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# Taiwan's Security Future

How Domestic Politics Impact Taipei's Defense

By Ethan Kessler

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# Executive Summary

While the American foreign policy establishment debates how the United States would respond to an attack on Taiwan by the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan's critical presidential election in January 2024 fast approaches. The election could have a significant impact on the direction of Taiwan's foreign and defense policies, which could in turn influence the PRC's actions in ways that impact US interests.

Taiwan's defense policy is especially important. The PRC's expanding and modernizing military capabilities increasingly allow Beijing to contemplate using military force against Taiwan. If that is to change, the military balance of power across the Taiwan Strait must change. Therefore, Taiwan's defense policy is consequential. Upcoming national elections in Taiwan could shift the country's trajectory on defense and, by extension, the delicate cross-strait peace.

**Upcoming national elections in Taiwan could shift the country's trajectory on defense and, by extension, the delicate cross-strait peace.**

If Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) wins yet another presidential term in January, Taipei's defense policy will likely continue on its current path. This status quo entails steadily increasing the defense budget, gradual mobilization of the Taiwanese public for potential cross-strait conflict, and cooperation with the Biden administration's changing thoughts on which US arms are best for Taipei. On all three points, however, another DPP government would very likely fall short of Washington's highest hopes for Taiwan: spending much more on its military and wholly mobilizing for a cross-strait war in line with the military strategy that the United States now prefers. It would also maintain existing US concerns that Beijing is more likely to act aggressively with a DPP government in Taipei.

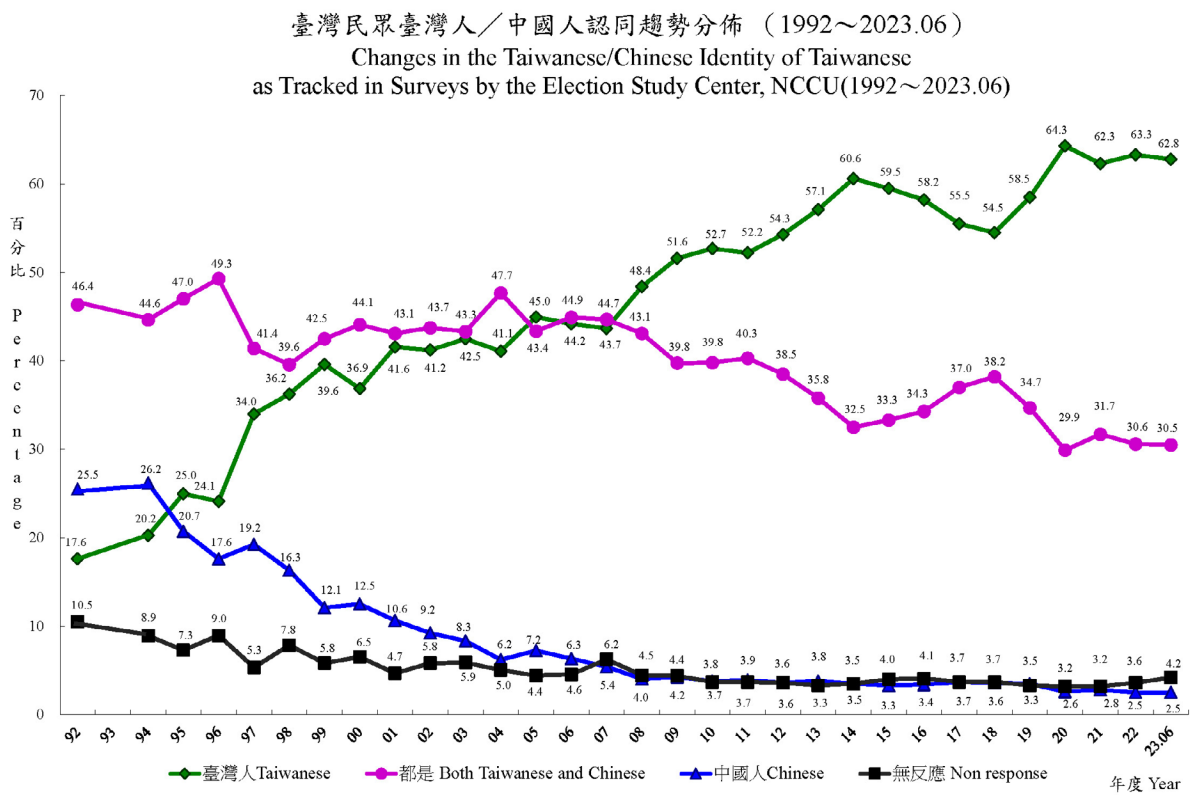
On the other hand, if the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), wins the presidency, it's less clear what that government's defense policy would look like because of existing splits in the party. It could follow a path similar to the DPP or it could halt progress on defense reform and instead prioritize cooling down tensions with Beijing. Predicting the KMT's orientation on defense policy is difficult because the party's basic foreign policy principles are unclear. Traditionalists who favor closer relations with Beijing—and would like to relax Taipei's investments in defense—are still battling over control of the party with reformers who overlap more with the DPP's policy of gradual military buildup. This uncertainty makes the KMT, despite its less-provocative foreign policy compared to the DPP, more of a risk in Washington's eyes.

## Blue and Green in Taiwan Politics

The most important cleavage in Taiwan's politics is between the pan-Blue and pan-Green camps, in which the KMT and the DPP are the largest political parties, respectively. Both camps contain elements that would be described in the West as liberal or conservative on social, labor, and environmental issues. The main cleavage between the camps has to do with cross-strait relations and national identity—in other words, how Taiwan relates to the PRC.<sup>1</sup> While third parties have also been significant political forces throughout the democratic period, this paper will only address the politics and defense policies of the KMT and the DPP. Notably, one third-party candidate has polled so well so far that the KMT recently agreed to a joint ticket with him, though this is unlikely to have a meaningful impact on KMT's defense approach.<sup>2</sup>

The KMT was founded as a Chinese nationalist party in Beijing in 1912 after the fall of the Qing Dynasty. After losing the Chinese Civil War to the Communists on the mainland in 1949, the KMT moved its Republic of China (ROC) government along with one million Chinese “Mainlanders” to Taiwan. During the Cold War it promised to reunify with the mainland and replace the PRC regime with the ROC. Though this goal has since been abandoned, the KMT and the rest of the pan-Blue camp continue to identify culturally with China and emphasize the ROC over a potential independent Taiwan. The Blues in Taiwan believe their policies can reduce the risk of a Chinese attack by ameliorating Beijing's concerns that Taiwan will never reunite with China under peaceful terms.<sup>3</sup>

The pan-Green camp, led by the DPP, instead sees Taiwan as independent and not part of China. After fighting against the KMT's autocratic rule and martial law during the late Cold War, the DPP successfully transitioned Taiwan to a democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s. With democracy came a challenge to the ROC system established by the KMT-Mainlander class: most of Taiwan does not want to be incorporated into China. The Greens have won most of the presidential elections in the democratic era by emphasizing Taiwan's independence and Taiwanese identity—which has increasingly displaced Chinese identity in Taiwan<sup>4</sup>—while promising not to officially declare independence and thus trigger war. In recent years, the PRC's grey-zone and information operations against Taiwan, human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and Beijing's demand that it will only engage with Taipei if Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen explicitly endorses the 1992 Consensus—an informal cross-strait agreement made during KMT rule that there is “One China”<sup>5</sup>—have convinced the Greens that the PRC is implacably aggressive and that Taipei must strengthen its military and ties with the United States and other democracies to preserve Taiwan's democracy.<sup>6</sup>



