

**How do Domestic Taiwanese Politics Affect Taiwan's Relationship with China?**

**David Mkrтчyan**

**University of California, Irvine**

## **Abstract**

How domestic Taiwanese politics affect its relationship with China is a research question that gained traction over the last decade. In this paper, I will use a mixed methodological approach to overview a quantitative case study of the effect of Taiwan's political makeup on China-Taiwan relations. Specifically, I analyze how China-Taiwan's relations have (1) shifted as a result of changes to Taiwan's domestic politics; (2) influenced Taiwanese natives' opinions on matters concerning China; and (3) affected the trajectory of future China-Taiwan association. By concentrating my focus on the changes in domestic political affairs in Taiwan from 2014 to present, I argue that (1) Taiwanese domestic efforts strongly indicate the people's opinions on China given the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), and the Sunflower Student Movement (SSM); (2) the Taiwanese natives were split between being open-minded to Taiwan's relationship with China or continuing to remain closed off; (3) changes to Taiwan's politics is a great indicator of how well Taiwanese residents receive Chinese policies.

## **Introduction**

The China-Taiwan relationship has been multiplexed and controversial since the administration of Taiwan was transferred from Japan to the Republic of China after the second World War ended in 1945. Ever since, China has perceived Taiwan as an extension of Beijing, whilst Taiwan has tried to maintain its sovereignty and culture in-tact. Thus, I argue that public opinion is a major catalyst for the trajectory of Taiwanese leadership and its relationship with China.

Furthermore, China-Taiwan relations have shifted because of the many changes to Taiwan's domestic politics through continuous influence from Taiwanese natives to change who domestic political affairs represent in Taiwan. I use the ECFA, the CSSTA, and the SSM as examples that succinctly illustrate how Taiwanese natives have protested for change that benefits them and helps cement the type of relationship with China that aligns with their political views. Overall, Taiwan's response to Chinese politics will always have a positive relationship with Taiwanese citizen's as they have expressed their interests/disinterests, for policies and vote according to how they want China-Taiwan relations to progress.

Learning about China-Taiwan relations is essential for several reasons: comprehending geopolitical trends, promoting peace and stability, upholding democratic values and human rights, and understanding global diplomacy. What happens between China-Taiwan is a forecast for what may happen elsewhere—allowing China to do as it pleases relays a rubric that leaves a path for other countries to follow. It is important to stay up to date on matters that, although might not be in one's own geopolitical backyard at present, will end up casting a growing shadow that will end up being far too late to remedy.

## **Literature Review**

The 2020 Taiwanese presidential election highlighted tension between China's influence and Taiwan's autonomy. Coincidentally, a month prior to said election, Taiwan passed the Anti-Infiltration Act which was proposed to curb Chinese political interference (Atlantic Council 2020). However, incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen won a landslide victory, securing over 8 million votes during a time when the DPP's majority in the legislature was decreased. This can be connected to the public's influence on the type of leadership they want without consideration for which party maintains majority in the legislature (Atlantic Council 2020). The victory was

important as it projected the public's rejection for Taiwan's ties with KMT and rejects a relationship with China altogether. Following these events, Chinese state media attributed Tsai's win to her administration's influence, egregious support from the U.S., and internal issues with the KMT in Taiwan to sway Taiwanese political values toward pro-China rhetoric (Atlantic Council 2020). However, this isn't foreign as the Taiwanese identity continues to consolidate, but in a more diversified and less political aggressive manner (Cabestan 2017). Taiwan's political landscape shows a rising maturation of democracy, with a declining emphasis on identity politics, and a stronger focus on pragmatic governance. The country articulates its sovereignty while focusing on its civic identity that aligns closely with the Republic of China (ROC), emphasizing democracy and political autonomy as key defenses against PRC's reunification ambitions (Cabestan 2017).

The relationship between China-Taiwan can't be analyzed without articulating how the United States plays a role in Taiwan's road to independence. It's worth mentioning that had Taiwan not democratized, U.S.-Taiwan relations would have plateaued and centered around economic interests, thus making it easier for the U.S. to deprioritize Taiwan in favor for stable U.S.-China relations (Chen 2016). Taiwan's democratization is what's netted a close relationship to the U.S., despite making it complex when managing cross-Strait relations. The U.S.'s rhetorical support for Taiwanese democracy is matched by substantial practical cooperation, underscoring the enduring strength of their bilateral relationship (Chen 2016). Tension between them often flare up, however democratic evolution in Taiwan has proven to fortify its relationship with the U.S., aligning their interests much more closely and demonstrating the tangible benefits of shared democratic values in international relations. This would not have been possible had the public of Taiwan not opt for the rise of democracy in Taiwan through calls for

formal independence during election campaigns (Coffin 2017). While the power was thought to be in the power of policy makers and those that make up the majority in the legislature, it should be commended that through the public's votes, rallies, and protests, Taiwan was capable of electing officials that match their interests. Taiwan's democratization has impacted domestic politics and policymaking, which as lead to a shift in the state's priorities with occasional gridlock (Coffin 2017). Although there are geopolitical complexities, the resilience in the U.S.-Taiwan relationship underscores the importance of continued cooperation and conversation to remedy shared challenges and uphold democratic principles in the region.

