;
- Taiwan would legally become part of the sovereign territory of the PRC, and the latter's flag would fly over the island;
- Taiwan would not be a province of China but a “special administrative region”;
- The PRC government in Beijing would control Taipei's foreign and defense affairs;

- Economic and social life in Taiwan would continue as before;
- The Taiwan authorities could keep their army and Beijing would not station PLA troops on the island, but Taiwan could not be a platform for the projection of U.S. power against China; and
- Although Taiwan's leaders were promised “a high degree of autonomy” to administer domestic affairs, Beijing would retain control over how those leaders were selected and therefore the policies they pursued. It would exclude those whose intentions China mistrusted.

For PRC leaders, this model of “home rule with CCP characteristics” seemed like a plausible and even optimal formula for ending their fundamental dispute with Taiwan. They believed that cross-Strait economic interdependence, which began in the 1980s and has flourished thereafter — and the fact that the great majority of the residents of the island were ethnic Chinese — would create sufficient material and psychological incentives to get Taiwan's leaders to give up the claim that the ROC was a rival China. Taiwan business executives might become political advocates for unification.<sup>2</sup>

KMT leaders of the 1980s had a different approach to unification, but unification was their declared goal. If Beijing could convince the KMT to accept 1C2S, everything would follow. An additional factor: Until the late 1980s, the KMT maintained tough, authoritarian control over the island's population, and its leaders would have the freedom to cut a deal if they chose to. Some pressure might still be required to bring them around, but Beijing thought it could still achieve its objective without war. It assumed that as the power balance had shifted more in Beijing's favor, Taiwan's leaders would recognize reality and settle. As the Chinese saying goes, “once ripe, the melon drops from its stem” (*guashu diluo*).

## STRATEGIC SETBACK: TAIWAN'S DEMOCRATIZATION

But there was a surprise in store for Beijing. The melon did not drop. For most of the last 40 years, David has outplayed Goliath. Even as the Chinese and Taiwan

economies became more interdependent, Beijing has had no success in achieving unification through persuasion.

Some international factors had worked in Taiwan's favor. The Reagan administration and its successors revitalized American support for Taiwan's security. Also, the end of the Soviet Union diminished China's global strategic significance and, therefore, the need for Washington to tread lightly on issues that Beijing claimed were "sensitive," like Taiwan. But the most important reason there was no progress towards unification was Taiwan's transition from a tough authoritarian system to a full democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This, in turn, created obstacles to China's ambitions:

- It opened the door for new players. Gradually, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) challenged KMT political dominance;
- A long-suppressed Taiwanese identity flowered, to the point that 90% of people polled consistently say that they are either "Taiwanese only" or "Chinese and Taiwanese" (the terms are undefined);
- Two presidents — Lee Teng-hui of the KMT and Chen Shui-bian of the DPP exploited Taiwanese nationalism and anti-China sentiment to win political power;
- The share of the population in favor of unification remained low, and around 80% of the population preferred the status quo for the foreseeable future or forever; and
- If political negotiations of any kind were to occur with China, the Taiwan public effectively had a seat at the table. For example, any major change in the island's relationship with the PRC would require a constitutional amendment. That can only happen if three-fourths of the members of the Legislative Yuan approve and a majority of all eligible voters endorse the change through a referendum.

For China, Taiwan's democratization and the array of new ideas it produced not only impeded unification but also increased its fear that Taiwan leaders and citizens might move towards *de jure* independence. Several developments increased this fear. The DPP's

1991 charter stated the creation of a "Republic of Taiwan" as the party's objective (the party claims that more moderate resolutions have superseded that aim). Second, young people appear to be more in favor of independence than their elders. Third, DPP administrations have placed more emphasis on Taiwan history and culture in school textbooks. Fourth, the increasing use of the referendum on policy issues creates a worry in Beijing that it might be used to change Taiwan's legal status.



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Beijing likely puts little faith in the results of Taiwan opinion surveys that show that support for independence is almost as low as for unification. The PRC also ignores that Taiwan's constitutional system is as much an obstacle to independence as it is to unification. It likely worries that pro-independence politicians could increase support for actions leading to independence through demagogic appeals. Hence, during the latter part of the Lee Teng-hui administration (1995-2000) and all of Chen Shui-bian's (2000-08), Beijing made "opposing independence" the primary focus of its near-term policy. "Promoting unification" was secondary at best.

