

Taiwanese perceptions of China, Taiwan, and US relations from 2016 to 2021

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ABSTRACT. In 2016, a dramatic shift in Taiwan's politics caught China's attention. After the inauguration of President Tsai Ing-wen, Beijing increased the pressure on Taiwan. Aside from limiting Taiwan's international space, Beijing had taken other steps. This study aims to review the policy regarding the relationship among Taiwan, the US, and China. The primary data were gathered through interviews with Taiwanese key informants of different age groups. Secondary data were gathered from official documents, online sources, journal and news articles, and books. Based on the analysis of informants' opinions on this issue, the study found that the majority of informants prefer the status quo in dealing with China. However, Taiwanese opinions on the issue of independence and unification change depending on the eagerness of the US to protect Taiwan and the degree of threat from China. Additionally, there is a division among the public regarding political parties. Kuomintang (KMT) supporters prefer a close relationship with China, while the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) supporters prefer not to rely on China but to seek other options. The split will continue to influence the government's policies as well as Taiwan's future. Ever since the country's expulsion as a member of the UN, its participation in the international arena was limited. Public opinion in Taiwan will continue to influence the decisions of Taiwan's leaders, both in domestic policy and foreign relations. This policy review paper recommends actions Taiwan can take to increase its participation in the international arena.

Keywords: *Foreign policy, security, independence, international relations*

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BACKGROUND OF THE POLICY ISSUE

In 2016, a dramatic shift in Taiwan's politics caught China's attention. Following the inauguration of President Tsai Ing-wen, Beijing has increased pressure on Taiwan. In May 2017, for example, China obstructed Taiwan's membership in the World Health Assembly (WHA). The Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) said this was due to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) not accepting the 1992 Consensus on "One China," which led to Taiwan's exclusion from WHA. In June 2017, Beijing established diplomatic relations with Panama, which previously had diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Juan Carlos Varela, the president of Panama, said the reason for the change was the uneasy truce when President Tsai Ing-wen took office. In addition, China's strong economic engagement with Panama influenced the decision to establish diplomatic relations with China (Brown & Kevin, 2017). China's most threatening measure is the increasing frequency of People's Liberation Army (PLA) ships and aircraft circling Taiwan. Taiwanese commentators stated that this action was meant to threaten Taiwan as well as direct a point to the US. (Brown & Kevin, 2017).

When President Donald Trump was elected Head of state of the US in 2016, friction between the US and China worsened. The Trump administration had sent unclear signals to China, adding to the uncertainty in overall diplomatic relations between the two countries. As cited by Bartsch and Stanzel (2017), the Trump government was described by New York Magazine as a "diplomatic disaster" in US-China relations. President Donald Trump had broken with the longstanding US foreign policy of One China by acknowledging a laudatory phone call from Taiwan's leader in 2016. In an interview, President Donald Trump recommended that the longstanding US position that Taiwan was part of One China should be challenged. However, in early 2017, he stated that the US government would adhere to the principle of One China. Bartsch and Stanzel (2017) proposed five different scenarios for US-China relations, namely (1) maintaining the status quo, (2) a political confrontation, (3) an intensification of military conflict, (4) an economic conflict, and (5) a G2 world in which the two superpowers form a coalition. Whether one of these scenarios occurs or not, it will always have an impact on Taiwan.

History of the Conflict between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan)

The first part of the 20th century was a time of division in China (Bush, 2017). From the beginning, the xenophobic Boxer Rebellion spread to many places in China, which almost led to the end of the imperial

regime. In 1912, the Republic of China (ROC) was proclaimed and hopes grew for a democratic system. During the founding of the ROC, Taiwan was not part of Chinese territory because Taiwan was still under Japanese occupation (Hsieh, 2009). Military leaders then began to compete for regional influence, power, and customs revenue. In the 1920s, the Kuomintang (KMT, the Nationalist Party) interfered in the military competition and began a provisional measure of reunification with its Soviet-trained armies (Bush, 2017). However, everything reversed in the 1930s when the Communist Red Army appeared in the mountains of southeastern China. Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the ROC, drove the Communists out of their mountain bases and chased them into northwest China, but the Red Army survived and began counterattacking the next day.