# DPP Defense Policy and Implications for Taiwan's Security

Should DPP presidential candidate (and Taiwan's vice president) Lai Ching-te win January's election, Taipei's defense policy will likely stay on its current track. Equally important for US policymakers is the fact that even under Lai—who is, if anything, more resolute against PRC coercion than Tsai—Taipei is unlikely to shift toward a “porcupine” or asymmetric defense strategy. Such a strategy would see Taiwan use small, numerous, hard-to-find forces and weapons instead of fighter jets and large naval vessels better suited to a similarly sized enemy. These new, more-durable forces would promise Beijing trouble if it tried to take Taiwan (much like a thorny “porcupine”) instead of trying to maintain air superiority, defeat a PRC blockade, or strike the PRC mainland—the Taiwan military's traditional missions. Tsai pleased many in Washington when she endorsed asymmetric military reforms in her first term, but she has since dropped her support for it for reasons covered below. Even though the KMT's reformer wing promises similar changes to the military, the DPP is probably a surer bet for Washington because it is not internally divided on the necessity of military deterrence like the KMT.

From 2017 to 2021, Washington was optimistic that Taipei had developed and committed to a wholesale shift to an asymmetric defense strategy. The proposed strategy was distilled by Tsai's chief of the General Staff, Admiral Lee Hsi-min, in the Overall Defense Concept (ODC) in 2017, which addressed the PRC's growing military power with a proposal that Taipei seek to deny PRC forces their objectives in an amphibious invasion of Taiwan instead of meeting them head-on as Taiwan's traditional defense concepts dictate.<sup>7</sup>

The ODC emphasized preserving Taiwan's limited military forces and concentrating fire on PRC forces in Taiwan's littoral waters and on its beaches in a war—at least long enough for US help to arrive. This required shifting largely from big-ticket items like fighter jets or large surface ships to more-survivable mobile antiship missiles, mobile air defenses, mines, and unmanned vehicles—all of which have the additional benefits of being less expensive per unit and thus easier to deploy in large numbers.<sup>8</sup> For Taipei, this was a significant departure from more-conventional defense concepts that called

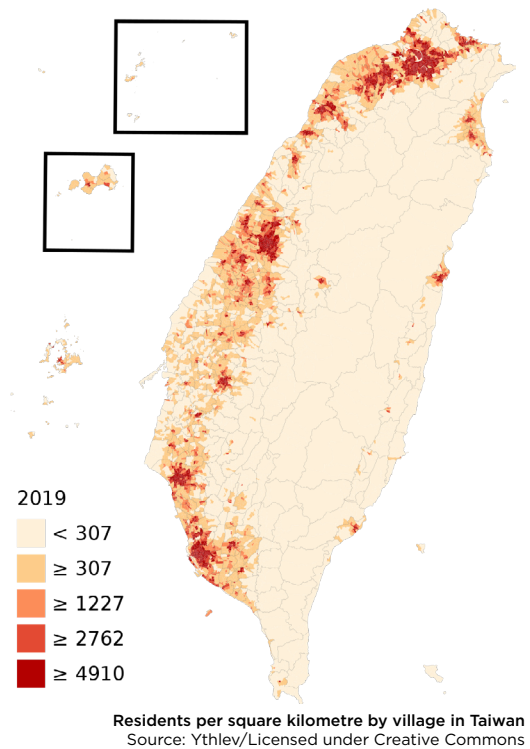
for its air force and navy to keep the fight far from Taiwan's shores and strike targets in the PRC—concepts developed when the PRC did not have the capacity to credibly threaten a blockade or invasion of Taiwan.<sup>9</sup>

But the Tsai administration ended up abandoning this approach for bureaucratic and political reasons. After fully committing to the ODC by late 2019, the administration apparently walked away from it in 2020 or 2021.<sup>10</sup> The Ministry of National Defense's (MND) 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review did not contain the phrase "Overall Defense Concept" and laid out procurement priorities that aligned with Taiwan's pre-ODC strategy.<sup>11</sup> The 2021 National Defense Report affirmed that the ODC was no longer guiding Taiwan's defense planning.<sup>12</sup> (The recently released 2023 report affirms this.<sup>13</sup>) The abrupt shift was first due to the intransigence of older, more-traditional officers in the Taiwan military who prefer offensive operations and autonomy from civilians.<sup>14</sup> Compared to the ODC's asymmetric approach, which emphasizes striking PRC forces on their approach to Taiwan, Taipei's traditional strategy envisioned its air force and navy striking PRC targets far out in the Taiwan Strait and on the mainland, satisfying traditional military preferences for hitting the enemy first and operating beyond the reach of civilian overseers at home.<sup>15</sup>

For instance, despite the Taiwan Air Force's pilot shortages and vulnerability to the PRC's air and missile capabilities,<sup>16</sup> the service still envisions itself launching missiles at PRC missiles on the mainland in a cross-strait war.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Taiwan Navy's traditional preferences are for large surface vessels tasked with maintaining sea control and sea lines of communication—not operating fleets of small attack boats, underwater unmanned vehicles, mines, and coast-based missile launchers as the ODC advocates.<sup>18</sup> The sense that these traditional concepts are simply "the way things have been done" is stronger among older, high-ranking officers for whom the PRC's clear military dominance over Taiwan is only a very recent development.<sup>19</sup>

The other factor in Tsai's turn away from the ODC is that civilians in her administration viewed the implementation of asymmetric defense as too politically costly for multiple reasons.<sup>20</sup> First, envisioning Taiwan's forces fighting far from Taiwan's main island, as the traditional defense strategy does, is politically safer than an asymmetric strategy because it shows the public that Taipei is trying to protect population centers if war occurs.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Tsai must often fend off charges from the pan-Blue camp that her anti-

PRC rhetoric and policies endanger Taiwan.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Tsai has benefitted politically from purchasing big-ticket traditional platforms that clash with asymmetric concepts—like the \$10 billion worth of US fighter jets and tanks she bought in 2019—because they appear more prestigious to voters than ODC-favored weapons, like air-defense systems and antitank missiles, and because they are seen as signals of US commitment to Taipei on the world stage.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, whether or not Taiwan’s weapons are ideally suited to operational needs is not a big concern for most voters or legislators. Lastly, building live-fire ranges, missile defense sites, or facilities for territorial defense forces is difficult without generating strong political pushback from voters and local politicians in the surrounding areas because space is scarce in and around Taiwan’s crowded population centers.<sup>24</sup>