Speaking of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), this trade pact garnered widespread protest and criticism and an overall focus point for opposition in parties and activist groups that did not agree with Ma's administration. The public protested the CSSTA because they believed that Ma's administration was undermining Taiwan's sovereignty and its democratic processes, making it impossible to avoid relations with China in the future (Hsieh 2015). Moreover, Hsieh overviews the implications of the Sunflower movement, which was a student-led protest that surrounded Taiwan's legislature for over three weeks due to their opposition to the CSSTA (2015). The movement had a lot of public support and drew attention to broader concerns about Taiwan's' relationship with China, not just the concerns people had based on what was written on the agreement itself—people believed there lacked a transparency in Taiwanese policymaking when the CSSTA was promoted by Ma at the time of signing. Ma then responded to the political challenges, articulating his efforts of trying to save face due to rising levels of public discontent, however this was not taken seriously, and his efforts were met with skepticism and immense criticism from civil society groups (Hseih 2015). Ma Ying-jeou was incapable of attaining public satisfaction, which is why his reign crumbled, providing insight

into the future of Taiwanese politics and the various factors necessary to shape the country's political landscape in the future—public acceptance.

Why was Ma elected president if the public's vote is so important? Well, he assumed his presidency by articulating his goal of preventing Taiwan's de jure independence while promoting total economic integration (Huang 2017). Most of the public wasn't keen on voting as they, at the time, felt it was to no avail and that individual votes made by the public wouldn't count for much when discerning political matters in Taiwan (Tung 2016). However, things took a turn when Xi Jinping tried his best to remove the U.S. from leveraging matters in cross-strait relations; by minimizing U.S. involvement, Xi wanted to achieve reunification despite challenges posed via shifts in the political landscape. Cross-strait relations under Hu Jintao were to prioritize preventing Taiwanese independence while promoting economic integration, however Xi Jinping's continuity and shifts emphasized a reinforcement of the "one country, two systems" slogan (Huang 2017). This would prove pointless as Taiwanese public voters weren't in favor of merging, and instead, wanted to maintain their individual identity with the ability to voice their opinions to uphold a government that addresses their own institutional desires (Lin & Wu 2017).

Much like the CSSTA, the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) is emblematic of China's efforts to strengthen economic interdependence between both sides of the Taiwan strait, thus fostering stability while advancing Beijing's political objectives. Xi's leadership brings a renewed emphasis on the one-China principle as the cornerstone of China's Taiwan policy, noting that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. However, Xi's policies are underpinned by a multifaceted approach that aims to bolster China's territorial integrity while simultaneously using diplomatic maneuvers aimed at isolating Taiwan diplomatically to diminish their international position in foreign politics (Tan & Ho 2017).

The public voters were inspired when Tsai emphasized the importance of promoting “fair and equitable opportunities” for young people to pursue their dreams and accomplish their lifetime goals. For people to have the ability of chasing dreams, the government must address many different challenges including house and rental costs (Wang 2016). This was one of the largest barriers for young people when entering the job market because it proved to be inaccessible for these individuals to have an avenue at climbing the social ladder without generational support. The administration also had hopes of implementing policies that improved labor rights to protect works’ interests by increasing minimum wage and allowing the option for childcare facilities to working young couples to help balance work and familial responsibilities (Wang 2016). Tsai went on to articulate the need to promote transitional justice and reconciliation in Taiwan to address historical injustices and human rights abuses, specifically those that stem from Taiwan’s authoritative past (Wang 2016). These changes are mandatory to build an inclusive democratic society where all citizens can participate fully and equally. In fact, not only did this help support the current regime in office, but it produced many working-class individuals that witnessed the government making changes that benefitted their future and actively mirrored their pleas (Wang 2016). Tsai ended her speech by outlining the importance of elevating Taiwan’s international presence and engagement in political affairs. She wanted Taiwan to “consolidate our democracy and ensure our sovereignty” in hopes of garnering global support for Taiwan’s cause. By improving Taiwan’s soft power and cultural influence at a global level, it would be able to leverage its strengths in areas such as technology and democratization. Tsai’s political agenda reflected a fountain of hope for Taiwanese citizens by focusing on pressing economic, social, and political challenges to better Taiwan as a whole. Through the prioritization of social welfare, innovation, justice, reconciliation, and international engagement, Tsai’s

administration sought to build a prosperous Taiwan, one that is inclusive, resilient, and safeguard's Taiwan's democracy and sovereignty in the face of external pressures (Wang 2016).

Taiwan's rise to democracy can be addressed through two perspectives: primordialism and constructivism. Primordialism emphasizes the deep-rootedness of factors such as culture, blood, language, et cetera. This perspective proposes that identities are largely inherited and immutable, shaped by historical, cultural, and linguistic ties that individuals have minimal control over (Wang 2017). This perspective can be applied to the historical division between "Taiwanese" and "mainlanders" during the authoritarian era, when ethnic differences played a significant role in shaping identities. Contrarily, a constructivist perspective highlights the role of intentional construction and social interactions in shaping identity (Wang 2017). Thus, identities can be consciously fostered and/or manipulated by political elites and state institutions, often through education, propaganda, and the discriminatory commemoration of certain cultural or historical narratives (Wang 2017). This perspective can help one understand how Taiwan's political environment and policies have influenced the evolution of identity, from an ethnic divide to a contestation between "Taiwanese consciousness" and "Chinese consciousness" (Wang 2017). It is imperative to use both perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of Taiwan's identity politics and its implications for domestic politics, with careful consideration to cross-strait relations.

