

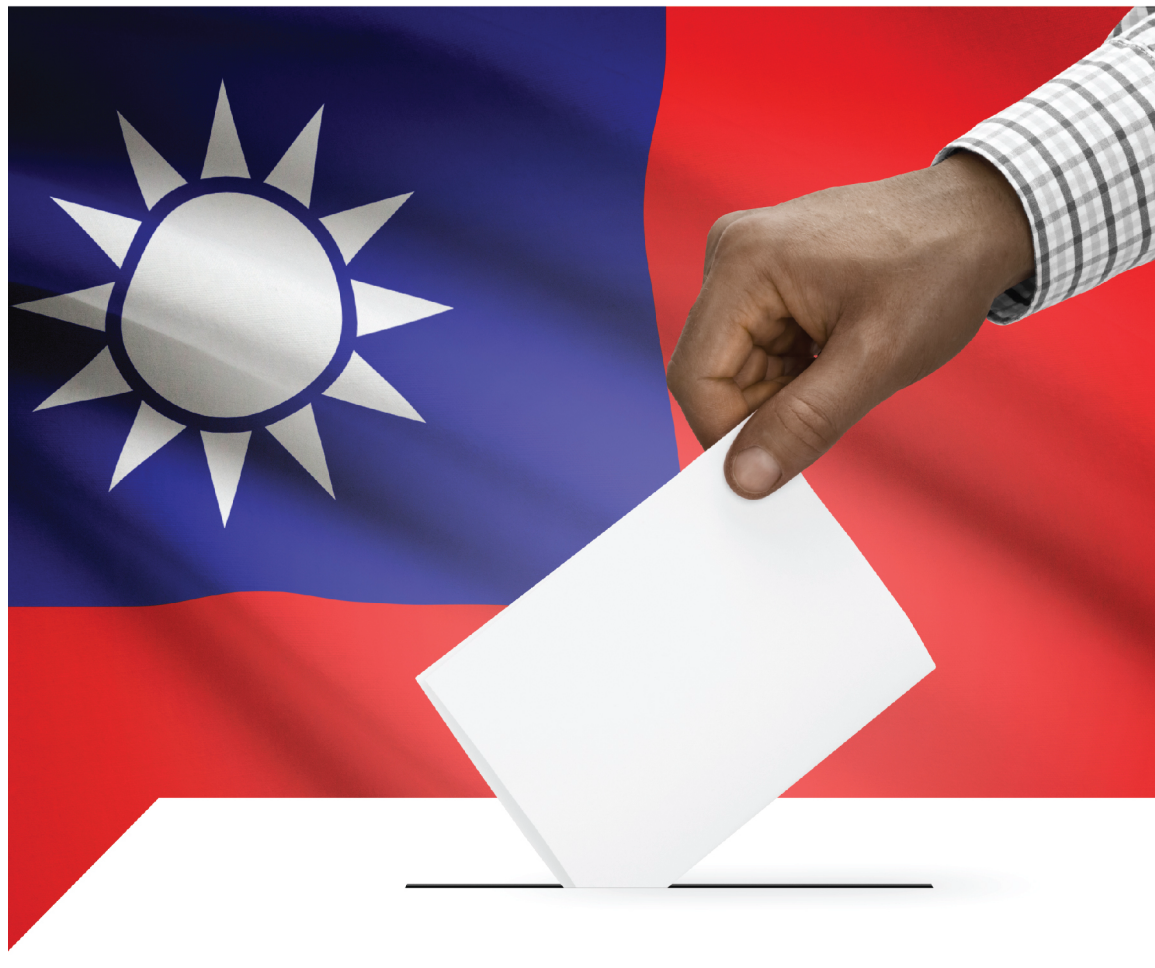


EAST-WEST  
CENTER

EAST-WEST CENTER

# Occasional Paper

## The Role of the 1992 Consensus and Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Elections



**Dean P. Chen, PhD**  
Professor of Political Science  
Ramapo College of  
New Jersey

**Kiely Paris-Rodriguez**  
Ramapo College of  
New Jersey

NUMBER

**6**

JANUARY 2024

# THE ROLE OF THE 1992 CONSENSUS AND TAIWAN'S 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

**DEAN P. CHEN, PhD**

Professor of Political Science  
Ramapo College of New Jersey

**KIELY PARIS-RODRIGUEZ**

Ramapo College of New Jersey

**ABSTRACT**

***Abstract:** Having suffered consecutively from two national electoral losses in 2016 and 2020 to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the Kuomintang (KMT) has been unable to settle on a strategically sound position to cope with the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s determination to unify with Taiwan, formally known as the Republic of China (ROC), instead opting to grapple with a vague formula known as the 1992 Consensus to maintain ties with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As of this writing, the KMT's prospect to recover Taiwan's presidency in 2024 remains uncertain, though not unlikely. If it wins, however, the party's relatively more conciliatory positions on China may still place Taiwan at odds with the national interests of the island democracy's chief security backer, the United States, which is now locked in an intense struggle for power with the PRC. Since 2016, though the KMT has strived to redefine its framing of the 1992 Consensus, it has failed to escape from its One-China precept that has become so sensitive given China's President Xi Jinping had equated, in 2019, the political formulation with the PRC (as well as the "one country, two systems" formula). This paper sets out to analyze the changing cross-strait perspectives on the 1992 Consensus, as conceived by the KMT, DPP, and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), and attempts to assess their implications on Taiwan's three-way presidential race in January 2024—pitting the KMT's Hou Yu-ih against the DPP's Lai Ching-te as well as the TPP's Ko Wen-je. The stakes are high given Taiwan's democratic identity and command of cutting-edge chip technology, which could significantly affect the balance of power between Washington and Beijing.*