Despite the turn away from the ODC under Tsai, there has still been gradual progress from her administration on defense: it has raised defense spending, extended mandatory conscription from four months to one year, and remained aligned with Washington even as the Biden administration has pushed Taipei to adopt asymmetric defense concepts.<sup>25</sup> Continuity on all these points would be likely under a Lai administration, as would the continued deference to a traditional instead of asymmetric strategy, because the same factors shaping Tsai’s decisions on defense would continue to shape Lai’s. Given his more pro-independence, or “Darker Green,” positions compared to Tsai, Lai would maintain the DPP’s position as the party of Taiwan’s sovereignty and de facto independence. Moreover, pressure on Taipei from Washington to raise defense spending and shift to asymmetric strategy as well as the Taiwan public’s continued attention on the Russia-Ukraine war would incentivize Lai to continue his predecessor’s increases to defense spending and maintain the lengthened conscription period.<sup>26</sup>



The same factors that led Tsai to drop the shift to an asymmetric strategy would also pressure Lai to stall on defense reform. At least in the first term of a Lai administration, there would likely be insufficient turnover among senior military officers in Taiwan to overcome resistance to reform from that source. The political incentives against reintroducing the ODC (or a similar concept) would likely also caution Lai against reform. The pan-Blue camp would still play on the public's fear of war to paint the DPP's policies as dangerous. Moreover, traditional US platforms offer more short-term political gain than would asymmetric arms, and building new facilities would be politically costly. These obstacles are further compounded by low social regard for military service and relatively weak civilian defense expertise in Taiwan.<sup>27</sup> The recently extended mandatory conscription period may help overcome these dynamics, but only in the long run if at all.<sup>28</sup>

Still, there is likely hope among defense-reform advocates in Taipei and Washington that a Lai defense policy would include some asymmetric reforms or increase Taiwan's military budget much more than Tsai. Although a Lai administration could grow more amenable to these possibilities if, for example, Beijing substantially ratcheted up its demands on Taipei after a DPP victory in January, continuity on defense policy is still likelier.<sup>29</sup> The political factors holding Taipei back from massively raising defense spending or switching to an asymmetric strategy have become further entrenched by the PRC's now-daily air intrusions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone and naval intrusions into its nearby waters (also called "grey-zone" warfare), meant to erode Taipei's sovereignty and thus legitimize the PRC's claims to it. Taipei often reacts to these maneuvers by scrambling aircraft or naval vessels, underscoring the claims of military traditionalists that Taipei cannot buy in fully to asymmetric reform and thus deprioritize the large, expensive platforms needed to react to Chinese grey-zone tactics.<sup>30</sup> The grey-zone argument for maintaining Taiwan's traditional platforms and defense posture is further strengthened by the ambiguous US defense commitment, which the pan-Blue camp often cites as further reason for Taiwan to maintain its ability to protect its airspace and sea lanes on its own.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, Taiwan could afford to keep its traditional force and strategy and add asymmetric forces as envisioned by the ODC if it massively increased defense spending. But in the several years since the ODC was proposed,

it has become clear that there are in fact trade-offs between conventional military capabilities and asymmetric ones since there is no political will to raise defense spending to, say, above 4 percent of GDP. Changing this reality would require a massive political shakeup that would signal greater US commitment to Taipei and likely elicit a response from Beijing, which itself would silence more pro-China voices in Taiwan. Examples include an official US commitment to defend Taiwan—which could help Taiwan see a joint US-Taiwan defense against the PRC as actually possible—or an increase in kind of the amount and sophistication of defense aid that Washington gives to Taipei.<sup>32</sup> But such decisions would largely be beyond Taiwan’s own control.<sup>33</sup>

## **KMT Defense Policy and Implications for Taiwan’s Security**

The KMT is less predictable on defense policy than the DPP because of its deep internal split between reformers, who advocate cross-strait and defense policies should be closer to the DPP’s, and traditionalists, who apparently wish to return to the foreign and defense policies of the last KMT president, Ma Ying-jeou. If KMT reformers could assure the United States that they control the pan-Blue camp in Taiwan, they may well be Washington’s preferred partner, since they pair a willingness to continue Tsai’s investments in Taiwan’s military readiness with moderation on Taiwan independence—something that assuages US concerns that Taipei could provoke a PRC attack. But the (generally older) traditionalists in the KMT camp—many of whom have substantial business interests in the PRC—still exert a hold on the party, and they have shown little indication that they have moderated their argument for cross-strait trade and diplomacy, rather than military deterrence, as the key to peace for Taiwan. The apparent bipartisan consensus in Washington that appeasing Beijing is unwise means the KMT is probably a more worrying proposition than the DPP.

The struggle between the reformers and traditionalists is one between electability and ideology. Reformers have recognized that the KMT’s traditional position of embracing the 1992 Consensus is not electorally viable. The party’s loss in the 2020 presidential election underscored this. Aggressive

PRC behavior that year in Hong Kong—where Beijing replaced the “One Country, Two Systems” framework with repressive direct rule—led Taiwan’s public to fear a similar fate if their government ever acceded to Beijing’s terms, causing support for the DPP to swell. As a solution, reformers propose replacing the KMT’s commitment to the 1992 Consensus with a commitment to something less conciliatory to Beijing.<sup>34</sup> Although they still advocate dialogue with Beijing, they assert that continuing Tsai’s progress on defense will give Taipei more leverage. And on defense policy, the reformers, like the DPP, speak of continuing Taipei’s increases in defense spending, conscription reform, and cooperation with US arms sales and training initiatives. Still, they remain focused on the PRC’s grey-zone threats and potential blockade scenarios, so it is unlikely they would revive proposals for an asymmetric defense strategy (despite any US-focused messaging to the contrary).<sup>35</sup>

In essence, while the reformers are trying to position their party to capture more of Taiwan’s voting public, they are also trying to carve a middle path that appeals to Washington’s hopes: a Taiwan that invests in its defense as much as (or more than) the Tsai administration but does not risk significantly provoking Beijing, as the DPP often does. In the words of one State Department official in the George W. Bush administration, Washington prefers a “strong and moderate Taiwan.”<sup>36</sup> In that sense, traditionalists come up short on the “strong” part and are too enthusiastic about the “moderate” part.

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Traditionalist media and figures in the KMT (including Ma) seem to advocate resuming the Ma administration’s foreign policy and, like that administration, rejecting military investment as an unnecessary drain on Taiwan’s resources and unnecessarily provocative toward Beijing. This would repudiate Washington’s focus under the last Trump and Biden administrations on matching the PRC’s growing military power and probably push Taipei too

close to Beijing for Washington's comfort. Such a move would hurt the US priority of maintaining the status quo across the Taiwan Strait and likely trigger destabilizing backlash among the Taiwanese public. Ma's attempt to expand economic ties between Beijing and Taipei in 2014, which triggered the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, is an instructive warning.<sup>37</sup>

Even though the KMT has formally nominated its candidate for president, New Taipei City Mayor Hou You-yi, it is far from certain whether reformer or traditionalist instincts on foreign and defense policy would dominate in a future KMT presidency.<sup>38</sup> The pan-Blue camp's base of support in national elections is facing structural threats from the increase in Taiwanese identity in Taiwan, which is accelerated by harsh PRC rhetoric and actions against Taiwan as well as the dwindling proportion of voters who identify strongly as Mainlander or personally benefited when cross-strait economic channels opened in the 2000s.<sup>39</sup> Hou's moderate position on cross-strait policy before his nomination indicated that KMT reformers partially succeeded in choosing electability over ideology.<sup>40</sup> But his poor position in the polls seems to have weakened the argument for picking a more moderate candidate, something that will likely obligate him to more enthusiastically adopt the traditionalists' One China position and antipathy toward military investment.<sup>41</sup> In July, he endorsed the 1992 Consensus and stated in an interview that he would try to reduce tensions with the PRC and then return Taiwan's mandatory military conscription period to four months from one year if he was president.<sup>42</sup> In an essay published in September, Hou reiterated his support for the 1992 Consensus and did not comment on military conscription.<sup>43</sup> The KMT's recent announcement of a joint ticket with third-party candidate Ko Wen-je means its future foreign and defense policy would be further complicated by the challenges of running a coalition government.