Taiwan's position on cross-strait negotiations has shifted in that they no longer accept the status quo position—de jure independence—but rather, a de facto independence, which is becoming more and more entrenched with time (Huang & James 2014). Coincidentally, it's interesting to note that Taiwan's colors of partisanship, Blue and Green, are blending into Aquamarine. Blue represents those that favor close ties with China, and green represents those



that advocate for Taiwanese independence. However, the combination of both colors, aquamarine, is represented by those that seek to maintain the status quo (Huang & James 2014). These colors personalize the nuanced preferences of Taiwanese voters regarding cross-strait relations, highlighting the importance of identity politics in shaping these preferences (Huang & James 2014). Through a combination of quantitative survey data collected over two decades and qualitative information from several focus-group interviews and other strenuous in-depth interviews, Huang & James argue that identity plays a crucial role in determining individuals' attitudes toward cross-strait relations and influences which party gets their vote (2014). Through these studies, it has become clear that Taiwanese citizens appeal to candidness and transparency when politicians convey prospects for intentional political realignment.

Incidentally, there is a link between elections in Taiwan and political successions in China. This political competition that branches from cross-strait conflicts is seen as Taiwanese presidents are much more assertive toward mainland China during the election period and their second term rather than their first inter-electoral period/first term (Wu & Chen 2020). Political leaders that are domestically challenged cannot be seen as inferior in external matters. Leaders facing domestic challenges feel compelled to demonstrate a certain level of authoritative strength, while on the other hand, leaders that have already secured their position can afford external concessions (Wu & Chen 2020). Public voters in recent elections have taken notice of leadership decisions that are articulated by Wu and Chen, which is why there is a higher participation rate from the Taiwanese natives when compared to elections in 2004 and 2008.

## **Case Background**

Historically, Taiwan's statehood is not the easiest to digest nor comprehend; since the 1500s, many different countries have visited Taiwan to advance production practices, however it

isn't until 1662 post Manchurian conquest of the Ming Dynasty that China enforced authority over the Taiwanese island. The Qing dynasty takes control of almost all of Taiwan's coastal areas for the next three centuries until the Qing Dynasty announces Taiwan as a prefecture of the Qing Empire. This announcement does not last long as around 1894, the Qing government signs the Treaty of Shimonoseki, thus ceding sovereignty of Taiwan to Japan—Japan ruled Taiwan until 1945 when the ROC declared that Taiwan will return to Chinese leadership. The ROC, United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States (U.S.) issued the Potsdam Declaration, which essentially pushed for Japan to surrender its authority over Taiwan and the eventual enforcement of the Cairo Declaration in 1943.

After 1945, when Japanese rule over Taiwan was handed to the ROC government representatives, the infamous February 28 Incident takes place, which is one of the earliest anti-government insurrections in Taiwan. This was violently suppressed by the Kuomintang-led government, which was directed by governor Chen Yi and President Chiang Kai-shek—Taiwan's representatives. This eventually leads to the Battle of Kuningtou on Kinmen in 1949, resulting in the hefty defeat of the CCP forces on the northwestern coast of the island at the hands of the ROC, thus enforcing Martial law in Taiwan until 1987. Up until this point, all activists of democracy were arrested and thrown in prison, regardless of the development of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986 to help reignite the people's voice—people in Taiwan push for independent sovereignty. After the creation of the DPP, the following year marks the end of Martial law and the start of cross-strait interactions as democratization ramps up in Taiwan.

The start of 1991 proves to be the biggest year for Taiwan as the National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion is eradicated, which makes sure that Taiwan's people have total representativeness as all congressional delegates will be re-elected to ensure

total representation. This lasts until 2005 when Taiwan becomes a part of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)—this is essential for Taiwan to have a gateway for free trade all through the Asia Pacific region. Being a member of the APEC helped influence Taiwan's first cross-strait meeting in Hong Kong in 1992.

The joint agreements at the APEC meeting came to fruition in the first ROC presidential election in 1996 with KMT's Lee Teng-hui and his right-hand man, Lien Chan, attaining 54% of the public vote. However, change democratization in Taiwan rises as Chen Shui-bian and Annette Hsiu-lien Lu, members of the DPP, end the KMT's half-century rule as they are the newly elected president and vice president, marking the first time the ROC government has changed executive power in Taiwan to an entirely different political party—KMT to DPP. Following the start of DPP rule in Taiwan, it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Furthermore, Taiwan created a unicameral legislature of the ROC in Taipei, known as the Legislative Yuan, which passes the Referendum Act; this act helps endorse regular citizens of Taiwan to push laws at both a local and national level. Democracy wins again—Chen and Lu were re-elected in 2004. However, this period goes back and forth between both political parties as the 2008 election selects Ma Ying-jeou and Vincent C. Siew as the presidential candidates of the ROC—representatives of the KMT.

One of the biggest economic matters between China/Taiwan takes place in 2010, when the Cross-Straits Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) is established to promote trade relations to strengthen economic cooperation between both states. The KMT continues its newfound streak and wins the election in 2012 with Ma Ying-jeou and Wu Den-yih. Two years later, Wang Yu-chi, one of the council ministers for mainland affairs, holds a formal meeting with Zhang Zhijin, China/Taiwan affairs executive, in Nanjing—2014. This year sparks

the rise of the Sunflower Movement, which is a group of students and other civic organizations that protest for Taiwan's independent sovereignty. One of the prominent slogans used in this protest is that *Taiwan is not for sale*.

This brings us to the time frame that this research is going to focus on: 2014-present. The DPP win the presidential election in both 2016 with Tsai Ing-wen and Chen Chien-jen and again in 2020 with Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te, whilst maintaining legislative majority. These events are important to understand to paint an image of what China/Taiwan relations have looked like and why matters are so volatile between the two.