In April 1949, negotiations between ROC and the Communists took place but failed. In October, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded under Mao Zedong, and the ROC continued to retreat from various regions. In December 1949, KMT forces withdrew to Taiwan. Even when the KMT armies retreated to Taiwan, the ROC continued to be recognized internationally as the only legitimate government of China for decades, including in the United Nations (UN) and in diplomatic circles, until a General Assembly was held at the UN in 1971 and passed Resolution 2758 proposed by Albania. Nevertheless, the Taiwan issue has not been resolved by UN Resolution 2758 nor by the loss of recognition by the ROC's most important states (Hsieh, 2009, p. 62). These decisions have only shown that the PRC is the legal administration of China, but whether Taiwan is a territory of China is still unclear. This is also reflected in the statements of the various states on the issue of Taiwan. The US and the UK "recognize," Canada "takes note," and Japan "understands and respects" China's position that Taiwan is part of China (Hsieh, 2009, p. 64). This indicated that China's claim that there was an "international agreement" regarding the Taiwan issue was rejected.

Although the 1992 consensus did not provide a solution for either Taiwan or China, no serious tensions arose in the Taiwan Strait until former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui proposed a two-state theory in a 1999 interview with Deutsche Welle. This theory meant that Taiwan and China were two separate legitimate systems. It is considered one of his most important political legacies because it emphasized Taiwan's national identity. He also stated that historical facts showed that Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu had never been ruled by communists since the establishment of the communist regime in China in 1949 (CNA News, 2020).

AIMS OF THE STUDY

With the limitation of focus and discussion on the opinions of the Taiwanese people in the existing literature, this policy review paper puts its core on the responses of each informant. These various issues in Taiwan and the intervention of the US prompted this study to examine the perspectives of Taiwanese people on China-Taiwan-US relations under the Trump administration. The study examines the relationship between the US, China, and Taiwan from the perspective of the Taiwanese people from 2016 to 2021. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Analyze the measures taken by President Donald Trump regarding the security policies in Taiwan;
2. Analyze the measures taken by President Xi Jinping toward Taiwan and President Donald Trump's actions toward Taiwan;
3. Describe Taiwanese views on these issues; and
4. Recommend approaches to improve Taiwan's participation in the international arena.

The conceptual framework of this article was based on the Taiwanese perception of the China-Taiwan-US relationship as a result of the intersectionality of the issues in the Taiwan Strait and the perspectives of the Taiwanese people (see Appendix A).

REVIEW OF DISCOURSES

The Consensus Made between Taiwan and China

Harry Harding (2000) has referred to the relationship between Taiwan and China as "transitional arrangements." Harding explained that he uses the term "arrangements" instead of "agreements" to suggest that the two states do not necessarily need formal written treaties, but that they may express themselves in tacit understanding or any other possible form. The 1992 consensus is a good example of this description. There were no formal documents, only spoken words and letters between representatives of the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) of Taiwan and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) of China in Hong Kong (Kui-bo, 2019). The two organizations did not reach a conclusion until November 3, 1992, when the SEF issued a press release and ARATS sent a letter stating that "it is acceptable for the two sides to present their own positions orally separately" (SEF, 1992, as cited in Chen & Cohen, 2019, p. 10). The result of this lengthy process was that "both sides of the Strait insist on the principle of 'One China,' but the two sides have different views on its meaning."

As a further clarification, Taiwan agreed during this period that there is only One China and that Taiwan is part of this China, but that One China implies the Republic of China. However, China emphasized that the People's Republic of China is the rightful regime indicating all of China, including Taiwan, regardless of the different interpretations from Taiwan. The Taiwan Strait was described by Cheng Shui-bian, former president of Taiwan, as a consensus without consensus. Wang (2013, p. 94) also believes that the policy of "strategic ambiguity" adopted by the US is the best option to preserve stability and peace in the Strait of Taiwan.

Taiwan between the US and China

As China defies the universal domination of the US, Taiwan has been caught in the conflict between the two international giants (Watt, 2020). Economically, President Tsai Ing-wen has tried to shift the market from China to the South, but dependence on China remains high. For safety and global political assistance, the country depends on the US. Under President Xi Jinping, China has boosted armed and economic stress in Taiwan to inhibit it from declaring independence. To protect its sovereignty, Taiwan must increase its military budget to acquire munitions from the US while improving its army training and abilities. It is clear that Taiwan's military spending has increased significantly in modern times after President Tsai Ing-wen's inauguration (Figure 1). This is to counter increasing pressure from China and uncertainty about its next move.

Figure 1
Military expenditure of Taiwan (in million USD)
(Source: Trading Economics)



On the other hand, the Trump administration has taken steps to increase American assistance for Taiwan. Considering the Taiwan factor, among the scenarios proposed by Bartsch and Stanzel (2017, pp. 119-123), a political confrontation between the US and China fits the current situation. As described by Bartsch and Stanzel (2017, p. 120):

“Political conflicts are mostly fought with the weapons of words, statements, protocol, meeting schedules, and propaganda. The arena can be bilateral dialogues, multilateral meetings, or institutions of global governance.”