## THE MA YING-JEOU OPPORTUNITY

For China, the 2008 victory of KMT leader Ma Ying-jeou seemed to be the magic moment to begin progress towards its ultimate objective. He was a mainlander by birth and a Chinese nationalist by temperament. Although he affirmed Taiwan's success, he would not rule out unification. In 2005, his party reached a consensus with the CCP on gradually developing cross-Strait relations. Called "peaceful development," this process would start with easier, economic issues and move later to harder, political matters. To the PRC, it seemed that the pressure it had exerted against the

Chen Shui-bian administration had created a basis for persuasion. Promoting unification was back in vogue.

Once Ma became president, he assured Beijing that independence was not on his agenda, and he promoted the normalization, expansion, and institutionalization of cross-Strait relations. His grand strategy was to increase Beijing's stakes in a positive relationship so much that it would never consider resolving the Taiwan issue through force. Beijing rewarded Ma by allowing Taiwan greater participation in the international community, but it made clear that there were limits without the beginning of political talks.

But the Taiwan public was against political talks, and there were divisions within the KMT over Ma's policies. The split was between the "deep blue" and "light blue" factions (the KMT flag is blue). The former tended to be mainlanders whose families came to Taiwan after 1945 and who were open to the "right kind" of unification. The latter were native Taiwanese whose families had been on the island for several generations.<sup>3</sup> To make matters worse for Beijing, Taiwan's political system was changing. Politics was no longer confined to the competition and interaction of political parties. New social and political forces emerged to promote a variety of causes, mobilized by post-modern sentiments and social media. The Sunflower Movement of 2014, mounted to block legislative consideration of an agreement with Beijing on trade in services, was the most consequential of these, and it effectively brought Ma's cross-Strait engagement to a halt. It also helped sweep the DPP to power at the local and central levels of government. As of 2016, it seemed as if the KMT had permanently become a minority party. More than a decade of patient work by Beijing was down the drain. Objectively, in view of the KMT defeat, Beijing could have worked out a *modus vivendi* with current Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and her DPP government, but it declined to do so.

That Beijing made less progress with Ma than expected reveals an important truth. A successful DPP drive to *de jure* independence would be a big blow to the PRC's interests. But an equally serious blow is permanent separation, whether formalized or not. During the Ma administration, Chinese concerns grew that he might be creating just such an outcome, precluding unification.

## OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

For Beijing, the failure to meet expectations with Ma and the low appeal 1C2S formula in Taiwan raises the question of what current Chinese President Xi Jinping and his colleagues should do. The least likely option is that Beijing abandons 1C2S altogether and makes Taiwan a more accommodating offer. This is essentially a zero-probability scenario.

Three options are more plausible: resuming the effort to persuade Taiwan to accept 1C2S, using force, or a middle option of coercing Taipei without violence.

### *Returning to a persuasion-based approach*

If the January 2020 elections produce a new KMT government — Han Kuo-yu as president and a KMT majority in the Legislative Yuan, Beijing might well resume the gradualist, persuasion-oriented approach it used during the Ma administration. It would have achieved its principal near-term goal (driving the DPP from power) and might find it reassuring that Han, born in Taiwan in 1957, comes from a mainlander family. Beijing could help Han stimulate economic growth by removing political obstacles.

On the other hand, the PRC has reasons to question whether a President Han would be any more willing to induce movement towards unification than Ma was. But Taiwan public opinion and substantive differences would still be obstacles:

- The KMT has yet to develop a general strategy for cross-Strait relations that would be appropriate for a post-Tsai era, one that fosters a broader consensus on how to prevent economic dependence trapping Taiwan into political talks that it is not ready to undertake;
- Given Han's experience as a politician and his populist campaign style, he is likely to be most attuned to the sentiments of the "light blue" Taiwanese wing of the party, who are happy to enjoy the benefits of economic ties with China but are wary of the mainland's political goals (also, Han has a reputation of making campaign promises he cannot fulfill);

- A specific question is whether Han would pledge to adhere to the “1992 Consensus,” the ambiguous formula that Ma used to make progress on economic and social issues. But as of the summer of 2019, there were signals from the Han camp that perhaps the 1992 Consensus was no longer useful.

The Hong Kong protests during the summer and fall of 2019 were a disaster for 1C2S brand and put the KMT on the defensive. Han vowed that if he became president, 1C2S would only be adopted “over [his] dead body.”<sup>4</sup> Xi’s dangling of a different Taiwan model for 1C2S didn’t help, because he said nothing about the content of that model and in his authoritative speech on Taiwan in January 2019, he made the formula less attractive than it was when originally conceived.<sup>5</sup>

In my judgment, Beijing will insist that a new KMT government in Taiwan make an early pledge to begin political talks. That would immediately put Han on the spot, because public support for those talks is low and the two sides have yet to create a shared framework for them. That Han has proclaimed his fidelity to the ROC during the campaign exposes the continuing conceptual gap between the KMT and Beijing.