## **Method**

To answer the research question, I will utilize interaction analysis. The sampling frame would consist of different political campaigns or any prominent changes to the political atmosphere of Taiwan and how this affects Taiwan's relationship with China through changes in public opinion. To choose the sample, I would choose political campaigns that net high levels of political competitiveness. Thus, I would be using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods; quantitative methods would articulate any economic changes or help represent a demographic of individuals that are pro-China/Taiwan or anti-China/Taiwan relations, whilst qualitative methods will help identify the social constructs that are represented by Taiwanese people post popular political projects. By using mixed methodology, my research will allow for a much larger selection of implications that would result in changes to China/Taiwan relations and answer why that is the case. However, because my research primarily relies on qualitative research (small-n analysis), I will focus on a few things while simultaneously addressing any changes throughout.

The time frame that I am looking at ranges from 2014 till present day; by looking at the past decade, I will be able to look deeper into a specific set of data.

Data that I will use will go over the public's opinion on the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), the Sunflower Student Movement (SSM), the Kuomintang (KMT)—aka the Guomindang (GMD)—the National Party of China (NPC)—aka the Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP)—and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Data will be drawn based on public acceptance on certain policies that are either in support of China or against China, thus allowing me to analyze whether there is a political connection between these two variables.

Independent Variable: Domestic Political Affairs in Taiwan

Dependent Variable: Taiwan's Relationship with China

## **Procedure**

For my study, it will be essential to investigate levels of democratization in Taiwan before and after political changes to domestic affairs that bring to question China's authoritative outlook on Taiwan's future. In doing so, it will allow me to gauge whether Taiwanese residents are in support of unionizing with China—upholding the status quo of the Republic of China—or opposed to it by choosing to support Taiwan's democracy, human rights, and overall nationalism. This data can be tracked by using Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation Polls, which was a survey first conducted in 1991 and illustrates those that de jure independence for Taiwan, that prefer the overall maintenance of the status quo, and those that do not hold any views on the matter.

Alongside this data, I think it will be pivotal to look at changes to political affairs made in Taiwan to better represent their people's opinions as presidential campaigns and other political campaigns do not fully encompass the voice of Taiwan.

## **Theory**

I argue that domestic Taiwanese politics affect its relationship with China by expanding on public opinion, elections, and qualitative data through polls and surveys. In doing so, I hypothesize that Taiwanese public opinion directly influences electoral results, thus, directly appointing the political candidates that best represent the majority, ensuring a public-approved trajectory of China-Taiwan relations.

The two main variables I will be talking about are "Taiwan's relationship with China" and "public opinion in Taiwan." The independent variable is the public's opinion (majority) and the dependent variable is Taiwan's relationship with China. Thus, if the public votes for a democracy, then their relationship with China will mirror just that, vice versa. When discerning "Taiwan's relationship with China," indicators may include diplomatic interactions, trade volume, cross-strait relations, and policy changes. For "public opinions in Taiwan," indicators may include surveys, protests, public movements, polls, media coverage, and public statements by political leaders or influential figures. Diplomatic interactions can be measured using official statements, agreements, and summits between Taiwan and China. Trade volume can be measured using economic data on imports, exports, and investments between the two entities. Public opinion can be measured using surveys conducted by reputable polling organizations, sentiment analysis of media coverage, and analysis of social media discussions if applicable.

## **Analysis**

## **Domestic Taiwanese Politics and Their Effects on Taiwan's Relationship with China**

It doesn't shock anyone that domestic Taiwanese politics play a significant role in shaping Taiwan's relationship with China because Taiwan's political landscape is illustrated by a continuum of views revolving around Taiwan's affiliation with China. This continuum of views stems from people encouraging stronger relations with China to people fighting for total liberation. For starters, many political factions in Taiwan support closer ties with China, while maintaining the notion of ensuing reunification (Cabestan 2017). One of the benefits that pro-reunification political factions in Taiwan stress is that it will economically benefit Taiwan in the long run; however, it's difficult for this group to gather mass support because pro-independence parties have made it clear that reunification would threaten democratic freedoms and Taiwan's national distinctiveness (Atlantic Council 2020). Furthermore, pro-independence political parties want to ensure total independence from China and argue that state sovereignty and international acknowledgement as an individual state is far more important than any potential economic resources that would benefit Taiwan. They argue that Taiwan's longevity would diminish at an exponentially faster rate without state sovereignty when compared to prospective economic gains netted by reunification with China (Chen 2016).

Conversely, there are centrist groups in Taiwan that believe in a more realist and pragmatic approach to the China-Taiwan crisis. Their primary goal is to maintain the status quo and engage in a more nuanced approach to cross-strait affairs by highlighting stability and economic affluence while complementing the complexity of Taiwan's dreadful relationship with China (Chen 2017). Centrist political group members typically stress positive and negative points toward pro-unification and pro-independence political groups to remain neutral yet express their distaste in choosing one specific approach. Instead, they engage in *delicate*

diplomacy to help manage hostilities and, in return, encourage healthy negotiation between China and Taiwan (Hsieh 2015).