The sensitive issue of Taiwan not only raises tensions between the two sides but also draws the attention of other countries to China's actions. In the combined announcement on the annual Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) held in July 2020, Taiwan's crucial position in the Indo-Pacific region was reaffirmed by the secretaries and ministers. This was the first time that the Taiwan issue was addressed in the AUSMIN joint statement (Mazza, 2021). Although the Taiwan issue is increasingly mentioned in various organizations and platforms, China's aggression on reunification will not decrease, but rather escalate.

The Link between Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in Taiwan

In the 1990s, Taiwan endured a succession of political amendments that climaxed in its democracy. During the same period, Taiwanese identity grew stronger as did the quest for international recognition. The democratization process provided an opportunity for legislators to win polls by mobilizing voters around the theme of Taiwanese patriotism (Wang, 2013, p. 96). Before Taiwan's democratization, the upper-ranked officials of China, Taiwan, and the US were the main actors in the triangular relationship, but after Taiwan's democratization, Taiwanese electorates engage in a crucial part in shaping security between the two sides of the Strait.

As described by Chu Yun-han and Andrew Nathan, Taiwanese citizens become the fourth actor in the triangular relationship. How the public perceives US assistance can impact how voted legislators make policy rulings concerning China (Wang, 2013, p. 94). As public opinion changes over the years, Taiwan's leaders must change their strategies to respond to public voices. For example, when China passed the Anti-Secession Law in 2005, which gave China a lawful foundation to use military force if Taiwan proclaimed independence, US-Taiwan relations went to their lowest point as Taiwan's former President Chen Shui-bian had not consulted the US on the border crossing issue. As a result, public

focus has shifted to rising unemployment and other economic concerns that threaten people's livelihoods. As many Taiwanese would like to ease cross-Straits tensions to benefit from China's economic prospects, the DPP began to lose seats in both national and local polls, including the Yuan law elections, as voters became disillusioned and weary of corruption. Undoubtedly, the KMT's presidential candidate won an overwhelming victory in 2008 (Wang, 2013, p. 97).

Security Dilemma

As cited by Alysa (2020), Viotti and Kauppi (2010) describe a security dilemma as a condition in which the more a state arms itself to protect its national security interests, the more threatening the armed state itself becomes, leading to an increase in self-armament. In East Asia, the security dilemma still applies, with it becoming increasingly difficult to balance threats and assurances simultaneously (Christensen, 2002). Therefore, the concept of security dilemma best describes the situation between China and the US regarding the military arms race. The rapid expansion of China's army capacities is attracting the attention of the US, although it is difficult to measure how modernized the Chinese military is due to ambiguity and limited transparency. The US, which aspires to the role of hegemon, needs advanced security capabilities to maintain peace in the region. As mentioned earlier, the ambiguous and secretive nature of China leads the US to assume China's military modernization (Johnson, 2018, as cited in Alysa, 2020, p. 64). Because of this assumption, the US is employing an air-sea combat strategy that will provide the US Navy and Air Force with the necessary budget to improve their capabilities. The more the US tries to match China's military capabilities, the more China will build up its capabilities to overwhelm the US. Regardless of the objective realities, fear, and mistrust may exacerbate the arms race and trigger a downward spiral (Friedberg, 2005).

In the case of Taiwan, China's goal may simply be to prevent Taiwan from going independent. As Friedberg (2005) notes, the Chinese leadership may be willing to maintain the status quo indefinitely but must make regular threats to prevent Taiwan from breaking free. On the other hand, the US's goal may just be to prevent the unification of Taiwan by force. However, China's threatening gestures and constant military buildup may increase the US's fear that China will eventually use force to achieve its goals. As a result, the US may feel compelled to increase its military support for Taiwan, such as selling military equipment and taking other actions to show US presence in the event of an attack on Taiwan. However, the cause of this action is the intensification of China's army endeavors due to the fear of a possible declaration of independence by Taiwan (Friedberg, 2005, p. 22). This cycle repeats itself.

For the US to sustain the status quo in the Strait of Taiwan, it is necessary to balance two positions: (1) strong assurances to supply defense equipment and training to Taiwan and (2) political assurances to China that the US does not plan to use its superiority to hurt China's most important security interests, namely preventing Taiwan independence (Christensen, 2002). However, these two positions will never be balanced, and relations between the three states will always be characterized by security dilemmas.