Even if the KMT controls the presidency and the legislature, it will not necessarily be able to carry out an agenda that will be acceptable to China. Even if the DPP loses its legislative majority, it would still be willing and able to obstruct administration initiatives.

Additionally, the social movements that emerged after 2008 and culminated in the Sunflower Movement of 2014 have not gone away and could be re-mobilized to block policies that activists view as dangerous.

Thus, Taiwan’s political reality shows why Beijing will likely be guarded in its expectations of a Han presidency. The option of “gentle persuasion” and the economic incentives that might come with it are not likely to yield the *political* outcomes that Beijing desires.

### **A military solution**

When people consider alternatives to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, including people in China, they think about China undertaking a military

campaign to break the political will of Taiwan leaders and the Taiwan public, and, if that is not successful, mounting an invasion of the island. Beijing has never renounced the use of force. Fundamentally, the PRC regards the Taiwan matter as an internal affair, and does not rule out fighting to achieve its goals. Technically, the civil-war state of hostilities still exists.

In March 2005, China’s National People’s Congress passed the 2005 Anti-Secession Law. In article 8, the law stated:

In the event that the “Taiwan independence” secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan’s secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan’s secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>6</sup>

The law’s conditions triggering “non-peaceful means” are stated quite vaguely. The first is the *fact* of secession — not a formal authoritative action. When the second condition refers to “major incidents that will lead to Taiwan’s secession,” would that include U.S.-Taiwan military exercises, which some in Washington advocate? On the third condition (“the possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted”), might Beijing judge that this condition were met if the Taipei government — even a China-leaning government — were unwilling to conclude or even enter into unification negotiations because the PRC terms were unacceptable and could not command public support?

In enhancing deterrence, a certain amount of fuzziness in defining boundaries is not necessarily a bad thing. A red line that is too precise will be read by a greedy, risk-accepting adversary as a license to go right up to the line and not cross it. So far, Beijing has relied on the law’s vagueness to serve as a kind of strategic ambiguity.

Aside from definitional vagueness, China’s decision-making process creates uncertainty about its intentions:

- The PRC and only the PRC will decide when Taiwan has crossed a use-of-force red line. How Beijing

might define “the fact of secession from China” or the “complete exhaustion” of possibilities for peaceful reunification is very different from how Taipei or Washington might define them;

- China’s analytic and policy agencies and its top leaders tend to make worst-case judgments on trends that affect the regime’s fundamental interests, which makes it more likely that they would exaggerate the impact of an “edgy” Taiwan or American initiative; and
- Third, at the end of the day, if senior Chinese leaders decide that Taiwan has gone too far, it won’t matter what the vague language of the Anti-Secession Law says or what the reality on Taiwan is.

### ***Intimidation: The “just right” option***

If a Chinese policy of persuasion is low-risk and low-reward, and if the use of force entails high risks and uncertain rewards, is there an approach whose risks are modest and chances of success are greater? In fact, a long-term campaign of intimidation, pressure, and cooptation of constituencies within Taiwan seems to be a more optimal strategy.

Intimidation offers a wide range of tools to keep Taiwan on the defensive and wear down its psychological confidence: suspending interaction between the organizations that have conducted cross-Strait relations; unevenly implementing existing cross-Strait agreements; creating difficulties for Taiwan companies whose leaders express sympathies for the DPP; snatching Taiwan’s diplomatic allies; marginalizing Taiwan in the international system; pressuring third-country companies and governments to employ nomenclature about Taiwan that favors the PRC; conducting military exercises in the area surrounding Taiwan; restricting PRC students from studying in Taiwan; restricting Chinese tourist travel to Taiwan; limiting interaction between PRC scholars and pro-DPP scholars; and so on. The incentives include purchases of Taiwan products, with preferences given for jurisdictions with KMT leaders; “national treatment” for Taiwan businessmen, entrepreneurs, and students; and so on.

Then there is the array of ways that Beijing has to penetrate and interfere in Taiwan politics: cyber warfare, manipulating social media, controlling or influencing traditional media, funneling money through cut-outs to KMT campaign organizations, and so on. Because it is difficult for the Taipei government to secure conclusive proof that Beijing is the author of these activities — and because KMT politicians dispute whether it is in fact responsible — Beijing’s risk-reward calculus works in favor of such interference.