Through elections, leaderships change, thus shifting domestic politics that can have direct implications for China-Taiwan relations. For example, when the DPP won the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, it cemented Taiwan's geopolitical needs within these eight years to promote state independence, leading to amplified tensions with China and alterations in cross-strait procedures (Huang & James 2014). Additionally, alongside the presidential elections, the public's opinion is what helps political candidates articulate their stances concerning cross-strait issues, since these prevalent attitudes towards China are formed based on historical understandings, cultural uniqueness, economic deliberations, and observations of Beijing's intentions (Huang 2017). China is still Taiwan's largest trading partner in both imports and exports, which is why Taiwan's economic sustainability relies on the Chinese market; however, this is a two-way street as Beijing is heavily reliant on technological parts imported from Taiwan—this is why the Beijing-Taiwan relationship is important to take note of separate from China-Taiwan relations (Coffin 2017). Ultimately, the relationship between domestic politics in Taiwan and its influence on cross-strait relations with China is apparent yet highlights Taiwan's position in the geopolitical landscape of East Asia.

Changes in Taiwan's domestic politics have regularly led to changes in China-Taiwan relations, as they can influence how Taiwan approaches its relationship with China. One of the many ways that changes to Taiwan's domestic politics has impacted China-Taiwan relations is through the election of pro-independence leaders (Lin & Wu 2017). The elections in which a leader that advocates for Taiwan's independence or pushes Taiwan's distinctiveness wins, puts a strain on Taiwan's relationship with China (Tan & Ho 2017). For example, when President Tsai



Ing-wen, representing the DPP, won the election in 2016, there was a period of heightened tensions between China and Taiwan. Tsai Ing-wen has maintained a cautious approach to relations with China and has not once endorsed the “One China” ideology since his day of election (TEMPLEMAN 2020). A second way in which changes to Taiwan’s domestic politics has impacted China-Taiwan relations is through shifts in policies (Wang 2016). Changes that are made within the administration often cause heavy shifts in Taiwan’s policies geared towards China. For instance, when the DPP is in authority, there tends to be a much more assertive attitude on disputes related to Taiwan’s sovereignty and identity, which leads to rising friction with China (Tung 2016). Contrarily, when the Kuomintang (KMT) is in power, there are attempts made to improve affairs with China through economic cooperation and negotiation (Tan 2017). The third way changes to Taiwan’s domestic policies affect China-Taiwan relations is through Cross-Strait Economic Relations. Taiwanese domestic political changes directly impact cross-strait economic relations, because when President Ma Ying-jeou, representing the KMT, took office, there was a period of warming relations with China (Wu 2005). These warming relations are demonstrated by increasing economic exchanges between both parties and the signing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in 2010 (Tung 2016). The ECFA helped institutionalize cross-strait economic exchanges and further prompted other countries to sign free trade agreements with Taiwan, whilst helping promote Taiwan’s involvement in foreign trade. Given this, it is apparent that shifts in domestic politics in Taiwan can indeed lead to reevaluations of economic policies towards China (TEMPLEMAN 2020).

Taiwan’s domestic politics impact China-Taiwan relations through the act of diplomatic maneuvering. When politics change domestically in Taiwan, it will affect the state’s international diplomacy—be that efforts to maintain diplomatic partners whilst partaking in transnational

organizations. For example, when the DPP is in an authoritative position, China will use its diplomatic influence to pressure other states into not distinguishing Taiwan as a sovereign state, or to limit Taiwan's immersion in international events, which, as stated above, is directly influenced by Taiwan's domestic political state (Tan & Ho 2017). Lastly, Taiwan's domestic politics can impact China-Taiwan relations through security. Domestic political changes can impact Taiwan's security dynamics in the region (Lin & Wu 2017). This is seen through changes in Taiwan's defense policies or perceptions of the threat posed by China, which may unanimously affect regional stability, and thereby, influence the responses of other countries—the U.S., Japan, and other potential regional actors. Not only do changes in Taiwan's domestic politics have the potential to considerably impact China-Taiwan relations, but it can redirect the trajectory of cross-strait developments (Coffin 2017).

China-Taiwan relations directly influence the future of China-Taiwan association through trust and confidence-building, political preconditions, state of domestic politics, international factors, and through security considerations. Trust and confidence-building are imperative to promote constructive and stable relations between China and Taiwan—making an environment conducive of trust-building procedures (Chen 2016). Examples of confidence-building methods would entail economic collaboration, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people interactions; doing so lays the foundation for future dialogue and cooperation between China and Taiwan (Cabestan 2017). Equally, conflicts and distrust can thwart progress towards any form of positive relationship. Trust and confidence-building are often seen when the KMT is in an authoritative position in Taiwan, meanwhile the opposite is in effect when the DPP is elected. Political preconditions affect the overall political climate between China and Taiwan and whether association is a hot topic. For example, China insisting on the “One China” principle as a

minimal basis for dialogue and Taiwan's declaration of its sovereignty, constrains the boundaries that affect future China-Taiwan association (Cabestan 2017). Thus, changes in the political landscape, especially shifts in leadership, impact the feasibility of association negotiations between China and Taiwan. In fact, domestic politics play a critical role in determining Taiwan's approach to possible association with China (Huang 2017). There are plenty of debates over Taiwan's identity, sovereignty, and national interest—political discourse—which further emphasizes the Taiwanese government's stance on topics such as independence, reunification, and the possible maintenance of the status quo. All these factors affect the direction that cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan can take toward any prospective associative attempts. Additionally, external influences, including those that affect the geopolitical environment and the stance of major powers such as the United States, are high up on the list of things that influence the trajectory of China-Taiwan association. The United States' continued support for Taiwan's security/sovereignty and its adherence to the "One China" policy affects and will continue to affect China's attitude toward Taiwan and vice versa (Huang & James 2014). Both international support and pressure can structure the incentives and limitations for both sides concerning association. However, like international factors, security considerations also play a role in China-Taiwan's trajectory towards association (Coffin 2017). Security concerns involve military tensions, which has a hefty implication for the practicality and interest of any future association between China and Taiwan. Assessments of security risks and the balance of power in the area influences the inclination of both sides to engage in association discussions and the conditions they may be inclined to accept.