Beyond the 2024 election, the direction of KMT defense policy is unpredictable, as reformers and traditionalists hold sway in the party. Reformers seem poised to grow more influential because the KMT traditionalist position cannot win enough votes in the long run—it will likely be defeated by the mutually reinforcing growth of Taiwanese nationalism and escalating PRC aggression that have fueled Tsai's two presidential victories, though the timing of this shift will be hard to predict.<sup>44</sup> Legislator Johnny Chiang of the KMT (also the KMT chairman from March 2020 to October

2021) said in an interview that the KMT will have to come around to this reality in order to win the support of Taiwan's people.<sup>45</sup> Yet even after the KMT's loss in the 2020 election, bids by Chiang and current party chair Eric Chu to moderate the party's cross-strait policy by dropping the 1992 Consensus failed.<sup>46</sup> Traditionalists' influence in the party is further demonstrated by the consistent US-skeptic reporting in pan-Blue media, which reinforces the notion that Taipei should lean toward both Beijing and Washington.<sup>47</sup>

Even in 2023, Ma—under whom Taiwan's military spending as a percentage of GDP fell to below 2 percent and mandatory military conscription was lowered to four months—remains influential in the KMT, as demonstrated by his frontline position at the KMT Party Congress (immediately to the right of Hou),<sup>48</sup> Hou's hiring of Ma's top political aide for his campaign in June,<sup>49</sup> and his brokering of the Hou-Ko unity ticket in November. In 2020, Ma said that “once initiated, the battle [between the PRC and Taiwan] must be finished in a very short time, and you have no chance to wait for the US military to assist”<sup>50</sup>—a skepticism of the US defense commitment that other KMT traditionalists share.<sup>51</sup> Another traditionalist heavyweight is Terry Gou, the billionaire founder of Foxconn who recently announced his independent candidacy after failing to beat Hou for the KMT nomination and initially promising to support him nonetheless.<sup>52</sup> Too many towering traditionalists remain influential in the KMT for reformers to decisively lay claim to the party.

## Conclusion

Understanding the politics behind Taiwan's upcoming presidential election will help US policymakers better prepare for the key challenges of Taiwan policy ahead. There continues to be a strong US interest in cross-strait peace. Yet Taiwan's two major political camps offer quite different answers on how to preserve that interest. While the DPP does not offer all that US defense and national security leaders currently hope for, it does offer predictability and a baseline commitment to enhance Taiwan's own military preparedness. Although this is unlikely to include a full return to asymmetric defense reform in the short term, it may help nurture more willingness among Taiwan's people to make necessary investments in their defense capabilities in the long term.

The KMT, by contrast, has not yet settled a key internal rift. Will it maintain a pro-China, pro-dialogue platform or cater to a public increasingly skeptical of Beijing? The party's volatility likely means, at least in the current US administration's view, that Lai and the DPP are the safer bet on defense policy. Washington prefers a partner in Taipei enthusiastic about matching the PRC's military gains, not one that wavers on the need to deter Beijing. In this way, recognizing the uncertainties that a KMT administration may bring can help sharpen US thinking on Taiwan. US policymakers should not assume that Taipei agrees with Washington's consensus that a strong defense is necessary for cross-strait stability. Keeping that in mind will be essential as policymakers in Taiwan and the United States try to keep the peace.

# About the Author

Ethan Kessler is pursuing a master's degree in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. From July 2021 to August 2023, he was a research associate with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, where he researched sanctions, US security assistance, and Taiwan security issues. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan. He can be reached at [ekessler@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:ekessler@hks.harvard.edu).

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# Endnotes

1. Nathan F. Batto, “Cleavage Structure and the Demise of a Dominant Party: The Role of National Identity in the Fall of the KMT in Taiwan,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 4, no. 1 (2019): 4-5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891118788202>.
2. The Taiwan People’s Party (TPP), led by presidential candidate and former Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je, has led the KMT in presidential polls for much of 2023. But the TPP lacks experience governing at the national level (which would be necessary to predict future TPP defense policy) and Ko and the KMT substantially overlap on cross-strait policy positions, which partly explains how Ko has been able to attract many KMT supporters. For example, Ko said this summer that China and Taiwan are “one family” and that “seeking dialogue” with the PRC is crucial. KMT-TPP overlap on defense policy has become even surer as of late. In November, the KMT and TPP revealed a joint-ticket arrangement whereby polls will determine which party’s candidate heads the ticket and, in the event of a joint-ticket victory, multiple cabinet positions will be distributed to either party based on the two parties’ relative success in legislative elections. See Gabriel Dominguez, “Taiwan Must Prepare for Conflict but Seek Dialogue with China, Presidential Candidate Says,” *Japan Times*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/06/08/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/taiwan-presidential-candidate-china-stance/>, and “KMT, TPP to form joint presidential ticket based upon polling results,” *Focus Taiwan*, November 15, 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202311150008>.
3. The pan-Blue view that cross-strait peace is mainly political overlaps with Washington’s traditional position after US-PRC normalization in the 1970s. Americans who embrace this position see Beijing as seeking to perpetually put off any final resolution of the Taiwan issue because of the certain costs and great risks of failure that a cross-strait war would bring. In this view, Beijing will not move against Taiwan so long as it can tell itself and the Chinese people that peaceful unification is still possible. Should Washington or Taipei take that off the table, no amount of military deterrence or persuasion will be able to convince the Chinese Communist Party that it should not take military action. Increasing US suspicion of the PRC seems to be making this position less popular in Washington. See dissenting views by Paul Heer, Patricia M. Kim, Margaret K. Lewis, Daniel R. Russel, and Douglas H. Paal *U.S.-Taiwan Relations in a New Era: Responding to a More Assertive China*, eds. Susan M. Gordon, Michael G. Mullen, and David Sacks (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), 95-96, 98-101, <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/us-taiwan-Relations-in-a-new-era>; Kharis Templeman, “Xi Doesn’t Need Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-08-09/strait-emergency>.
4. According to National Chengchi University’s Election Study Center, in 1992 only 17.6 percent of Taiwan adults identified as Taiwanese compared to 25.5 percent that identified as Chinese and 46.4 percent that identified as both. By 2023, those proportions had shifted drastically: 62.8 percent identify as Taiwanese compared to just 2.5 percent that identify as Chinese and 30.5 percent that identify as both. The proportion of those identifying as just Taiwanese jumped by nearly 10 percent from 2018 to 2020, likely driven by Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping’s hardline speech on reunification in January 2019 and the Hong Kong protest movement in summer 2019. See “Taiwanese/Chinese Identity(1992/06-2023/06),” Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, updated July 12, 2023, <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>.
5. Kharis Templeman, *Taiwan’s January 2020 Elections: Prospects and Implications for China and the United States*, Brookings Institution, December 2019, 3-5, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/FP\\_20191231\\_taiwan\\_election\\_templeman-1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/FP_20191231_taiwan_election_templeman-1.pdf). The 1992 Consensus has been open to many conflicting interpretations because it is thoroughly paradoxical: it is supposed to convince Beijing that reunification can and will happen while also convincing Taiwan voters that it will not enable Beijing to threaten Taiwan’s sovereignty. Tsai’s predecessor and KMT traditionalist Ma Ying-jeou has been quoted as calling it a “masterpiece of ambiguity.” See Batto, “Cleavage Structure,” 12.
6. The pan-Green view that the PRC is inherently aggressive and cross-strait peace is largely military overlaps with the suspicious view of the PRC ascendant in Washington. Americans who take this position argue it is crucial for Washington and Taipei to strengthen their military capabilities to dissuade Beijing because Chinese leaders may brush aside the risks of attacking Taiwan. In this view, Chinese Communist Party Chairman Xi Jinping may seek unification with Taiwan before he leaves office to cement his status as the greatest Chinese leader since Mao Zedong, or he may do so to bolster support for the party as its longtime source of domestic legitimacy—economic growth—slows. Americans and Taiwanese who take this position also cite Beijing’s repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong as