METHODOLOGY

Primary and secondary sources were used for this study. Primary data were collected through questionnaires with open-ended questions. The primary informants were Taiwanese representatives of different age groups between 20 and 60 years old. The informants were further divided into informants who have already lived abroad and those who have never lived abroad. To select the ten key informants, the snowball method was used on account of the limitations of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which was challenging to identify potential research participants. Nevertheless, this study is qualitative-based research, in which the researchers analyze the responses made by each informant. Interview questions include the informants' basic information, their views on the three governments' actions and Taiwan's future, and their recommendations to Taiwan and its people.

In addition, due to the pandemic, online platforms such as Zoom, Line, and Google Meet were used as the main channels for the interviews. The interviews were done between the months of February and June 2021. The responses of key informants were analyzed using qualitative data analysis using replies of open-ended questions and audio recordings. On the other hand, secondary sources from official documents, online sources, journals, news articles, and books were used.

ANALYSIS OF POLICY OUTCOMES

Profile of the Key Informants

The basic information of the key informants in this study is summarized in Table 1. The ten key informants are coded with capital letters from A to J. Informants A through E are those who have lived abroad for at least 1 year. Letters F through J, on the other hand, are the

Table 1
*Basic information of the key informants who have lived abroad
for at least a year and who have never lived abroad*

Informants	Gender	Age	Occupation	Years Living Abroad	Place of Residence
A	F	24	Student	23	Australia
B	F	31	Pharmacist	1	Taiwan
C	M	41	Professor	8	Taiwan
D	M	53	Finance	15	Thailand
E	M	66	Trade	>20	Philippines
F	F	24	Human Resource	0	Taiwan
G	M	39	Civil Servant	0	Taiwan
H	M	49	Academe	0	Taiwan
I	F	57	Education	0	Taiwan
J	M	60	Advertising	0	Taiwan

informants who have no experience living abroad. According to their passports, all informants are Taiwanese, with a total of four women and six men.

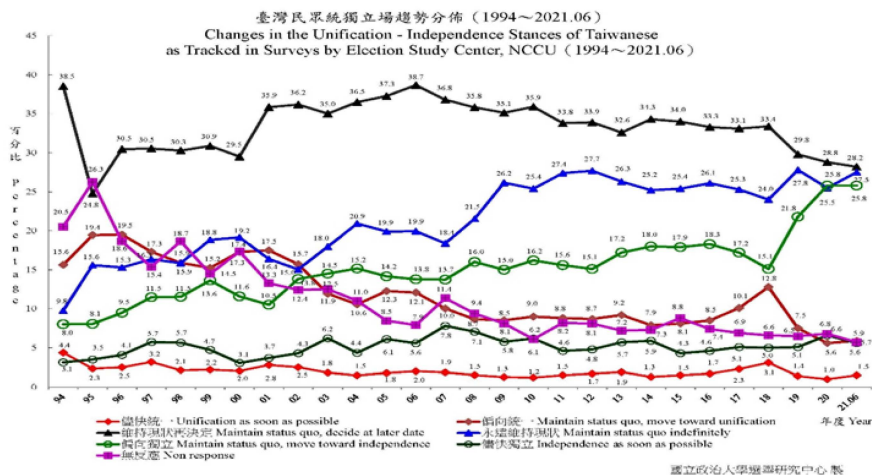
As mentioned, the Taiwan issue is among the most uncontrollable global security challenges today. It is a sensitive topic that could lead to a great-power war between the US and China (Wang, 2013, p. 93). As the fourth party, the Taiwanese public opinion on the issue of autonomy and unification is related to the commitment of the US to protect Taiwan and the extent of the threat to Taiwan from China (Benson & Niou, 2005). Figure 2 shows that the number of informants who chose to maintain the status quo on the condition of moving closer to independence increased dramatically from 2018 to 2020. Within those two years, President Donald Trump passed several laws related to and increased weapons deal with Taiwan. The protection by the US had given the Taiwanese people the feeling that the US would protect Taiwan from China if the latter tries to unify Taiwan by force. However, after the change of presidency from Trump to Joe Biden in January 2021, the percentage has not increased. Many experts believe that Biden is playing it safely on the Taiwan issue.