Taiwanese domestic efforts regarding the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) serve as significant indicators of the people's—Taiwan's citizens'—opinions on China

through public presentations and protests. These protests can indicate widespread resistance to adjacent economic ties, whilst larger-scale protests attract media attention and distinguish issues that concern state sovereignty, democracy, and national statehood in correspondence to China. One of these protests involved about 100,000 people, although the police claimed there were only 32,000 people (Tan & Ho 2017). People in the public were interviewed and one person, Chen Chih-wu, a self-employed merchant, articulated that ““Ma Ying-jeou won’t listen, but he’ll lose in the elections”” (Jennings 2010). Many other protesters were chanting “say no to unification, say no to China” and things like “put the interests of the people first” to articulate how important the public’s opinion is and how serious the people are in expressing their views (Chang & Chao 2010). Ma expressed that the ECFA would be beneficial to Taiwan’s export-based economy by providing preferential tariff reductions to Taiwanese goods, however many people that were protesting believe that giving China an inch would be synonymous to a first step toward unification (Chang & Chao 2010). Another way Taiwan’s people’s opinions are showcased are through public opinion polls and surveys that are managed by reputable research institutes or media outlets. Thus, providing quantitative data on public perception toward China and the ECFA. In a survey done by the Central Election Commission (CSIS) in 2016, 56.12% of the public voted for the DPP in 2016, 31.04% voted for the KMT, with the remaining 12.84% being third party (Hart et al. 2024). The same survey completed in 2020 netted 57.13% of public participants voting for the DPP, 38.61% voting for the KMT, with the remaining 4.26% voting for third party candidates, showing a positive relationship with public opinion and Taiwan’s relationship with China (Hart et al. 2024). It’s worth noting that the legislative yuan elections still marginally favored KMT, yet China-Taiwan relations continue to be strained based on public disapproval (Hart et al. 2024). Moreover, National Chengchi University gathered data that shows

changes in China-Taiwan relations and how identity plays a role in the participation of Taiwanese residents. The data shows a growing trend, showing that 61.7% of Taiwanese residents want to change the trajectory of Taiwan's relationship with China and either maintain the status quo indefinitely or maintain the status quo and look toward independence soon (Election Study Center 2024). The results of these surveys and polls can uncover the level of approval or disapproval toward engagement with China, whilst also providing distinction in the different types of opinions based on demographics, political affiliation, or geographic location (urban, suburban, rural, et cetera). As briefly mentioned prior, media coverage and media commentary also play a huge role in gathering the people's opinion as they play a major role in affecting public discourse regarding China and the ECFA (Lin & Wu 2017). Through media consumption, Taiwan's people are introduced to commentary analysis and investigative reports via newspapers, television, and online platforms, that represent diverse perspectives within Taiwanese society and influence Taiwan's public's perceptions of China and its rampant policies. Taiwan has hefty rules on Chinese investment in Taiwanese media, making it very difficult for the CCP to shape the media landscape (Huang et al. 2022). In March 2021, a poll was made discovering that "some 70 percent of Taiwanese said fact-checking could weaken the effect of fake news," meanwhile a few months later, a poll showed that Taiwanese disapproval to Beijing's "one country, two systems" formula for reunification skyrocketed "from 75.4 percent" to "85.6 percent" (Huang et al. 2022). As a result, there was a spike in CCP misinformation in Taiwan that led to the public becoming much more readily aware of manipulative information also known as "red media;" a survey conducted by the China Impact Studies Research Team at Academia Sinica in 2021, delineated that about 72% of Taiwanese respondents all came to the consensus that the Taiwanese government should regulate news media if it's being used by China

to promote propaganda, with about the same number of people also wanting the Taiwanese government to filter social media as well (Huang et al. 2022). Through these polls, it's very easy to identify where the public's opinion remains and how effective it is at shifting Taiwanese prospects with China.

Unsurprisingly, political parties in Taiwan influence the public on differing positions regarding engagement with China and the ECFA. The DPP criticizes agreements with China that potentially undermine Taiwan's sovereignty and threaten democratic values, whilst the KMT defends said agreements and deems them beneficial for Taiwan's future economy, with a bonus of revamping cross-strait relations for future cooperation (Tan & Ho 2017). Alongside political parties and civil society organizations—advocacy groups, think tanks, grassroots movements, et cetera—the Sunflower Movement enabled a level of fluidity amongst Taiwanese participants that helped increase awareness about the implications of the ECFA and help encourage community contribution in decision-making procedures (Tung 2016). The Sunflower Movement was “led by students” and functioned as an organized protest Taiwan's leadership and their decision to tango with China (Jarenwattananon 2024). Thus, after considering political parties and civil societal organizations as means of portraying public opinion, it's important to note that election outcomes are the best way to quantify how Taiwan's public feels about China-Taiwan relations and the trajectory they wish to take. Election results at the local and national levels can not only determine how the public views China and the role of the ECFA, but also help express the support or opposition to the state's government; through election, Taiwan's public directly influences the direction of Taiwan's domestic and foreign policies (Chen 2016). In May of 2021, a few thousand Taiwanese participants took a survey questioning whether they felt the PRC government was good/bad—the results show that 63% of Taiwanese residents believe the PRC is

bad, thus showing conclusive results that can be put side by side to other polls/surveys mentioned above to suggest that Taiwan's public opinion has the power to shift Taiwan's relationship with China in favor of Taiwanese residents (Bush et al. 2022). By evaluating the numerous domestic efforts and expressions of public opinion, policymakers will get insight into the multifaceted dynamics of Taiwan's relationship with China and the diverse factors that shape communal attitudes toward engagement with the mainland.