**KEYWORDS:** 1992 CONSENSUS, BIDEN-XI SAN FRANCISCO MEETING, U.S.-TAIWAN RELATIONS, TAIWAN'S 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, ROC CONSTITUTION, ONE COUNTRY, TWO SYSTEMS, KUOMINTANG (KMT), CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY (CCP), DEMOCRATIC PROGRESSIVE PARTY (DPP), TAIWAN PEOPLE'S PARTY (TPP)

The **East-West Center** promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options. The East-West Center in Washington provides US and Indo-Pacific government stakeholders and program partners with innovative training, analytical, dialogue, exchange, and public diplomacy initiatives to meet policy priorities.

## INTRODUCTION

This special series of *EWC Occasional Papers* is the result of the 2023 *Taiwan & Asia Program Conference* entitled “Washington-Taipei-Beijing Relations at a Crossroads: the 2024 Elections and Geostrategic Implications from the Individual, Domestic, and International Levels of Analysis,” which was hosted by Ramapo College of New Jersey and sponsored by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in Washington, DC. The conference organizers gratefully acknowledge the intellectual contributions of the speakers and discussants in providing their views, research observations, and comments to improve the manuscripts as well as the East-West Center in Washington and its editors for reviewing and publishing this series.

As ties between Washington and Beijing become more competitive and adversarial over a range of divergent issues, including trade, military, espionage, human rights, governance, and high technologies that are pivotal in determining the global distributions of power of the twenty-first century,<sup>1</sup> the world also pays greater attention to the security and freedom of Taiwan (also known as the Republic of China, ROC), a self-governing democracy claimed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as an inalienable part of its national territory. The PRC’s paramount ruler, Xi Jinping, has vowed that the Taiwan issue “cannot be dragged on generation after generation,”<sup>2</sup> implying a sense of urgency on China’s longstanding reunification goal.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese leader has stepped up military coercive campaigns<sup>4</sup> to pressure Taiwan while accusing Washington of implementing “all-around containment, encirclement and suppression against China.”<sup>5</sup> Commanding the production of cutting-edge semiconductor chips, Taiwan has become front and center in the U.S.-Chinese rivalry.<sup>6</sup> The island’s two major political parties—the Chinese Nationalist Party or the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—prioritize deepening relations with the United States, which has been the ROC’s chief security backer for more than 70 years. Moreover, since 1979, Washington has based its Taiwan Strait policy on an ambiguously defined One-China policy that rests upon the Taiwan Relations Act, Three Joint U.S.-PRC Communiqués,

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an updated and abridged version from this author’s forthcoming book chapter, “Xi Jinping and the Derailment of the KMT-CCP ‘1992 Consensus,’” in Xiaobing Li and Fang Qiang eds., *China under Xi Jinping: A New Assessment* (Leiden University Press, 2024). For an in-depth discussion on the history and changing strategic circumstances driving this growing competition between Washington and Beijing, see Evan Medeiros, “Explaining and Understanding Competition in US-China Relations,” in Evan Medeiros ed., *Cold Rivals: The New Era of US-China Strategic Competition* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), pp. 25-45.

<sup>2</sup> “Xi says ‘China Must Be, Will Be Reunified’ As Key Anniversary Marked,” *Xinhua News* (January 2, 2019), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/02/c\\_137714898.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/02/c_137714898.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Chun Han Wong, *Party of One: The Rise of Xi Jinping and China’s Superpower Future* (New York: Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, 2023), pp. 199-200.

<sup>4</sup> Wu Huizhong, “China Flies 38 Warplanes Near Taiwan, 6 Navy Vessels in Area,” *Associated Press* (April 28, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/china-fighter-jets-harassment-taiwan-9156541b4138cfa3865b7232ee6a8970>.

<sup>5</sup> Chun Han Wong, Keith Zhai, and James Areddy, “China’s Xi Jinping Takes Rare Direct Aim at U.S. in Speech,” *The Wall Street Journal* (March 6, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-jinping-takes-rare-direct-aim-at-u-s-in-speech-5d8fde1a>.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Miller, *Chip War: The Fight for the World’s Most Critical Technology* (Scribner, 2022).