Compared with the survey conducted by the Election Study Center of NCCU, the trend is similar with the informants. Five of the respondents agreed to preserve the current situation and move toward

Figure 2

Basic information of the key informants who have lived abroad for at least a year and who have never lived abroad

(Source: Election Study Center, NCCU)



autonomy later (Table 2), four of them were willing to preserve the status quo for an indefinite period due to tensions with China while only one informant agreed to reunification. These results show that the majority of informants, although they had different experiences, were in support of preserving the status quo contemplating the economic, military, and diplomatic aspects. As two of the informants from both groups stated:

"Facing China's military power, Taiwan has no ability to resist, which makes Taiwan not have the ability to declare independence. If Taiwan chose to declare independence, China will take Taiwan by force, and use 'domestic affairs' as a reason to reject other countries' interference...in conclusion, I believe the economy and regional safety are the most important topic for the time being. Upholding the status quo, living in peace, dialogue on an equal footing, and economic coexistence are the necessary conditions for Taiwan at the present and in the future." (Informant D)³

"Current Taiwan has a president, government, constitution, and complete civil and state system, which are the structure of a country. If Taiwan is already a country, declaring independence itself is just an ideology." (Informant G)

³ The respondents' names were replaced as capital letters to respect their privacy.

Table 2
Opinion on independence, future, and President Tsai Ing-wen's US ties

Informants	Independence	Taiwan's Future	President Tsai's US Ties
A	Pro-independence	Negative	Agree
B	Pro-independence	Positive	Agree
C	Pro-independence	Negative	Agree
D	Status-quo	Positive	Disagree
E	Pro-independence	Neutral	Agree
F	Pro-independence	Negative	Neutral
G	Status-quo	Neutral	Agree
H	Status-quo	Positive	Agree
I	Status-quo	Neutral	Agree
J	Pro-unification	Negative	Disagree

The People's Republic of China's warning to use military force if Taiwan proclaims sovereignty is an advantageous deterrent to Taiwan's sovereignty (Benson & Niou, 2005). By suspending Taiwanese goods shipments to China, China has economically prevented Taiwan from seeking independence. Not knowing whether the US will defend them, the Taiwanese public is hypersensitive to the threat posed by China. Given the risk of an unabated warning from China, many prospective backers of Taiwanese sovereignty would have a preference to sustain the status quo instead of proclaiming autonomy (Benson & Niou, 2005). In addition, there are other reasons for the informants' approval of maintaining the status quo. According to Informant G (see above), present-day Taiwan is already a country, which means that declaring independence is not as necessary. Informant C also further stated:

"After the democratization of Taiwan, presidents and foreign ministry spokesmen have repeatedly stated that Taiwan is already a sovereign independent country. To most Taiwanese people, Taiwan's 'present situation' (status quo) can be considered as 'independent' when viewed from national security, legal institution, and administrative jurisdiction."

Although Taiwan's current status looks like a country, the lack of international recognition is still at the core of the problem. Therefore, Taiwanese attitudes toward independence are mostly influenced by the policies and movements of other nations, such as the US's pledge to protect Taiwan and China's risk to use military force if Taiwan proclaims autonomy. This situation will continue as Taiwanese citizens largely refuse

to unite with the present political structure in China but are frightened to proclaim independence (Benson & Niou, 2005). However, there are still some who believe that reunification is the only and best option for Taiwan to avoid serving as a bargaining chip between China and the US. Informant J, in his 60s and has never lived abroad, stated:

"Taiwan cannot be independent because we will just be others' pawn and battlefield, so the best solution is to unify with China."

On the other hand, informant F, who is in her 20s and has never lived abroad, has said:

"As for unifying with China, being a person who has seen freedom and liberty, I cannot choose to live under a totalitarian government."

Looking at the differences between the two answers above, this implies that age also has an impact on how informants think about the issue of independence and reunification. In addition, the experience of living abroad also influences the informants' views. Informant E, who is older than Informant J, agrees with maintaining the status quo, but would not give up the path to independence. The Hong Kong issue, which began in 1919, has also led to changes in Taiwan's domestic politics. The statement "Hong Kong today, Taiwan tomorrow" was spread on Taiwan's social media, which led to the younger generations hating the Chinese government even more. However, after the Hong Kong situation, the informants, especially Informant J, still believed that unification with China was the best option because his ancestors were from China. Moreover, this was also one of the important factors that gave President Tsai Ing-wen victory in the 2020 elections. The way China behaves will change the way Taiwanese people react to this issue.

The future of Taiwan is then seen differently by the informants. Of all the informants, three saw the future positively, four negatively, and the other three were neutral (Table 2). Most of them agreed that the threat from China will not go away in the future, but how they see the US's actions in the future varies. Some of the informants predicted that the US would remain friendly with Taiwan, while others see it as a country that will take advantage of Taiwan. In the short-term, Taiwan will remain allied with the US to protect itself from China.