Taiwanese domestic efforts surrounding the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) provides significant insight into the people's opinions on China through public demonstrations and protests, public opinion polls and surveys, media coverage and commentary, political party positions, civil society advocacy, and election outcomes. Some observers estimated that on March 30, 2014, half a million Taiwanese citizens assembled in a protest regarding the rapid approval of the controversial CSSTA (Fan 2014). Internally, Taiwan heavily relies on its service industry, which accounted for 60.7% of its GDP in 2022. Given the significant role of this sector in the Taiwanese economy, it's imperative to assess China's economic conditions before Taiwan considers opening its market to them (Liao 2023). However, China's economy is encountering substantial challenges, particularly evidence by a notable rise in urban youth unemployment, reaching 21.3% in June 2023 before data publication ceased (Liao 2023). In contrast, Taiwan reported an unemployment rate of 3.48% in September 2023, while China's stood at 5% (Liao 2023). If Taiwan proceeds with the CSSTA, it will entail opening markets and employment opportunities to China, potentially resulting in a large-scale influx of Chinese workers into Taiwan (Liao 2023). This matter cannot go unaddressed, or it could significantly impact Taiwan's service sector job market (Liao 2023). Moreover, these protestors effectively utilized social media and other online platforms to communicate, educate,

and mobilize, challenging and reshaping conventional media narratives practically overnight. Contrary to the situation during Taiwan's democracy movement several decades prior, when overcoming media control by the KMT seemed improbable, the emergence of social media and the internet has provided a new set of tools for successful activism (Huang 2015). This includes the ability to mobilize protesters from different cities and even allow international supporters to join solidarity protests from their own countries (Khan 2020). Initially, livestreaming was ad hoc, often done via personal devices and platforms like UStream, before being taken over by a group called g0v in 2012, which prioritized sharing and promoting government transparency to Taiwanese natives and those abroad (Khan 2020). Videos also played a crucial role in internationalizing the movement, which were uploaded to YouTube in various languages including Cantonese, Mandarin, English, Japanese, and others (Khan 2020). These videos ranged from official organizers' messages to support from people around the globe, underscoring the movement's global reach (Coffin 2017). The videos that were particularly important were the ones that highlighted police brutality, which served as rallying points both domestically and internationally, prompting supporters to take on the streets in solidarity protests abroad (Khan 2020). In the election that took place on November 29, the DPP emerged victorious in most key races, securing 13 out of 22 cities and counties. This marked a significant decline for the KMT, whose control over cities and counties dropped from 15 to 6, meanwhile independent candidates won 3 seats (Vitello & Glaser 2014). The DPP garnered 47.56% of the popular vote compared to the KMT's 40.7%; voter turnout was also 67.59% nationwide, highlighting the main KMT losses in Taichung and Taipei. (Vitello & Glaser 2014). The outcome of public votes determines which political party manages relations between Taiwan and China. A higher number of votes for the DPP increases the chances of strained China-Taiwan relations and shift towards independence.



The Sunflower Student Movement (SSM) is one way that the Taiwanese people have expressed their opinions on China. As we know, the SSM took place in Taiwan during 2014 and provides great insight on Taiwan's public's opinions on China and cross-strait relations. Firstly, it delineated opposition to further enhance ties with China as the movement was largely a protest opposing the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). The CSSTA was considered a step towards bettering economic integration with China, however participants of the SSM raised concerns that this may diminish Taiwanese state sovereignty, eradicate democracy, and conceal national identity (Cabestan 2017). Thus, the purpose of this movement was to signal that strengthening ties with China by any means is to cease and discontinue. Individuals part of this movement also demanded transparency and accountability regarding policymaking, with special emphasis on policies that deal with agreements made with China. The movement wanted to ensure that no policies fly under the radar and that the people of Taiwan can offer their input, given the state of democracy at the time of occurrence (Lin & Wu 2017). This is a result of the lack of public consultation and clarity during the negotiation and ratification process of the CSSTA, exhibiting a formal request for greater public involvement and oversight in outcomes that relate to cross-strait policies (Lin & Wu 2017). Next, the SSM participants wanted Taiwan to accentuate its democratic values and institutions in response to perceived threats from China. The movement was not just defending Taiwan's democratic values, but rather a way of combating Beijing's attempts to challenge Taiwan's autonomy and democratic freedoms. This movement consisted of students, activists, and civil society groups with varying backgrounds and perspectives on cross-strait relations; this movement showcased the complexity of public opinion in Taiwan regarding its relationship with China—there were people advocating for the maintenance of the status quo and people asking for an insurance on democratic policies; the

public was very involved in the political makeup revolving around China-Taiwan relations (Tan & Ho 2017). The SSM led to the revision of policymaking, leading to the shelving of the CSSTA, thus prompting a reexamination of Taiwan's current approach to cross-strait relations. The movement stimulated public opposition to the treaty and prompted subsequent government decisions, emphasizing the significance of public opinion in shaping Taiwan's policies towards China (Huang & James 2017). This movement served as a powerful example of Taiwanese public feelings towards China and accentuated the importance of public participation and responsibility in decision-making developments related to Taiwan's relationship with China. Based on primary interviews with political leaders, their aides, and activists in Taiwan, alongside supplementary data, I affirm that public sentiment emerges as the primary driver behind political alliances (Wu 2019). This example highlights instances where public opinion holds more sway than elite competition in shaping the decisions of political leaders, potentially serving as a pivotal aspect of democratic policymaking (Wu 2019).