evidence of its aggressive nature. When it comes to Taiwan politics, they see the pan-Blue path to peace as politically incompatible with Taiwan's democracy because suppressing Taiwan independence to placate Beijing would defy the will of the country's voters. See Gordon, Mullen, and Sacks, U.S.-Taiwan Relations, 37-39; Anthony Toh Han Yang and Jonghyuk Lee, "Xi Jinping's Legitimacy Malaise Is Bad News for Cross-Strait Relations," *Diplomat*, May 11, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/xi-jinpings-legitimacy-malaise-is-bad-news-for-cross-strait-relations/>; David Sacks and Ivan Kanapathy, "What It Will Take to Deter China in the Taiwan Strait," *Foreign Affairs*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/what-it-will-take-deter-china-taiwan-strait>. However, some members of the pan-Blue camp in Taiwan also endorse the view that Beijing is looking for a way to resolve the Taiwan question soon. Dr. Su Chi (chairman, Taipei Forum Foundation), interview with the author, Taipei, May 26, 2023. Su was the minister of the Mainland Affairs Council of the Executive Yuan from 1999 to 2000 and secretary-general of Taiwan's National Security Council from 2008 to 2010. He also coined the term "1992 Consensus."

7. Lee Hsi-min and Eric Lee, "Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept, Explained," *Diplomat*, November 3, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/taiwans-overall-defense-concept-explained/>. The PRC's rising qualitative and quantitative advantages over Taiwan have been fueled by decades of high economic growth and motivated by Beijing's concerns over Taiwan's political aspirations and US military power since the 1990s.

8. Drew Thompson, "Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose," National Defense University Strategic Forum, No. 310 (October 2021), 3-4, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-310.pdf>.

9. York W. Chen, "The Evolution of Taiwan's Military Strategy: Convergence and Dissonance," Jamestown Foundation: China Brief 9, no. 23 (2009), 9, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-evolution-of-taiwans-military-strategy-convergence-and-dissonance/>; Michael D. Swaine, *Taiwan's National Security, Defense Policy, and Weapons Procurement Processes* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1999), 53-54, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1128.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1128.html).

10. The Ministry of National Defense's 2017 National Defense Report, published eight months after Admiral Lee was appointed chief of the general staff, included some support for transitioning to asymmetric defense concepts, highlighting the need for "defensive concepts" and "asymmetric combat capability" in light of the PRC's growing military power. It also stated that Taiwan would begin acquiring short-range air defense missiles, mine-laying systems, mobile radar systems, and mobile antiship systems—all high-priority capabilities within the ODC. The 2019 National Defense Report prioritized the ODC and asymmetric concepts more explicitly, stating that the MND would try acquiring "weapon systems that best fit into our Overall Defense Concept" and describing in length the ODC's core principles: "force protection, decisive battle in littoral zone, and destruction of enemy at landing beach." Importantly, it linked ODC principles to future military acquisitions and emphasized the survivability of Taiwan's forces—much more so than in previous defense documents. It also stated explicitly that precision-strike weapons would help defensive operations in contrast to the long-envisioned offensive role for Taiwan's long-range missiles. And in 2020, Tsai said her top-priority defense reform was speeding up Taiwan's development of asymmetric capabilities under the ODC. Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2017 National Defense Report (Taipei, Republic of China: Ministry of National Defense, December 2017), 8, 86-89, <https://www.ustaiwandefense.com/tdnswp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Taiwan-National-Defense-Report-2017.pdf>; Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2019 National Defense Report (Taipei, Republic of China: Ministry of National Defense, September 2019), 6, 68-69, 73-84, <https://www.ustaiwandefense.com/tdnswp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Taiwan-National-Defense-Report-2019.pdf>; "Inaugural Address of ROC 15th-Term President Tsai Ing-wen," Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), May 20, 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6004>; "President Tsai Addresses Taiwan's Diplomatic, Security, and Economic Challenges at Videoconference Jointly Sponsored by US-Based Think Tanks," Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), August 12, 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6027>.

11. Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review (Taipei, Republic of China: Ministry of National Defense, March 2021), 2, 23, <https://www.ustaiwandefense.com/tdnswp/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021-Taiwan-Quadrennial-Defense-Review-QDR.pdf>. The document explicitly prioritizes air- and ground-launched missile strikes against PRC targets on the Chinese mainland, air superiority operations over Taiwan, and sea control operations in the waters around Taiwan. Token references to asymmetric warfare are also included, but "asymmetric" is used to describe concepts that the ODC explicitly rejected, such as trying to "resist the enemy on the opposite shore"—a term for striking PRC forces on the mainland that was at the core of Taiwan's deterrence strategy before Admiral Lee introduced the ODC. See *ibid.*, 4, 19. For Taiwan's pre-ODC strategy, see Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2017 Quadrennial Defense Review (Taipei, Republic of China: Ministry of National Defense, March 2017), 38-39, <https://www.ustaiwandefense.com/tdnswp/wp-content/uploads/2000/01/2017-Taiwan-Quadrennial-Defense-Review-QDR.pdf>.