Since Taiwan has limited space internationally due to China's threats and power, Taiwan must look for other ways to survive and become internationally known. Both Informants B and I mentioned

Taiwan's ability to manufacture semiconductors. However, Informant I expressed concern that US-China relations could affect Taiwan's IT industry.

"Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) is doing very well, with advanced skills, and many countries wanted wafers that are made by the TSMC." (Informant B)

"Taiwan's geographic location is good, with the existence of the TSMC, but the US-China relations are not in a good shape currently. Taiwan could only observe the situation and think of the next step." (Informant I)

To establish itself in the international arena, Taiwan should not stop challenging itself in various ways. For Informant D, doing business with other countries is Taiwan's priority, not politics. Since Taiwan is not acknowledged as a country by most nations, Taiwan could just set up offices abroad as a substitute for embassies. In this way, Taiwan could still maintain relations with other countries without touching the sensitive issue with China.

"In the future, by using the name 'Chinese Taipei,' or using Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO), Taiwan can still have room to reach its full potential without touching on China's One-China Principle."

Taiwan as a state seeks to preserve its sovereignty but must limit China's influence due to its growing influence in the world. This situation is consistent with the perpetuation of the security dilemma, fostered primarily by rising tensions between the US and China, which places Taiwan in an untenable position. Tensions in the Strait of Taiwan are perpetuated by China's actions, eroding Taiwan's state identity. This forces Taiwan to rely more heavily on the US, which in turn provokes China.

Taiwanese Perspectives on the Relationship between Taiwan, China, and the United States

Taiwan's sovereignty is not recognized by the majority of independent countries, which means that the country cannot join international organizations as a sovereign state but can only participate with a changed name or only as an observer (Shattuck, 2021). The exclusion from most major international entities, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the WHA, makes it difficult for Taiwan to obtain first-hand information and also limits Taiwan's presence in the

international community. China will apply whatever pressure is necessary to keep Taiwan off the international stage as long as President Tsai Ing-wen remains in office. The pressure is directed not only at the WHO and the WHA but also at Taiwan's remaining diplomatic partners (Shattuck, 2021).

In an effort to compete with China's financial resources, Taiwan must spend more wisely and be more strategic if it is to continue to use development assistance, such as medical and technological support, as an incentive for countries not to trade recognition for economic rewards to China (Harold et al., 2019). Although 170 countries and territories grant visa exemption, land visa, or e-visa privileges to Taiwanese passport holders [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), 2021], from 2016 to 2021, seven countries established consular relations with China after suspending consular relations with Taiwan, while the remaining 15 nations keep consular relations with Taiwan. Additionally, the voices of poorer countries in need of vaccines have become a strategy for China in the COVID -19 pandemic to convince them to break off relations with Taiwan in exchange for vaccines from China. With China's constant pressure, Taiwan is in constant danger in the international arena unless the US and other major countries publicly express their support in international organizations, Congress, or official venues, or pass legislation affecting Taiwan.

While the number of Taiwan's diplomatic partners is decreasing, all informants indicated that diplomatic relations are still necessary for Taiwan. They, however, have different reasons in support of their statements. Informants D and I have similar answers, as they stated that although these countries have limited options due to their economic and military power, Taiwan still needs diplomatic partners because they can help give voice to Taiwan in international organizations such as the WHO, the WHA, and the UN and let other countries in the international community know that there is a country called Taiwan. Regardless of the countries that want to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Informants B and E believe that Taiwan should continue on its path and find other alternative ways to solve its long-term problem.

"Having diplomatic relations is not that important, rather it is more important for us to change our type of diplomacy with the countries that are not our diplomatic partners, such as from our expertise: healthcare and technologies." (Informant B)

Even without establishing diplomatic relations, Taiwan could set up TECRO to maintain economic and cultural contacts with other countries. In this way, countries can establish interpersonal relations with Taiwan without paying much attention to politics. As Informant E stated:

"Establishing TECRO in every state is more efficient than having embassies. If our economy does well, then we will be not afraid of China threatening us since China is threatening us only for sovereignty."

When observing the policies of trade with China, the two main political parties of Taiwan have different approaches. The DPP generally has a negative opinion of cross-strait economic ties because they fear that more economic integration will draw Taiwan closer to China and leave Taiwan open to economic pressure. Contrarily, the KMT is more in favor of cross-strait economic relations, believing that trade and investment agreements will aid in reviving Taiwan's lagging economy and prevent the nation from becoming isolated in the expanding economic integration of East Asia (Wang, 2013). Despite the fact that all the informants agreed that diplomatic relations are necessary, Informant J sees things differently:

"China is threatening Taiwan's diplomatic partners, but those countries did not lose any benefits, nor being destroyed. If Taiwan is unified with China, Taiwan eventually has diplomatic relations."