The reason for division among Taiwanese natives regarding Taiwan's relationship with China stems from periods of colonization—Dutch, Spanish, Qing Dynasty, Japan, Republic of China (ROC). During the civil war in China, the ROC government fled to Taiwan in 1949 after its defeat by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and established a political entity in Taiwan, marking the reason why there are diverging views present in Taiwan regarding its identity and relationship with China amongst Taiwanese natives (Wang 2017). Other reasons for diverging views among Taiwanese natives consider economic factors, cultural and linguistic ties, national security concerns, and democratic values and human rights.

Diverging economic interests contribute to differing views among Taiwanese natives when considering economic ties with China, through the facilitation by agreements like the

ECFA. Natives may also be concerned about the potential negative impact on domestic industries, wage levels, and economic sovereignty, fearing overreliance on the Chinese market and competition from mainland businesses (Wu & Chen 2020). Cultural and linguistic connections between Taiwan and China have helped shape many different attitudes between cross-strait relations since most Taiwanese natives feel a sense of affinity toward Chinese culture, history, and language, thus fostering a level of openness that can trigger a want for integration with China (Wu & Chen 2020). On the other hand, many Taiwanese residents feel strongly about Taiwan's distinct cultural identity and historical experiences, resisting efforts to assimilate or subordinate Taiwanese culture to a broader, and less condensed, Chinese identity. National security considerations continue to play a significant role in shaping diverging views on China-Taiwan relations since some Taiwanese natives may view closer ties with China as a means of upgrading security and stability in the region, while reducing the potential risk for conflict through peaceful coexistence (Tung 2016). Similarly, many also perceive China's growing military capability and territorial ambitions as a threat to Taiwan's sovereignty and decision to sustain a democratic lifestyle, thus advocating for cautious engagement or even outright resistance to Chinese influence (Wu & Chen 2020). In summation, differences in values and principles related to democracy and human rights have contributed the most when considering the future of China-Taiwan relations as some Taiwanese residents prioritize economic prosperity and stability over democratic prospects—willing to compromise issues pertaining to political freedom and human rights in exchange for closer ties with China (Wu 2005). Whereas Taiwanese citizens that view Taiwan's democratic system as non-negotiable, will continue to resist all efforts to undermine democratic institutions in Taiwan and value the pursuit of sealing their ties with an authoritarian regime, China.

Elections in Taiwan, both local or presidential, precisely reflect public sentiment towards China and its policies. When candidates that advocate for stronger ties with China win elections, public surveys and polls represent a degree of public acceptance and support for engagement with Beijing among Taiwanese residents (Wu & Chen 2020). On the other hand, if candidates that critique China's policies and choose to dissociate from China, while promoting independent democracy, win the elections, then the polls and surveys will show that the public opposes closing ties with China and wants to maintain state sovereignty. As a result, depending on public opinion and the public's perception regarding China, policies will shift given the election result. For example, during DPP rule, an anti-China administration, policies will promote statehood and independence rather than cross-strait affairs and economic cooperation. Following Lai Ching-te's presidential inauguration, it's important to take a note of the seats held in legislature by party and whether the public vote mattered, and to what extent. In 2016, the DPP held 68 seats and the KMT held 35 seats; in 2020, the DPP held 61 seats and the KMT held 38; meanwhile, in 2024, the recent election, the KMT held the majority in 52 seats and the DPP held 51 (Dotson et al. 2024). Although the number of seats a party has in the legislature paints a picture for what the election will look like, the Taiwanese elects its president with a direct election through a secret vote system that the citizens of Taiwan participate in (Dotson et al. 2024). Given this information, most citizens still voted for the DPP, despite the heavy shift in legislative seats in Taiwan, showcasing the public's influence on the future of Taiwan's stance toward China (Dotson et al. 2024).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research reinforces the significant impact of domestic Taiwanese politics on the intricate relationship between Taiwan and China. Using a mixed methodological

approach, this study has delved into many qualitative aspects of this relationship, illustrating the many complex influences at play. The findings reveal a compelling narrative in that the Taiwanese domestic political landscape has tangible effects on the dynamics of China-Taiwan relations. By further examining the period from 2014 to present, this study elucidates how changes in Taiwan's political makeup has not only influenced the trajectory of bilateral relations but also shaped the opinions of Taiwanese natives regarding matters concerning China.

Critically, the research highlights the pivotal role of Taiwanese public opinion in shaping the direction of Taiwan's relationship with China. Analysis of key events such as the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), and the Sunflower Student Movement (SSM) underscores the intricate interplay between domestic politics and public sentiment. What's more, the study reveals a nuanced picture of Taiwanese attitudes towards China, with opinions ranging from openness to continued skepticism and resistance. This diversity of viewpoints and perspectives highlights the complexity of China-Taiwan relations and the overall importance of the many intricacies of Taiwanese society and domestic politics.

Ultimately, the research that suggests changes to Taiwan's political landscape serves as a significant indicator of the sentiments and preferences of Taiwanese residents regarding China. By recognizing the importance of public opinion in shaping bilateral relations, policymakers can better navigate the complexities of China-Taiwan relations and work towards fostering mutual understanding and cooperation in the region.

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