and the Six Assurances.<sup>7</sup> While the U.S. does not support Taiwan's independence,<sup>8</sup> Washington also does not take a stance on Taiwan's sovereignty. Any cross-strait resolutions, the U.S. insists, must be reached peacefully and "consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan."<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, on January 2, 2019, in an address marking Beijing's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the issuance of the "Messages to Compatriots of Taiwan," which announced the shift from a policy of forceful liberation to one of peaceful unification, Xi appeared to suggest that the 1992 Consensus is synonymous with the PRC's One-China principle and advancement of "national reunification" based on the "one country, two systems" formula,<sup>10</sup> hence leaving no space for the so-called "One-China, respective interpretations," as espoused by the KMT regarding the consensus.<sup>11</sup> As will be discussed in greater details later, for the KMT, One-China stands unequivocally as the ROC.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the KMT's cross-strait position has been significantly discredited in Taiwan's electoral arena, where voters have identified the PRC as a growing national security threat and firmly rejected Beijing's unification ambition. These attitudes were duly reflected by the KMT's two consecutive major losses in Taiwan's 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. The DPP under the Tsai Ing-wen administration has underscored how the KMT was inept at defending the ROC and even coopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s version of the One-China principle. The KMT's relatively more China-friendly platform has also made the party a less attractive strategic partner for the United States in its ongoing global power contest with the PRC.

This paper will examine the role of the 1992 Consensus in Taiwan's 2024 presidential election, the outcome of which will have a significant impact on the increasingly adversarial U.S.-PRC ties. As cross-strait relations deteriorated after Tsai's election in 2016, coinciding with the rising tensions between the United States and the PRC, Xi's 2019 Taiwan speech not only undermined the KMT's position, but also inadvertently empowered Tsai's reelection bid in 2020. Meanwhile, in light of a more robust relationship between Washington and Taipei, the KMT is in a bind as the party continues to grapple with creating a new definition for the 1992 Consensus, whose One-China element can be better justified to placate the angst of Taiwan's electorates and reassure Washington that the KMT, if it wins the 2024 presidential election, isn't going to erode or concede Taiwan's democracy, freedom and security at the expense of improving relations with Beijing. Indeed, public opinion surveys in Taiwan have consistently found that a great majority of the island's citizens are opposed to Beijing's "one country, two systems" model and the notion of unification under the PRC's One-China principle. The Taiwanese people, in

---

<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Department of State, "Fact Sheet: U.S. Relations with Taiwan," May 28, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>.

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Department of State, "The Biden Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China, by Secretary of State Antony Blinken," May 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ryan Hass, Bonnie Glaser, and Richard Bush, *U.S.-Taiwan Relations: Will China's Challenge Lead to a Crisis?* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2023), pp. 80-81.

<sup>10</sup> The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, "Xi Jinping's Speech at the Marking the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Issuance of the Message to Compatriots to Taiwan: Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China's National Reunification," January 2, 2019, [http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201904/t20190412\\_12155687.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201904/t20190412_12155687.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Wong, *Party of One*, p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> Dean P. Chen, "Security, Domestic Divisions, and the KMT's Post-2008 'One China' Policy: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (2015), pp. 319-365.

contrast, have communicated their “greatest consensus” is to support and defend the continued existence of the ROC.<sup>13</sup>

Following the 20<sup>th</sup> CCP Party Congress in October 2022 and the 14<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress in March 2023, Xi Jinping has successfully secured and consolidated an unprecedented third term in office as the CCP general secretary, president of the PRC, and chairman of the Central Military Affairs Commission. Such has been norm-breaking in the post-Mao reform and opening era.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, being arguably the most powerful PRC leader since Chairman Mao Zedong, Xi has promised the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” which sits at the heart of his “Chinese Dream.” This requires, as one of the highest priorities, recovering China’s lost glory, dignity, and prestige from the hands of Western and Japanese imperialists during the “century of humiliation.” Consequently, Taiwan, for Xi and the CCP, remains the final piece of territory that needs to be brought back to vindicate that shameful period of Chinese history and complete their national unity and sovereignty. Since coming to power, President Xi has on numerous occasions talked about the importance of reunifying with Taiwan, which is “an inevitable course of development.”<sup>15</sup> He clearly showed no patience to wait indefinitely, stressing that a resolution must come sooner rather than later. For Xi, if he can resolve the Taiwan issue, not only would the CCP’s ruling legitimacy be further enhanced along with China’s global power status, but he would surely be remembered as the greatest leader since the founding of the PRC—a legacy which would surpass that of Mao. In November 2023, Xi told U.S. President Joe Biden during their summit meeting in San Francisco that China must “reunify with Taiwan.” Though the Chinese leader expressed a preference to do so through peaceful means and refrained from setting a timeline, he did not rule out using military actions if necessary.<sup>16</sup>

However, for the sake of cross-strait peace and stability, recognizing objectively the ROC’s contributions to the state-building and national development of modern China, and respecting the Taiwanese people’s wishes today for their liberal democratic self-governance, Xi should consider facing up to the reality of the continued presence of the Republic of China, which was founded and established by Dr. Sun Yat-sen in 1912 and has persisted ever since. Notwithstanding all of their shortcomings and corruptions while governing the Chinese mainland, the ROC fought hard and endured huge sacrifices in their military resistance against Imperial Japan during World War II. Under the ROC’s national flag and central command, both the KMT and CCP cooperated, albeit half-heartedly, to confront a common enemy, even though a former U.S. national security advisor reported in his memoir that the “Chinese Communists had spent most of the war ducking Japan and trying to undercut the Chinese Nationalists.”<sup>17</sup> In the decades following the KMT’s loss in the Chinese Civil War and retreat to Taiwan in 1949, the ROC has gone through strenuous decades of struggles, paving the way for state-building, economic development, and political liberalization and transformation, prompting Taiwan to become an affluent and leading

---

<sup>13</sup> Mainland Affairs Council, Republic of China (Taiwan), “Defending ROC’s Sovereignty and Dignity is the Greatest Consensus among Taiwanese People,” February 8, 2019, [https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News\\_Content.aspx?n=2BA0753CBE348412&sms=E828F60C4AFBAF90&s=4BB376D86553B326](https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=2BA0753CBE348412&sms=E828F60C4AFBAF90&s=4BB376D86553B326).