Considering his answer to the question of independence and reunification, it is clear why he responded in this way. For the majority of informants, diplomatic relations are still critical to Taiwan's survival under China's pressure, despite the threat posed by China to Taiwan's diplomatic partners and to Taiwan's international space. As Informant C explained:

"Regardless of whether or not Taiwan will be widely recognized in the international arena, as a member of the international society, Taiwan should participate in the interactions with the international society, such as in economics and trade, transportation, and health...Taiwan always needs the space for diplomacy and maintain substantive interactions worldwide, which means even unofficial diplomatic relations."

While Taiwan has maintained unofficial diplomatic relations with the US since the adoption of Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, China, aside from monitoring the PLA on a daily basis, has continued its threats against Taiwan when weapons are sold to Taiwan or when US officials visit

Taiwan. However, as Taiwan has no choice but to side with the US, the threats will be maintained until Taiwan is united with China, which will not be the case in the short-term, at least not in the Tsai Administration. With the passage of legislation by the US Congress, such as the Taiwan Travel Act in 2018 (which encourages visits by officials from both sides at all levels) and the Taipei Act in 2020, interactions between Taiwan and the US have become more frequent compared to the Ma era.

As a rising superpower, China has become more active in the international arena, especially on the Taiwan issue. Given that the majority of Taiwanese people are unwilling to unify with China, Taiwan, as a small state, could only try to ally with the US to prevent it from being unified by force by China.

When informants were asked about President Tsai Ing-wen's close relationship with the United States, seven of them agreed with her actions, two disagreed, and one informant remained neutral. Although seven of the informants agreed, their reasons were inconsistent. Most stated that Taiwan had no choice but to side with the US because of its location. According to Informants C and F:

"The opposition between China and the US will continue to exist. For Taiwan, there is no big room of choices for the Tsai administration, basically continue to maintain a strong relationship with the US and follow the strategy of the US."

"From the perspective of Taiwan, having only the choices of 'being taken advantaged of' and 'being unified with China and being ruled under a communist regime,' Taiwan has no option but to side with the US."

Although the US has shown its support under the Trump administration, many Taiwanese express concerns about President Donald Trump's unsafe actions. Taiwan's relations with the US are currently stable, and there is no assurance that the United States will stand by Taiwan permanently. As Rigger (2017) notes, the worst-case scenario for Taiwan is that the US withdraws its support for its continued self-determination to gain concessions from Beijing (including by ending arms sales). As indicated by Informant I:

"Since Taiwan needs the US's protection on the sea and aviation, and the US needs Taiwan's geographical location, the two countries are getting what they need from each other. Yet, we do not know what the limit of China is, and also, we do not know whether or not the US will continue to support Taiwan."

In the face of China's strong military power, Taiwan can choose to side with the US to protect itself from China's threats. To defend its sovereignty, Taiwan can also increase its military budget to strengthen its military power. As Informant E said:

"Taiwan can only help itself, and that is the reason why we need to increase our national defense capabilities. If we do not increase our national defense, we can only be the bargaining chip, a country that listens to the big states."

The survey conducted by the Taiwan New Constitution Foundation showed that the Taiwanese have a positive attitude toward the US. In contrast, only 16.4 percent have a positive attitude toward Taiwan's cross-strait neighbors, while 70.3 percent have a negative attitude toward China (Taipei Times, 2021). The reason for these survey results can be explained based on the responses of the informants. Most of them believe that Taiwan's current position is to side with the US, as the opposite path of siding with China is out of the question for most Taiwanese, considering that China and Taiwan have completely different government systems, lifestyles, and environments.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy review examined the relationship of Taiwan, the US, and China through secondary data and perspectives from Taiwanese citizens, especially from 2016 to 2021, as the policies of the presidents of the US and Taiwan have changed significantly. Based on the analysis of informants' opinions on this issue, the study found that the majority of informants prefer the status quo in dealing with China. However, the opinions of the Taiwanese on the issue of independence and unification change depending on the willingness of the US to protect Taiwan and the level of threat from China. Most informants are concerned about President Donald Trump's actions because they believe that he was using Taiwan as leverage to deal with China's expanding economy and military strength. They are also concerned that US support will not last. Therefore, while Taiwan should not fully rely on the US, it has no choice owing to the growing threat from China. On the other hand, more than half of the informants are negative about President Xi Jinping's actions toward Taiwan. However, they also believe his actions are reasonable and understandable because the threats show that China does not approve of Taiwan's actions that could lead to independence.