12. Instead of focusing on Taiwan's littoral zone and beaches, the 2021 National Defense Report stated that Taipei was pushing its defensive capabilities further to include strikes against the PRC's mainland targets, and traditional priorities of long-range strike and sea control were front and center. Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2021 National Defense Report (Taipei, Republic of China: Ministry of National Defense, November 2021), 60, 67-69, <https://www.ustaiwandefense.com/tdnswp/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Taiwan-National-Defense-Report-2021.pdf>.
13. The 2023 National Defense Report rhetorically affirms asymmetric concepts by citing lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine war but immediately goes on to emphasize the PRC's increased grey-zone coercion in recent years, making the case for symmetric platforms and concepts. The report goes on to emphasize traditional procurement priorities for the navy and air force at odds with a comprehensive shift toward an asymmetric strategy. Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, ROC National Defense Report 2023 (Taipei, Republic of China: Ministry of National Defense, September 2023), 64-67, 71, 74, 76, <https://news.usni.org/2023/09/13/2023-taiwan-national-defense-report>.
14. See Testimony for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on "Deterring PRC Aggression Toward Taiwan," 117th Cong. 8 (2021) (statement of Michael A. Hunzeker, Assistant Professor, Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University), [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Michael\\_Hunzeker\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Michael_Hunzeker_Testimony.pdf); Michael A. Hunzeker, "Taiwan's Defense Plans Are Going Off the Rails," War on the Rocks, November 18, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/taiwans-defense-plans-are-going-off-the-rails/>; Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, "Real Friends Twist Arms: Taiwan and the Case for Conditionality," War on the Rocks, July 27, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/07/real-friends-twist-arms-taiwan-and-the-case-for-conditionality/>.
15. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 47-50, 54-55, <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801416330/the-sources-of-military-doctrine>. Symmetric missions and concepts include maintaining local air superiority, guaranteeing safe passage for ships during a blockade, striking PRC targets on the mainland, and repelling PRC naval forces in the strait during a war. Keeping conflict far beyond Taiwan's shores as these missions do was also politically imperative after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995-1996 revealed the potency of the PRC's missile arsenal. See Chen, "Evolution of Taiwan's Military Strategy," 9.
16. Lily Kuo and Vic Chiang, "Taiwan Needs More Top Guns As Chance of Conflict with China Grows," Washington Post, February 28, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/01/china-taiwan-military-threat-invasion/>; Ellen Nakashima, Christian Shepherd, and Cate Cadell, "Taiwan Highly Vulnerable to Chinese Air Attack, Leaked Documents Show," Washington Post, April 15, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/15/taiwan-china-invasion-leaked-documents/>.
17. Roy Choo and Peter Ho, *Modern Taiwanese Air Power* (Vienna, Austria: Harpia, 2021), 42, <https://harpia-publishing.com/hapbook/261>; Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review, 23.
18. Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review, 23; Admiral (ret.) Lee Hsi-min, "Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept: Theory and the Practice," Hoover Institution, September 27, 2021, 4, [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/210927\\_adm\\_lee\\_hoover\\_remarks\\_draft4.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/210927_adm_lee_hoover_remarks_draft4.pdf). See also Taipei's commissioning this year of the 10,000-ton Yu Shan landing platform, a large ship intended for offensive amphibious assault operations on Taiwan's outlying islands, very much at odds with the ODC's concepts for the Taiwan Navy. "Taiwan Needs a New Defence Strategy to Deal with China," Economist, March 6, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/03/06/taiwan-needs-a-new-defence-strategy-to-deal-with-china>.
19. One official working in government who asked not to be named said Taiwan's military is still substantially stratified by generation, with a disproportionate number of enthusiastically pro-Blue older officers. Still, under Tsai, the DPP civilian government has maintained a good amount of control over the military. Government official, interview with the author, Taipei, May 23, 2023. Another source close to the Tsai administration said the president's relationship with MND is still complex and difficult because Taiwan's national security institutions were fairly autonomous when Tsai came into office. Anonymous source, interview with the author, July 11, 2023.
20. Adm. (ret.) Lee Hsi-min, interview with the author, July 30, 2023; Fu S. Mei (Director, Taiwan Security Analysis Center), interview with the author, June 26, 2023.
21. As one Taiwan expert has noted, "For Taiwanese . . . the military threat from the PRC is background noise. They live under a sword of Damocles, no doubt, but it is a rusty, dusty old sword that has been hanging up there for seventy years." See Testimony for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on Cross-Strait Deterrence, 117th Cong. 2 (2021) (statement of Shelley Rigger, Professor of Asian Studies, Davidson College), [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Shelley\\_Rigger\\_Statement\\_for\\_the\\_Record.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/Shelley_Rigger_Statement_for_the_Record.pdf). For an example of Taiwanese fear of the PRC's power in a locale on the front lines of a potential cross-strait conflict, see Amy Hawkins,

“A Trojan Horse”? Taiwanese Islands Weigh Plan for ‘Peace Bridge’ to China,” Guardian, July 30, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/30/taiwan-kinmen-islands-plan-peace-bridge-china>.

22. As Ma Ying-jeou said shortly after the KMT’s victory in the 2022 local elections, the 2024 elections will offer voters a choice between war and peace: “Vote for the DPP, youth go to the battlefield. Vote for the KMT, there will be no battlefield on either side of the strait.” “Election in 2024 a Choice between War, Peace: Ma,” Taipei Times, January 2, 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/01/02/2003791839>.

23. Tanner Greer, “Taiwan’s Defense Strategy Doesn’t Make Military Sense,” Foreign Affairs, September 17, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/taiwan/2019-09-17/taiwans-defense-strategy-doesnt-make-military-sense>.

These political considerations also help explain Taipei’s pursuit of F-35 fighter jets from the United States since the mid-2000s.

24. Steven Li, “Why So Little? The Curious Case of Taiwan’s Defense Spending,” PhD thesis, University of Washington, 2020, 107-114, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/46343>. These challenges are often not well understood from a US perspective because the United States is so large and thinly populated by comparison that incredibly large military bases and training facilities have been established without national political pushback. Resistance to US landmine sales to Taiwan by KMT legislators earlier this year illustrates the political constraints on shifting to asymmetric, defensive concepts and enhancing readiness as reformers advocate. One legislator said the sales could mean Taipei now has a “scorched-earth strategy.” See Lawrence Chung, “Taiwan’s Deal to Buy US Volcano Landmine Systems Sparks Controversy over Safety Risk and International Drive for Ban,” South China Morning Post, July 3, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3226431/taiwans-deal-buy-us-volcano-landmine-systems-sparks-controversy-over-safety-risk-and-international>. For proposals to develop territorial defense forces by ODC advocates, see Lee, “Taiwan’s Overall Defense Concept: Theory and the Practice,” 6; Adm. (ret.) Lee Hsi-min and Michael A. Hunzeker, “The View of Ukraine from Taiwan: Get Real About Territorial Defense,” War on the Rocks, March 15, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/the-view-of-ukraine-from-taiwan-get-real-about-territorial-defense/>.