In fact, Beijing has employed these various measures against the Tsai administration because she was unwilling to commit to principles like the 1992 Consensus in the explicit way that Beijing insisted. If Tsai wins reelection in January 2020, the PRC punishment since 2016 would likely resume and perhaps even escalate. It might move to use whatever resources are necessary to steal away Taiwan’s remaining diplomatic allies, for example. But intimidation has other uses. It can socialize the Taiwan public towards the conclusion that the status quo is no longer in Taiwan’s interest and that it is time to resolve the fundamental cross-Strait dispute, more or less on China’s terms. It might even be employed against a KMT administration that was unwilling to move to political talks.

It is worth noting that the economic incentives Beijing has given to Taiwan companies and their political impact is likely to be mixed. Whether Taiwan companies and entrepreneurs move their networked operations to the mainland depends on the business environment on the mainland. But ever since the late 2000s, the cost structure (wages, environmental regulations) has shifted against Taiwan companies that have used China as a platform for the assembly of export goods, and they have moved some of their operations to other countries. The U.S.-China trade war has accelerated that trend. (Taiwan companies that produce for the mainland market have obvious reasons to stay.) As for young people who take advantage of educational opportunities in China for economic reasons, it remains to be seen whether it remains to be seen whether their political attitudes about Beijing’s Taiwan policies will change. My guess, and it is only that, is that they will pocket the benefits but sustain their identification with Taiwan.

Similarly, specific steps to intimidate and pressure may provoke resentment in Taiwan concerning PRC bullying. The emphasis on 1C2S in Xi Jinping's January 2019 speech probably improved Tsai's chances of winning a second term.

## IS THERE A DEADLINE FOR UNIFICATION? CHINA'S STRATEGIC PATIENCE

Xi Jinping's repeated association of Taiwan unification with the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" has led some to infer that the 2049 target for the latter is in fact the deadline. As a younger Chinese scholar suggested to me: "There's a deadline within a non-deadline." Some Chinese leaders may in fact believe that 2049 is the unification deadline, but my reading of Xi's speeches is that he is in fact careful *not* to make explicit what may seem implicit. This makes perfect sense. To state a hard deadline might lead Taiwan and the United States to take actions that undermine Beijing's Taiwan goals. Not publicly setting a target date for unification avoids the risk of having to act on the implied threat should the designated time arrive with Taiwan still outside "the embrace of the motherland."



**On balance, Xi's January 2019 speech suggests that Beijing does not believe that the door to unification is closing and that patience is justified and necessary.**

Rather than think in terms of a deadline, it makes more sense to try to determine, at any given time, whether PRC leaders perceive that the door to achieving their goal is opening, closing, or standing still. Clearly, a judgment that the door is closing — for example, in the form of an active program by Taiwan leaders to move toward what looks like *de jure* independence — would demand action in response. If Beijing believes that the long-term trends are favorable for unification — that the door remains open, and that the melon will at some point fall from the stem — then patience is justified.

On balance, Xi's January 2019 speech suggests that Beijing does not believe that the door to unification is closing and that patience is justified and necessary. He in no way altered the unification goal and 1C2S formula, but his remarks do not betray a sense of danger looming or an urgency to resolve the issue.

Each Taiwan presidential and legislative election and the attendant re-shuffling of the political deck will provide milestones for calibrating PRC confidence about the future. A KMT victory in 2020 would boost Beijing's confidence, and Beijing could probably tolerate a narrow win by Tsai. After all, it survived two terms of Chen Shui-bian. The medium-term scenario that is most likely to alarm Chinese leaders is if Tsai managed to win in 2020 and then a next-generation DPP leader won in 2024. That would indicate a fundamental, pro-DPP shift in Taiwan public opinion that would imply that the door to unification is closing.

Looking more long term, Xi in his speech did revive the idea that "the long-standing political differences between the two sides of the Strait are the major causes that prevent cross-Strait relations from proceeding steadily. This should not be passed down generation after generation." The implication of that statement is that the longer the issue is unresolved, the more peaceful separation will grow as a problem for China. From the 2028 Taiwan presidential election on, each new administration that does not make significant movement towards unification will raise doubts in Beijing that it will ever happen. The closer that Hong Kong gets to the end of the 50-year period under 1C2S, the more people in China will feel the need to rely on more than strategic patience with Taiwan characteristics.