<sup>14</sup> Wong, *Party of One*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Simone McCarthy, “China’s Xi Claims ‘Reunification’ with Taiwan Is ‘Inevitable’ as Crucial Election Looms,” *CNN* (December 26, 2023), <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/27/china/china-xi-jinping-taiwan-reunification-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Kristen Welker, Courtney Kube, Carol E. Lee and Andrea Mitchell, “Xi warned Biden during summit that Beijing will reunify Taiwan with China,” *NBC News* (December 20, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/china/xi-warned-biden-summit-beijing-will-reunify-taiwan-china-rcna130087>.

<sup>17</sup> John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 302.

Chinese constitutional democracy in the Asia-Pacific region. Accordingly, unless the Xi administration is willing to tamp down their hawkish nationalist impulses and be more accommodating in their handling of cross-strait relations by recognizing the ROC's formal existence, the 1992 Consensus will continue to be a contentious concept between Taiwan and China and, more critically, unlikely to be endorsed by the people of Taiwan. In other words, Xi's "overreaching" nationalist ambition and his political power could cloud his rational judgement and banish informed perspectives and deliberations within his policymaking circles.<sup>18</sup> This could lead to misperceptions and a cross-strait policy that would only drive away the Taiwanese people and undermine peaceful relations between the two sides.

## THE KMT-CCP 1992 CONSENSUS UNDER THE ERA OF MA YING-JEOU

Between 2008 and 2016, cross-strait interactions between Taiwan and the PRC were mostly amicable and smooth. The relaxation of cross-strait tensions in those years resulted from Taipei's acceptance (under the then-president Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT) of the 1992 Consensus—a nebulously-defined verbal formula referring to the November 1992 Hong Kong meeting between the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang, which agreed that both sides of the Taiwan Strait belonged to one Chinese nation.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the KMT construed the framework as "One-China, respective interpretations" (OCRI), where "China" stands for the Republic of China that was established by Dr. Sun Yat-sen in 1912. Beijing, on the other hand, has focused on the formulation of both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland "respectively expressing a 'One-China' principle," and "China" is the People's Republic of China founded in October 1949.<sup>20</sup> Yet, Beijing did not object publicly to Taipei's position, at least when the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou was serving as Taiwan's president between 2008 and 2016.<sup>21</sup>

### *Beijing's Pragmatic and Broader Treatment of "One-China," 2008-16*

When Hu Jintao came to power in China in 2003, he urged Taiwan's DPP administration to resume cross-strait dialogues on the basis of the 1992 Consensus.<sup>22</sup> However, by the mid-2000s, Chen Shui-bian

<sup>18</sup> Susan Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Su Chi, who served as President Ma's secretary-general of the National Security Council from 2008 to 2010, coined the term "1992 consensus" in April 2000 when he was the head of Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council. The context then was during the political transition of Taiwan's first political party rotation of power from the KMT to DPP, so Su was hoping that his creation of the term—ambiguous enough to accommodate differences and flexibility—would allow the PRC and the incoming DPP administration under Chen Shui-bian to continue negotiations and stabilize cross-strait relations. See Su Chi, *Taiwan's Relations with Mainland China: A Tail Wagging Two Dogs* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Szu-yin Ho, "Cross-Strait Relations," in Kharis Templeman, Yun-han Chu, and Larry Diamond, eds., *Dynamics of Democracy in Taiwan* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020), p. 342-343.

<sup>21</sup> On a fuller discussion of the KMT-CCP's changing interpretations of One China and creation of the 1992 Consensus, see Dean P. Chen, "Constructing Peaceful Development: The Changing Interpretations of One China and Beijing's Taiwan Strait Policy," *Asian Security* 10, no. 1 (2014), pp. 22-46.

<sup>22</sup> Su, *Taiwan's Relations with Mainland China*, p. 122. On April 29, 2005, in their first meeting since 1945 between the heads of the KMT and CCP, Lien Chan and Hu Jintao issued a joint statement on the "peaceful development" of cross-strait relationship, outlining five major goals: (1) resume cross-strait negotiations on the basis of the "1992

sought to draft a new Taiwanese constitution to replace the ROC, pushing Taiwan to rejoin the UN. Taiwan's president aimed at severing any ties between the mainland and Taiwan. The George W. Bush administration, which was then preoccupied with the aftermath of 9/11 and the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, intervened to restrain Taipei, lest a new Taiwan Strait crisis could undermine U.S.-PRC cooperation and divert American attention away from its global campaign against terrorism.<sup>23</sup> Witnessing Taiwan's rising independence sentiments, Hu took a conciliatory turn. At the 17<sup>th</sup> CCP Party Congress in October 2007, he raised the idea of a "common destiny community," implying a reorientation of the political status across the Taiwan Strait, in which "One-China does not mean PRC's China, but [simply] a common homeland for both sides."<sup>24</sup> After the KMT returned to power in May 2008, Beijing has shown more tolerance on the Ma administration's more literal and explicit interpretation of China as the ROC.<sup>25</sup> In essence, "Ma's unambiguous adherence to the One-China principle provided the fundamental dynamic for Beijing's policy shift."<sup>26</sup>