25. The Trump administration was arguably as enthusiastic as the Biden administration on selling arms to Taiwan—a major shift from past administrations focused primarily on balancing Taiwan’s military needs with Beijing’s strong dislike of increased US commitment to Taipei. In 2019, Trump agreed to sell Taiwan \$10 billion worth of fighter jets and tanks. Yet these systems explicitly contradict the ODC and asymmetric strategy given Taiwan’s limited defense funds. By contrast, the Biden administration has tried to steer Taipei toward an asymmetric posture by denying it arms that are out of sync with an asymmetric defense and selling it 100 coastal defense missile systems in 2021. This sharpened focus on not just selling Taiwan weapons but deliberately changing its force structure as well is also demonstrated by the increased US military trainer presence in Taiwan, announced in 2021 and 2023. Alexander Ward and Quint Forgey, “U.S. Pushing Taiwan toward Other Weapons in Secret Letters,” Politico, May 10, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2022/05/10/u-s-pushing-taiwan-toward-other-weapons-in-secret-letters-00031485>; Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “U.S. to Expand Troop Presence in Taiwan for Training Against China Threat,” Wall Street Journal, February 23, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-expand-troop-presence-in-taiwan-for-training-against-china-threat-62198a83>.

26. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine increased public support in Taiwan for raising conscription in 2022 (which was likely necessary for Tsai to commit to the policy, especially so soon before a presidential election) and more public involvement in civilian defense programs, which could form the basis for a territorial defense force and help free up active-duty troops for dedicated military missions in a war. Puma Shen (Chairman, Doublethink Lab, Cofounder, Kuma Academy), interview with the author, Taipei, May 23, 2023; Enoch Wu (Founder, Forward Alliance), interview with the author, Taipei, May 23, 2023.

27. The especially short bench of civilian defense experts in the DPP, along with Taiwan’s lack of active oversight on defense issues in the legislature and nongovernmental defense expertise compared to the United States, also means that Lai would likely keep a significant number of defense and foreign policy personnel from the Tsai administration—another factor for continuity. See Russell Hsiao, “The DPP’s 2024 Presidential Candidate-in-Waiting: William Lai,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief 23, no. 4 (2023), 10, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-dpps-2024-presidential-candidate-in-waiting-william-lai/>; Testimony for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (statement of Michael A. Hunzeker), 8; Adm. (ret.) Richard Chen, interview with the author, Taipei, May 26, 2023; Fu S. Mei, interview with the author, June 26, 2023; Kharis Templeman (Research Fellow, Hoover Institution, Manager, Project on Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific Region), interview with the author, August 3, 2023. However, one ex-Tsai administration official disagreed that Lai would likely keep many of the defense and foreign policy personnel from the Tsai administration. Adm. (ret.) Lee Hsi-min, interview with the author, July 30, 2023.

28. Doubts persist about Taiwan's ability to handle the upcoming conscription period of one year with existing training facilities and volunteer soldiers. Kitsch Liao, assistant director of the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub, said he doubted Taiwan could overcome its shortages of staff and facilities necessary for military training by the time the military conscription expansion begins in 2024. See Ashish Valentine, "Taiwanese Young People Have Mixed Feelings about Increased Military Service," World, January 3, 2023, <https://theworld.org/stories/2023-01-03/taiwanese-young-people-have-mixed-feelings-about-increased-military-service>. Associate research fellow Dr. Tzu-li Wu of Taiwan's government-affiliated Institute for National Defense and Security Research said in an interview with the author that Taipei needs to improve its training in operations, jointness, and command-and-control. Taipei, May 22, 2023.

29. Statements by Lai during the campaign have Washington somewhat concerned that as president, he may not defy PRC demands with minimal provocations as well as Tsai. Amy Chang Chien and Chris Buckley, "As a Taiwanese Presidential Contender Visits U.S., He Tries to Walk a Fine Line," New York Times, August 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/12/world/asia/taiwan-us-china-lai-ching-te.html>.

30. For instance, Taiwan's 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review emphasized that conventional platforms, or "fundamental capabilities," were necessary for "peacetime air and maritime patrols." See Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review, 27. One interviewee emphasized that grey-zone warfare also increases maintenance costs as Taiwan's fighters and ships are worn down from sorties. Chen, interview.

31. In interviews with the author, KMT and DPP politicians expressed concern with the US defense commitment. Legislator Johnny Chiang of the KMT, who also was the KMT chairman from March 2020 to October 2021, said Taiwan worries about the Biden administration's efforts to "friend-shore" or "on-shore" critical supply chains for semiconductors away from Taiwan, which signals US concern that a cross-strait war may occur. Legislator Chih-cheng Lo of the DPP said Taiwan would trust Washington more if it shifted to a policy of "strategic clarity, tactical ambiguity," that clearly stated the United States would defend Taiwan but left ambiguous the conditions under which it would do so. Johnny Chiang and Chih-cheng Lo, Taipei, May 26, 2023. Lo's assertion is supported by online polling of Taiwanese in May and June 2023 that found that the proportion of respondents who strongly supported increasing mandatory conscription time nearly doubled when it was assumed that Washington committed to defending Taiwan. See Timothy S. Rich and Serena White, "What Do Taiwanese Think about Expanding Conscription?" Diplomat, June 24, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/what-do-taiwanese-think-about-expanding-conscription/>.

32. Washington formally committing to defend Taiwan would likely assure Beijing that it intends to permanently separate Taiwan and the PRC—precisely the justification for war Beijing outlined in its 2005 Anti-Secession Law. Yet many in Taiwan and the United States have increasingly argued that to maintain a credible defense commitment to Taipei, Washington must replace its policy of strategic ambiguity with one of strategic clarity. See Article 8 of "Anti-Secession Law (Full text)(03/15/05)," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, March 15, 2005, [http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zt/twwt/200503/t20050315\\_4912997.htm](http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zt/twwt/200503/t20050315_4912997.htm); Huynh Tam Sang and Chen Kuan-ting, "'Strategic Confusion' Hurts Taiwan," Taipei Times, May 28, 2022, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/05/28/2003778903>; Richard Haass and David Sacks, "The Growing Danger of U.S. Ambiguity on Taiwan," Foreign Affairs, December 13, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-12-13/growing-danger-us-ambiguity-taiwan>; Raymond Kuo, "'Strategic Ambiguity' Has the U.S. and Taiwan Trapped," Foreign Policy, January 18, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/18/taiwan-us-china-strategic-ambiguity-military-strategy-asymmetric-defense-invasion/>.

33. While Admiral Lee has continued to acknowledge the necessity of fighter jets, large ships, and other conventional capabilities for countering the PRC's grey-zone tactics, it remains hard to imagine Taipei passing any defense budget large enough to pay for both these and asymmetric capabilities in sufficient numbers without an outside political shock. And increasing spending is probably the surest way out of this dilemma; one defense expert noted that conflicts between different kinds of doctrine and equipment, like between traditional and asymmetric concepts in Taiwan, are usually resolved by buying equipment that suits all of the doctrines involved. Lee and Lee, "Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept, Explained"; Thompson, "Winning the Fight," 13; Dick Bitzinger, interview with the author, July 26, 2023.

34. More than one KMT reformer has offered an alternative to the 1992 Consensus that has plagued the KMT's recent electoral losses: a KMT government could instead insist on conducting negotiations with the Chinese contingent upon their willingness to engage in dialogue concerning the validity of the Republic of China constitution. Dennis Weng, interview with the author, July 27, 2023; Hou Yu-ih, "Taiwan's Path between Extremes," Foreign Affairs, September 18, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwans-path-between-extremes>.