Between Ma and Tsai Ing-wen, the young informants favor the latter because of her behavior toward China. Despite the fact that relations between Taiwan and China have deteriorated after President Tsai Ing-wen took office, the informants believe that she wants to protect Taiwan's sovereignty and the rights of the 23 million Taiwanese. While Taiwan's international space is limited due to China's pressure, Taiwan strives to be more visible in the international space and focus on technologies and health.

Because of the different opinions toward trade, politics, and the status of Taiwan, the population is divided between the two major political parties. KMT supporters prefer a close relationship with China while DPP supporters prefer to seek options other than relying on China. The split will continue to influence government policy and Taiwan's future owing to Taiwanese people's right to suffrage. Since the country's exclusion as a member of the UN, its participation in the international arena has been limited so far. In this scenario, the public should agree that regardless of differing opinions on the triangular relationship and Taiwan's future, the main goal should be to make Taiwan a better country. This could be achieved by expanding the country's participation in the international arena and having other countries recognize it as a full-fledged nation. For example, Taiwan was particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a time when the country was a "model" for its response to a pandemic. This performance was achieved even with the delayed information from the WHO as the country is not a member of the said organization.

The security dilemma surrounding the three states will not end until China decides to end its continued pressure on Taiwan and allow Taiwan to declare independence. In the meantime, Taiwan must side with the US in seeking protection while gradually expanding its international space with US support. As China gains power, the US may be less willing to help Taiwan defend itself (Wang, 2013). The visit to Taiwan by Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, also demonstrated how the US has responded to the Taiwan Strait issue. The Biden administration had opposed her trip to Taiwan because of concerns that the visit would harm US-China relations (Wong, 2022). In addition, the recent phone call between President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping in July 2022 indicated that President Joe Biden would not support Taiwan's independence (Amaro, 2022). Although Taiwan's geographic position is important for the US to maintain its influence in the Indo-Pacific region, with President Joe Biden taking office in 2021, it is still hard to say whether the new president will continue to support Taiwan as Trump did. In this

case, Taiwan itself should look for other options, such as the New Go South Policy (New GSP) introduced by President Tsai Ing-wen, and not invest in one single venture.

In summary, public opinion in Taiwan will continue to influence the decisions of Taiwan's leadership, both in domestic policy and foreign relations. However, leaders should not use this as a strategy to increase their votes in elections but to develop policies that are undoubtedly relevant to the current situation and also to Taiwan's future.

There are still different opinions on the issue of independence and unity, but the Taiwanese people should agree to stick together when the country faces a difficult situation. With the escalation of Chinese activities, Taiwan should prepare at all times to become more active not only militarily but also on the international stage, as the country's limited access to the international arena poses a threat to Taiwan.

While it is important to protect Taiwan's sovereignty, Taiwan's leader must also keep in mind that every action and every statement the leader makes will ultimately lead to a change in the attitude of China and the US. For this reason, every step the leader takes should be taken carefully.

As a country, Taiwan should not rely so much on any particular country, as there are no guarantees that these countries will extend unwavering support. They should seek other exchanges, such as building economic and cultural ties with other countries. Although there is no political involvement, Taiwan is strengthening its relationship with the local people and governments of partner-countries.

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APPENDIX A
Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study is guided by the conceptual framework shown in Figure 3. The Taiwanese perception of the China-Taiwan-US relationship is a result of the intersectionality of the issues in the Taiwan Strait as well as the perspectives of the Taiwanese people. There are various problems in the Taiwan Strait, such as the security issue that may lead to a military conflict between the self-governing island state of Taiwan and mainland China, which considers the self-governing island as its property. What further complicates the issues in the Taiwan Strait is the involvement of the US, which is one of Taiwan’s staunch supporters.

Taiwan is the eighth largest trading partner of the US, cooperates with the country on a number of international issues, and adheres to US principles (Lee, 2022). In addition, the US is committed to providing Taiwan with sufficient weapons to enable it to continue to defend itself and to combat “any use of force or other forms of coercion that might undermine the security or social or economic system of the Taiwanese people” (Lee, 2022).

As tensions between China and the US increase under the Trump administration, this paper explores the Taiwanese people’s perspectives on the relationship between China, the US, and Taiwan from 2016 to 2021.

Figure 3
Conceptual framework of the study

