



Beijing Is Pushing the Taiwanese Toward Independence Hard and Fast

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On May 20, Beijing's public enemy No. 1, Tsai Ing-wen, will be inaugurated for a second and final four-year term as president of Taiwan. Tsai was reelected in January with 57 percent of the vote, beating her Beijing-friendly rival. Her Democratic Progressive Party, which holds that the "Republic of China (Taiwan)" is already "an independent country" and not a part of China, also retained its legislative majority. Beijing's growing belligerence, its tightening grip on Hong Kong, and Taipei's stronger relations with Washington propelled Tsai's big victory. But the primary driver behind her success is a more profound shift in Taiwanese identity. In February, a staggering 83 percent of Taiwan's residents self-identified as Taiwanese rather than Chinese, as compared to 56.9 percent last June. But this burgeoning national identity still remains anathema to Beijing, which insists that the island's inhabitants are Chinese—no matter what *they* may think.

For decades, the dispute was about which side really represented "China." After losing the Chinese Civil War in 1949, U.S. ally Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan, bringing with him the Republic of China government and its treasury. For decades, both sides—the authoritarian Kuomintang (KMT) regime in Taipei on the one hand and Mao Zedong's revolutionary communists in Beijing on the other—claimed to represent China and engaged in a costly dollar-diplomacy struggle for international recognition throughout the developing world. Many poor countries took advantage and changed recognition several times, with each switch demanding ever more largesse from either Taipei or Beijing.

During the 1960 Olympics, China successfully compelled the Olympics Committee to admit the country as "Formosa," and at Beijing's behest the nation's athletes' uniforms bore the name "Taiwan" at the 1964 and 1968 Games, rather than 'The Republic of China.' But times have changed. Now, Taiwan's people, generations removed from the mainland and increasingly accustomed to their democratic rights, have begun to see themselves as distinct. Beijing, meanwhile, has become even more linguistically demanding, in baroque and arbitrary ways that emphasize their imaginary ownership of the Taiwanese people. In November 2018, Beijing deemed a failed ballot initiative to change the island's current Olympics name from "Chinese Taipei" to "Taiwan" so provocative that it threatened to force Taiwanese athletes to withdraw from international competitions.

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During Tsai's first term it induced seven countries to cut ties with Taipei, leaving Taiwan with only 15 formal diplomatic partners. And amid the COVID-19 crisis, Beijing has done everything within its power to keep Taiwan from engaging meaningfully with the World Health Organization and participating, as an observer, in the World Health Assembly, the organization's decision-making body.

These strong-arm tactics, which have continued unabated despite the global pandemic, have eroded the political ground beneath the feet of the KMT—the Chinese Communist Party's erstwhile political collaborator—and rendered it one of many political parties on the island. For instance, Beijing has criticized Tsai because she (unlike her KMT predecessor) has not accepted the so-called 1992 Consensus—an informal agreement between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party that there is one China, but that each side can have its own definition of what that might mean.

Then, in his 2019 New Year's address, Chinese President Xi Jinping redefined the 1992 Consensus as an understanding that "the two sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China, jointly seeking to achieve cross-strait unification." Even the China-friendly KMT cannot abide this change and has been compelled to consider dropping its support for the concept. Public anger and fear among the Taiwanese electorate catalyzed by what many see as the repression of Hong Kongers' political rights made the change a requirement for the KMT's political survival.

But Beijing might reconsider the likely consequences of further isolating Taiwan and intimidating its 24 million residents. This approach has already convinced millions more Taiwanese that formal independence may be the only reasonable next step for their island.

Even so, Tsai is no rabble-rouser. She has deliberately selected policy positions and been careful not to overplay Taiwan's surging support within the Trump administration. Nor has she disavowed the idea of the Republic of China in favor of an entirely separate Taiwanese identity, despite the fact that increasing numbers of Taiwanese view the idea of the Republic of China itself as a foreign construct imposed upon them by China.

The smart move for Beijing would be to engage Tsai and her twice-elected Democratic Progressive Party government to mollify their legitimate concerns and work toward a modus vivendi between the two sides. To date, however, Beijing has been more interested in tightening the knot than untying it. One reason is because after decades of propagandizing their children about the inevitability of "reunification" and the evil of "separatism," the pressure is now growing on China's current leadership from a new generation of bellicose and nationalistic netizens to make good on their bluster and to take Taiwan, by force if necessary. The rigidity of China's rhetoric toward Taiwan, its primary core interest, has almost obligated Beijing to adopt aggressive policies that continue to undermine its own stated policy objectives.

Yet, as China's leaders work to tighten their grip and destroy the Taiwanese government, more and more of the island's residents are self-identifying as Taiwanese, thus making it more likely that one day a "Republic of Taiwan" will replace the Republic of China. Xi and his comrades can help stave off that day by adopting a more flexible approach to Taiwan that includes granting its people the space and respect they deserve, and finding a way to sit down with its legitimately elected government and discuss issues of mutual concern. Until they do, the promise of peaceful unification with Taiwan will continue to slip through their fingers.