Three sets of discourse from Hu Jintao suggested Beijing's greater receptivity of the ROC. First, shortly after Ma's electoral victory on March 22, 2008, Hu, in a telephone conversation with then-U.S. president George W. Bush, expressed that both China and Taiwan should "restore consultation and talks on the basis of the 1992 Consensus, which sees both sides recognize there is only one China, but agree to differ on its definition."<sup>27</sup> Bush welcomed the Chinese leader's flexibility.<sup>28</sup> Second, on December 31, 2008, Hu formally described that "both the mainland and Taiwan belong to One-China" and urged both sides to "make *pragmatic explorations* in their political relations under the *special circumstances* where the country has not yet been reunified."<sup>29</sup> Lastly, in March 2012, when meeting with the KMT's honorary chairman Wu Poh-hsiung, the Chinese president remarked that the CCP should view cross-strait situations "objectively," that is, the "fact that [both] the mainland and Taiwan belong to One-China [is] in line with the *current cross-strait rules and regulations* and should be observed by both sides."<sup>30</sup> The

---

consensus"; (2) cease hostilities, conclude a peace agreement, and launch confidence building measures (CBMs); (3) comprehensively expand economic engagements; (4) negotiate Taiwan's international participation; and (5) set up party-to-party platform. See Shirley Kan, "China/Taiwan: Evolution of the 'one China' Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taiwan," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress* (June 24, 2011), p. 75. The full press communique on Lien-Hu's five major goals, see: <http://www.cctv.com/english/20050430/100193.shtml>. On Hu's patient policy, see Chen, "Comparing Jiang Zemin's Impatience with Hu Jintao's Patience Regarding the Taiwan Issue," p.4.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy B. Tucker, *Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and the Crisis with China* (Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 268-269.

<sup>24</sup> Xin Qiang, "Beyond Power Politics," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 65 (2010), p. 529.

<sup>25</sup> Su, *Taiwan's Relations with Mainland China*, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Xin Qiang, *Mainland China's Taiwan Policy: From Peaceful Development to Selective Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> The Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, "Chinese, U.S. Presidents Hold Telephone Talks on Taiwan, Tibet," March 26, 2008, [http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/gyzg/xizang/200803/t20080326\\_8410854.htm](http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/gyzg/xizang/200803/t20080326_8410854.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Chen, "Constructing Peaceful Development," p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> The USC US-China Institute, "Let Us Join Hands to Promote the Peaceful Development of Cross-Straits Relations and Strive with a United Resolve for the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation Speech at the Forum Marking the 30th Anniversary of the Issuance of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan," December 31, 2008, <https://china.usc.edu/hu-jintao-let-us-join-hands-promote-peaceful-development-cross-straits-relations-and-strive-united>. *Emphasis added*.

<sup>30</sup> Qtd. in Chen, "Constructing Peaceful Development," p. 37. Hu already raised the idea as early as March 2005. The Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of Denmark, "Four-point guideline on cross-Straits relations set forth by President Hu Jintao," March 14, 2005, [http://dk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zd/gx/200503/t20050314\\_2555985.htm](http://dk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zd/gx/200503/t20050314_2555985.htm).

remarks that “One-China is in line with current cross-strait rules and regulations” seemed to imply that both the ROC and PRC Constitutions agree on One-China although differing on what that China is.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, in April 2012, while expressing the hope of eventually creating conditions conducive for a cross-strait political agreement, Wang Yi, who was at the time China’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) of the State Council, acknowledged that more time was needed to overcome difficulties and differences between the two sides. The 1992 Consensus was referred to as the political foundation, in which both sides “adhered to the common ground of One-China and setting aside political differences.”<sup>32</sup> Since 2008, President Ma has more frequently stipulated that One-China refers to the ROC which incorporates the mainland region and Taiwan.<sup>33</sup> During his second inaugural address on May 20, 2012, Ma maintained:

When we speak of One-China, naturally it is the Republic of China. According to our Constitution, the sovereign territory of the Republic of China includes Taiwan and the mainland. At present, the ROC government has authority to govern only in Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmin, and Matsu. In other words, over the past two decades [since 1992], the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have been defined as “one Republic of China, two areas.” This status has remained unchanged throughout the administrations of the [past] three presidents.... [One ROC, two areas] is an eminently rational and pragmatic definition and constitutes the basis for assuring the ROC’s long-term development and safeguarding Taiwan’s security. Both sides of the Taiwan Strait ought to squarely face up to this reality, seek common ground while respecting differences, and establish a consensus regarding “mutual non-recognition of sovereignty and mutual non-denial of authority to govern.” Only in this way can the two sides move forward with confidence.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, during Ma’s two terms in office, he engaged Beijing with the reassurance of his administration’s commitment to the 1992 Consensus, albeit based it on the stance of “One-China, respective interpretations” or “one Republic of China, two areas” in line with the ROC Constitution.<sup>35</sup> Beijing did not openly reject Ma’s ROC position. Xi Jinping’s first five years in office (2012-17) corresponded almost exactly with Ma’s second term as president. As a result, Xi showed some flexibility towards Ma’s OCRI. For instance, Xi agreed that “both Taipei and Beijing base their legal and government systems on the One-China principle, under which Taiwan is a part of China, as is the Chinese mainland.”<sup>36</sup> He said: “We also are soberly aware that historical problems remain in cross-strait relations, and that there will be issues in the future that will require time, patience, and joint effort to resolve.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Huang Nian, *Liangan Da Jiagou: Da Wuding Xia De Zhongguo [The Cross-Strait Framework: A One China Roof]* (Taipei, Tianxia Wenhua Publishers, 2013), pp. 17-18.

<sup>32</sup> Qtd. in Chen, “Constructing Peaceful Development,” p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), “總統出席「中華民國釋憲60年」研討會,” December 21, 2008); <https://www.president.gov.tw/NEWS/12920>.

<sup>34</sup> Office of the President of Republic of China (Taiwan), “Full Text of President Ma Ying-jeou’s Second Inaugural Address,” May 20, 2012, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/3887>.

<sup>35</sup> Dean P. Chen, “The Strategic Implications of Ma Ying-jeou’s ‘One ROC, Two Areas’ Policy on Cross-Strait Relations,” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 20, no. 1 (2013), pp. 23-41.

<sup>36</sup> Qtd. in Chen, “Constructing Peaceful Development,” p. 40.

<sup>37</sup> “China’s Xi to Tread Peaceful Patient Path on Taiwan,” *Reuters* (Feb 25, 2013), <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-taiwan/chinas-xi-to-tread-peaceful-patient-path-on-taiwan-idUKBRE9100CA20130225/>.



In this context, both the KMT and the CCP governments deepened cross-strait ties, building an intricate web of economic, social, and institutional linkages that led to 23 agreements signed between the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and the Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS), semi-official representative bodies of Taipei and Beijing, respectively, that have served, since the early 1990s, to negotiate cross-strait technical, socioeconomic, and business matters. The historic Singapore summit meeting between Ma and Xi Jinping in November 2015 is another case in point illustrating the KMT-CCP's tightening of bonds.<sup>38</sup> "Cross-strait political engagement ascended to its peak on November 7, 2015, when Xi and Ma shook hands in Singapore addressing each other as 'mister' within their capacity as 'leader of mainland China' and 'leader of Taiwan,' respectively, marking the first meeting between top leaders of both sides since the end of Chinese Civil War in 1949. This historic meeting, as the culmination of mutual efforts to replace confrontation and conflict with dialogue and reconciliation, highlighted the political trust and delivered goodwill to maintain cross-strait peace and development."<sup>39</sup>

## THE GROWING CROSS-STRAIT TENSIONS SINCE 2016

Nonetheless, the DPP and a significant segment of the Taiwanese public have remained largely distrustful about the KMT-CCP détente, fearing that greater socioeconomic liberalization and closer contact between the two sides would allow too much Chinese influence into Taiwan that could potentially undermine the latter's democracy, freedom and security. Even the United States, then under the Barack Obama administration, voiced concerns on the KMT's deepening tilt towards the PRC and the potentially pernicious effects on America's national interests in the region amidst Xi's more expansionist endeavors in the South China Sea.<sup>40</sup> Taiwan's strong public anxiety culminated in the Sunflower student demonstrations in Taiwan in the spring of 2014 that not only halted Ma's attempt to further push for a services trade agreement with Beijing but also sparked an anti-KMT campaign that gave the party a series of stinging defeats in the island's major elections, especially in the last two presidential contests in 2016 and 2020.

Thus, the cross-strait relationship under Ma was far from smooth and stable as seen from a superficial appearance. Beijing's underlying intent to coerce and promote unification has always been clear to the Taiwanese civil society and the younger generation, whose angst regarding the PRC's ambitious encroachment toward Taiwan, using a combination of military pressure campaign, economic coercion, and grey-zone tactics in the forms of cognitive warfare and misinformation initiatives, has only amplified their hostility towards Beijing and skepticism of the KMT's rapprochement policy.<sup>41</sup> In the words of Syaru Shirley Lin, Taiwan faces a "China dilemma," and the key to understanding it lies in "the emergence and consolidation of Taiwanese national identity and the relationship between identity and Taiwan's most important national economic interests, namely growth, stability, equity, and security." Taiwan has been facing these economic opportunities and challenges under the "threat of a militarily

<sup>38</sup> Ho, "Cross-Strait Relations," pp. 349-351.