## TAIWAN'S RESPONSE

The fundamental cleavage between the KMT and DPP defines how politicians and society respond to Beijing's current pressure campaign against the Tsai administration. The DPP believes that the pressure is real and is a manifestation of the malevolent intentions that Beijing and its Taiwan allies hold concerning the future of the island. The KMT believes that Tsai's refusal to accommodate Beijing on the 1992 Consensus justifies the PRC's negative response.

But it is not just a party cleavage that is operative here. Divisions within each camp complicate matters. This is particularly true within the DPP, where the “fundamentalists” are very critical of Tsai’s relative moderation towards China and her unwillingness to pursue symbolic initiatives that explicitly or implicitly promote their independence agenda. Tsai has not completely resisted that agenda. She gave the green light to a transitional justice project, the main effect of which was to deprive the KMT of assets under its control. Her willingness to go along with a relaxation of the referendum law is another, one that the DPP came to regret after the KMT used referendums to block action on certain policy issues. Yet the fact that former premier William Lai challenged Tsai for the party’s presidential nomination is the clearest evidence that this division is real.

The KMT also has its divisions, mainly between the northern wing (which is more mainlander in its composition and China-friendly in its orientation) and the southern wing, which is more Taiwanese and skeptical of China on non-economic issues. This division exploded into view when Ma tried to purge legislative speaker Wang Jin-pyng in 2013.



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These multiple cleavages impede any attempt to forge a cross-party consensus on how to deal with China across the board. Such a consensus, to be realistic, would have to start with the premise that Taiwan as a polity and society is under threat and must meet that challenge on a more unified basis. But such a consensus is difficult if and as long as the blue camp believes that the policies of the DPP administration are more of a threat to Taiwan than China is. The desire of some in the DPP to settle scores for long-ago KMT abuses during its authoritarian rule also deepens division.

On one issue, there has been broad consensus within Taiwan, and that is the importance of the role of the United States. The KMT and the DPP compete as to which does a better job of managing the relationship with Washington. Beijing blames the United States for blocking unification and encouraging separatism through its security commitment and arms sales to Taiwan. Successive U.S. administrations *have* supported Taiwan in order to ensure that it does not have to negotiate under duress. But the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations also sought to constrain the Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian administrations from actions that would unnecessarily alarm China. On the other hand, the Trump administration’s steps to improve relations with Taipei in the diplomatic and security spheres does create the possibility that Taiwan might be drawn into U.S.-China strategic competition beyond what is wise or necessary. That said, the main reason Beijing has not made progress toward unification is not the U.S. role but its own refusal to adapt its policy to Taiwan political realities, as well as its insistence that Taiwan leaders meet preconditions before productive cross-strait relations can occur. In this as well, intimidation may be a better way for Beijing to diminish the effectiveness of U.S. support, precisely because it is more difficult for Washington to counter.

The Tsai administration’s main weapon in responding to PRC pressure so far has been publicity, exposing with some detail the ways in which Beijing has constrained Taiwan’s international space, engaged in repeated displays of force, used economic leverage (e.g. on tourists), and penetrated the Taiwan political system. Presumably the administration will continue to do so, but I would guess that the result only confirms the fears and prejudices of the DPP without necessarily changing the minds of people outside the party. Among more independent voters, young people were responsive to that message from 2014 to 2016, but Tsai’s initial failure to pass marriage-equality legislation has alienated that group. Tsai is constrained from taking legal action against Chinese political interference because of her commitment to legal due process and, perhaps, to protecting intelligence sources and methods.



Taiwan's political institutions reinforce the political polarization that serves to obstruct the forging of a more consensus-based approach to China. The legislature is the primary arena for fairly constant political combat. The more extreme wings of the KMT and the DPP (the deep blues and the deep greens) impede the more moderate wings from working out compromises. The mass media and the perception that major media outlets are megaphones for the main political tendencies – green, blue, and even the overtly pro-Beijing “red” – exacerbate political conflict. The growing clout of civil society organizations, their low regard for existing political institutions, and their willingness to engage in radical tactics have been an obstacle to consensus building.

The dysfunction of Taiwan's political system makes a PRC policy of intimidation, pressure, and selective cooptation even more sensible. In effect, it targets Taiwan's most serious point of vulnerability, the public's low self-confidence about the future. A Beijing that increasingly exercises its power in ways that demonstrate the island's continuing economic dependence on the mainland, its growing isolation in the international community, its vulnerability to PLA patrolling and even attack, and the unreliability of the United States socializes voters into the idea that Taiwan's situation is hopeless. The fable of the frog in water whose temperature rises imperceptibly to the boiling point is not of Chinese origin, but it may well apply to Taiwan.

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