35. One KMT-affiliated military expert emphasized that a PRC blockade should be the priority contingency for Taiwan given its reliance on imported liquid natural gas and coal. Chen, interview. See also Jenny Li, "Taiwan's Defense

Dilemma,” Diplomat, June 17, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/taiwans-defense-dilemma/>; Dee Wu, “The KMT’s Defense Policy: Toward a Symmetric Posture,” Diplomat, April 1, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/the-kmts-defense-policy-toward-a-symmetric-posture/>. In comments at the Brookings Institution last year, KMT Chairman Eric Chu stated “asymmetric defense” was a priority for the KMT should it return to power. But as Taiwan’s 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review makes clear, the term “asymmetric” is now used by both proponents and opponents of porcupine defense as American advocates would understand it. See “Taiwan’s Path Forward: A Conversation with KMT Chairman Eric Chu,” Brookings Institution (transcript), June 6, 2022, 8, 11, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/fp\\_20220606\\_taiwan\\_chu\\_transcript.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/fp_20220606_taiwan_chu_transcript.pdf).

36. Thomas J. Christensen, deputy assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific affairs, “A Strong and Moderate Taiwan,” transcript of speech delivered at the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council Defense Industry Conference, Annapolis, Maryland, September 11, 2007, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2007/91979.htm>.

37. For more on the Sunflower Movement and its impact on Taiwan’s politics in the last decade, see Ming-sho Ho, “The Activist Legacy of Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/02/activist-legacy-of-taiwan-s-sunflower-movement-pub-76966>.

38. Terry Gou’s August reentry into the presidential race makes it possible that Hou does not end up being the most popular pan-Blue candidate by the time of the 2024 election, and it is even possible that the KMT later replaces Hou with another presidential candidate. However, this analysis will presume that Hou maintains the KMT nomination until the 2024 election.

39. US-PRC tensions and economic decoupling have caused a decline in new investments in the PRC from Taiwan. See Samson Ellis, “Taiwan Firms Pull Back in China as Investments Elsewhere Surge,” Bloomberg, April 20, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-04-20/taiwan-firms-pull-back-in-china-as-investments-elsewhere-surge>.

40. Hou’s work as a law enforcement officer largely insulated him from politics for much of his early career (the DPP even extended an invitation to him to join the party at one point). His lack of experience with foreign policy means he has few public statements on cross-strait relations tying him to the KMT’s increasingly unpopular positions on One China and the 1992 Consensus. But Hou’s distance from KMT traditionalists’ main principles, along with the fact that he is native Taiwanese instead of Mainlander, would likely make both Beijing and KMT traditionalists wary of him if he were elected. The KMT’s last native Taiwanese president, Lee Teng-hui, began implementing more pro-Taiwan, anti-One China policies in his last term (1996–2000). Lee was expelled from the KMT in 2001 and has since come to be seen as a traitor by KMT traditionalists. See Jessica Drun, “A Green Wave?,” The Marshall Papers, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 22, 2022, 6, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/green-wave>; Stephanie Low, “KMT Breaks It off with Lee Teng-hui,” Taipei Times, September 22, 2001, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2001/09/22/0000103986>.

41. Hou has polled third, behind Lai and Ko, since the KMT nominated him in May. Jono Thompson, “DPP’s Lai Leading Taiwan Presidential Race, TPP’s Ko in Second,” Taiwan News, July 25, 2023, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4953402>; Nathan Batto, “A Few Thoughts about Hou Yu-ih,” Frozen Garlic, July 23, 2023, <https://frozensgarlic.wordpress.com/2023/07/23/a-few-thoughts-about-hou-yu-ih/>.

42. Backlash over this comment led to Hou clarifying that he is not opposed to the one-year conscription term right now and would only reduce it once he restored cross-strait stability and peace. “KMT Presidential Candidate Hou You-yi Vows to Restore 4 Month Military Service If Elected,” News Lens, July 4, 2023, <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/186226>.

43. Hou, “Taiwan’s Path between Extremes.”

44. Batto, “Cleavage Structure,” 8-10.

45. Chiang, interview.

46. Brian Hioe, “Where Does the KMT Go from Here?” Diplomat, September 27, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/where-does-the-kmt-go-from-here/>.

47. For instance, Blue-leaning media outlet United Daily News published a story this July alleging that the Tsai government was cooperating with a request by Washington to develop biological weapons. Matt Yu and James Lo, “MND Denies Report of U.S. Requesting Taiwan to Produce Bio-Weapons,” Focus Taiwan, July 9, 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202307090017>. See also Taiwan’s independently wealthy outlets like billionaire Tsai Eng-meng’s Want Want China Times, which leans toward the PRC. Chris Horton, “The Plan to Destroy Taiwan,” The Wire China, March 26, 2023, <https://www.thewirechina.com/2023/03/26/the-plan-to-destroy-taiwan-want-want-china-times-media-group/>.

48. Shih Hsiao-kuang and Kan Meng-ling, “KMT Congress Officially Nominates Hou You-yi,” Taipei Times, July 24, 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/07/24/2003803658>.

49. Huang Tzu-yang and Jake Chung, “KMT’s Hou Unveils Campaign Team for Presidential Race,” Taipei Times, June 29, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/06/29/2003802373>. Ma’s poor legacy on defense is one reason to question KMT reformers’ assurance that a president from their party could manage the military more competently than a DPP president. Research fellow (Taiwan’s government-affiliated Institute for National Defense and Security Research), interview with the author, Taipei, May 23, 2023; official who served in the Tsai administration, interview with the author.
50. Chun Han Wong and Joyu Wang, “Fearing Hong Kong’s Fate, Taiwan Moves to Bolster Its Military against China,” Wall Street Journal, August 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fearing-hong-kongs-fate-taiwan-moves-to-bolster-its-military-against-china-11598803656>.
51. Su, interview. Skepticism of the US commitment to Taiwan overlaps with opposition to military preparation measures like extending conscription. See media personality and former KMT legislator Jaw Shaw-kong’s statements earlier this year that Tsai’s extension of the military conscription period to one year was a mistake and that Taiwan should not “be a pawn of a powerful country”—a way of saying that US interests do not always align with Taipei’s interests. Huang Wei-quan, “Military Service Reform Is Different! Zhao Shaokang Blasts Zhu Lilun: Don’t Learn from the Democratic Progressive Party to Strengthen The National Flag,” TVBS News, January 3, 2023, <https://news.tvbs.com.tw/politics/2007404>.
52. Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, “Terry Gou: Why Is Foxconn Billionaire Running for Taiwan President?” BBC, August 28, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66639012>. Other traditionalists are often far less visible to Western observers than moderate KMT members because they are less likely to have spent time in the West or speak English fluently. Many are found in the KMT’s Central Standing Committee, a group of 39 KMT legislators and other power brokers who keep party members in line on policy and appoint party personnel and at-large legislators that fill the Legislative Yuan on a party list basis.

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