<sup>39</sup> Xin, *Mainland China's Taiwan Policy*, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Dean P. Chen, *U.S.-China Rivalry and Taiwan's Mainland Policy: Security, Nationalism, and the 1992 Consensus* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Hass, Glaser, and Bush, *U.S.-Taiwan Relations*, pp. 46-48.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Bush, *Difficult Choices: Taiwan's Quest for Security and the Good Life* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

hostile neighbor that seeks to absorb it politically and on which it has become dependent economically.”<sup>42</sup>

Between the KMT and the DPP, China certainly prefers the former given that both the KMT and the CCP share a common Chinese heritage and agree on the same Chinese national identity. The DPP, in contrast, is viewed by the PRC as the more dangerous opponent because of its pro-independence platform. Yet, according to Richard Bush, there is a “mismatch” between Beijing’s preconceived notion or assumptions about the DPP’s cross-strait position and the political pragmatism chartered by the Tsai Ing-wen administration since May 2016. Beijing has largely perceived the strategy employed by Taiwan presidents Lee Teng-hui (though a KMT), Chen Shui-bian, and Tsai as similarly geared toward “achieving independence by moving incrementally and covertly, to create a fait accompli, to which Beijing would find harder to respond.”<sup>43</sup> Lee’s eagerness to expand Taiwan’s international space and push for the Two States Theory in 1999, and Chen’s attempted efforts, through several referendum initiatives, to transform Taiwan’s legal status in the 2000s had confirmed this worst fear for the PRC leadership. As for Tsai, who rose to prominence as a consultant to President Lee at the ROC’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) in the late 1990s, she is believed by many in Taiwan and China to be the “brains” behind the Two States Theory. She also served as the minister of MAC under Chen Shui-bian’s first term and is credited for revitalizing and ultimately leading the DPP back to power after the party’s stringing electoral setbacks in 2008 and 2012.<sup>44</sup>

Since Tsai, as president, has refused to embrace the 1992 Consensus, in the manner Ma Ying-jeou and the KMT politicians did, the Xi administration has criticized the DPP administration for taking a pro-independence route. According to analysts of cross-strait relations, however, China’s depiction misrepresented the reality and failed to recognize Tsai’s more moderate approaches given the domestic political constraints she faced.<sup>45</sup> Even without explicitly endorsing the 1992 Consensus, Tsai has been quite pragmatic, as demonstrated by her first inauguration address on May 20, 2016:

We will also work to maintain the existing mechanisms for dialogue and communication across the Taiwan Strait. In 1992, the two institutions representing each side across the strait (SEF & ARATS), through communication and negotiations, arrived at various joint acknowledgements and understandings. It was done in a spirit of mutual understanding and a political attitude of seeking common ground while setting aside differences. I respect this historical fact. Since 1992, over twenty years of interactions and negotiations across the strait have enabled and accumulated outcomes which both sides must collectively cherish and sustain; and it is based on such existing realities and political foundations that the stable and peaceful development of the cross-strait relationship must be continuously promoted. The new government will conduct cross-strait affairs in accordance with the Republic of China Constitution, the Act Governing Relations Between the People of Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area, and other relevant legislation. The two governing parties across the strait must set aside the baggage of history, and engage in positive dialogue, for the benefit of the people on both sides. By existing political foundations, I refer to a number of key elements. The first element is the fact of the 1992 talks between the two institutions representing

<sup>42</sup> Syaru Shirley Lin, *Taiwan’s China Dilemma: Contested Identities and Multiple Interests in Taiwan’s Cross-Strait Economic Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 208.

<sup>43</sup> Bush, *Difficult Choices*: p. 130.

<sup>44</sup> Shelley Rigger, “The 2012 Elections,” in Templeman, Chu, and Diamond, eds., *Dynamics of Democracy in Taiwan*, p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> Hass, Glaser, and Bush, *U.S.-Taiwan Relations*, pp. 75-77.

each side across the strait (SEF & ARATS), when there was joint acknowledgement of setting aside differences to seek common ground. This is a historical fact. The second element is the existing Republic of China constitutional order. The third element pertains to the outcomes of over twenty years of negotiations and interactions across the strait. And the fourth relates to the democratic principle and prevalent will of the people of Taiwan.<sup>46</sup>

To a great extent, Tsai used her speech to reassure Beijing that her administration was neither going to change the cross-strait status quo nor promoting Taiwan's de jure independence. Notably, Tsai pledged that her government would conduct cross-strait policies on the basis of the "ROC constitutional order" and the "Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area," both of which are One-China documents that essentially imply both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland are parts of the same nation.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, in July 2016, I had an invaluable opportunity to interview a high authority in the Tsai government responsible for handling mainland affairs, who stated that "we seek to show greater flexibility than the previous Chen Shui-bian and Ma Ying-jeou administrations." In a sense, the official continued, "President Tsai wants to avoid getting into the debates on whether Taiwan and [the] mainland are regions under one China, as Ma noted in his 'one ROC, two areas' characterization. While following the ROC Constitution, we can't say One-China. People can interpret our position freely on their own.... [President Tsai's] mentioning of the 'ROC constitutional order' and the 'Act Governing Relations between the People of Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area' [implicitly] echoes the point that mainland China and Taiwan are not international but cross-strait relations."<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the person added, "by respecting the historical fact of various joint acknowledgements and understandings arrived [in 1992] and done in a spirit of mutual understanding and a political attitude of seeking common ground while setting aside differences," and "cherishing the over 20 years of interactions and negotiations across the strait [and] accumulated outcomes," Tsai practically expressed the 1992 Consensus, akin to Ma's "one China, respective interpretations," in a more "qualitative way." At the same time, the president also insisted that any cross-strait resolutions must reflect the democratic preferences of the Taiwanese people.<sup>49</sup>

### *Xi Jinping's 2019 Taiwan Speech*

Nevertheless, Beijing was unwilling to give the DPP leader the benefit of the doubt. The Chinese government has suspected that Tsai's genuine intention was to promote de jure Taiwan independence in the long run, though for the time-being her separatist proclivity was merely cloaked under the ROC cover. For instance, the Chinese side has pointed out how the DPP administration has engaged in the "de-Sinicization" agenda across the social, cultural, and educational spectrums in Taiwan by denigrating the KMT as an "alien authority" or a "foreign regime" while commemorating Japanese colonialism in

<sup>46</sup> Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Inaugural Address of ROC 14<sup>th</sup>-Term President Tsai Ing-wen," May 20, 2016. Accessible at: <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/4893>.

<sup>47</sup> Bush, *Difficult Choices*, p. 153.

<sup>48</sup> This author's interview with a high authority in the Tsai administration responsible for handling cross-strait policy, July 26, 2016, Taipei, Taiwan. The interviewee requested to remain anonymous. See also Chen, *U.S.-China Rivalry and Taiwan's Mainland Policy*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Taiwan to undercut, if not nullifying, the relations between Taiwan and China.<sup>50</sup> Yet, in light of the DPP platform's longstanding objection to One-China (regardless of whether that China is the ROC or PRC), especially coming from its Deep Green faction, Tsai has her hands tied. Her winning coalition also consisted of political and civil societal groups in favor of Taiwan independence. Furthermore, as U.S.-PRC relations have grown more confrontational over the past several years under both the Trump and Biden administrations, Washington has also become more skeptical of the KMT's China-friendly position, which could potentially compromise Taiwan's democracy and security. U.S. national interests, therefore, have welcomed Tsai's more centrist bent on cross-strait relations. Thus, Tsai, in the opinions of many, is doing her best to address Beijing's demands without undermining her domestic political legitimacy as well as international support.<sup>51</sup>

Bush, as a longtime observer of the Taiwan Strait issue, has provided an interesting insight:

My own view is that the PRC leaders cannot afford to accept the reality that the mainstream of the DPP recognizes that independence is not an option. To do so would be to legitimize the DPP and require Beijing to creatively find a way to coexist with it, which, in turn would reduce even further the chances for unification and produce an outcome of permanent de facto separation. Beijing must therefore demonize the DPP and deliberately set the bar for coexistence higher than the DPP is willing to go. Moreover, in situations such as Taiwan, where the CCP exercises less control than it would like, the PRC seeks to ally with internal forces that share its goals in order to obstruct, constrain, and isolate adversaries that defy the CCP's interests. Having an enemy to demonize and oppose is an essential element of this Leninist, united-front strategy.<sup>52</sup>

Whatever the ambiguity China was willing to accommodate in the 1992 Consensus during the Ma era, Beijing has moved the goalposts and tightened its definition by unequivocally insisting that the Tsai government must endorse the "One-China" core connotation.<sup>53</sup> For Beijing, to be sure, the PRC government is always the only legitimate Chinese state that has superseded the ROC state in 1949. The Chinese leadership was willing to entertain Ma's "respective interpretations" not because they agreed with him about the existence of the ROC but because they trusted his intention and support for One-China.<sup>54</sup> Yet, when President Tsai brought up the ROC, Beijing refused to allow for any more wiggle room.

On January 2, 2019, in a speech commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the issuance of the "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan"<sup>55</sup> by the Standing Committee of the PRC's National People's Congress, President Xi Jinping called for a "peaceful reunification with Taiwan" in accordance with the One-China principle of the 1992 Consensus. The Chinese leader explained that the Taiwan issue originally emerged from China's internal weaknesses dating back to the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. After WWII, "[the] two sides of the Taiwan Strait fell into a special state of protracted political confrontation due to

<sup>50</sup> Xin, *Mainland China's Taiwan Policy*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>51</sup> Ho, "Cross-Strait Relations," p. 355; Bush, *Difficult Choices*, pp. 153-154; Hass, Glaser, and Bush, *U.S.-Taiwan Relations*, pp. 86-87. See also Jacques deLisle, "United States-Taiwan Relations: Tsai's Presidency and Washington's Policy," *The China Review* 18, no. 3 (2018), pp. 13-60.

<sup>52</sup> Bush, *Difficult Choices*, p. 131.

<sup>53</sup> J. Michael Cole, *Cross-Strait Relations since 2016* (Routledge, 2020), pp. 11-12.

<sup>54</sup> Bush, *Difficult Choices*, p. 152.

<sup>55</sup> The Standing Committee of the Fifth National People's Congress, "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan," January 1, 1979. Accessible at: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/7943.htm>.

the civil war in China and interferences of foreign forces.” Since 1949, he said, “the Communist Party of China, the Chinese government, and the Chinese people have endeavored to pursue the historic mission of resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China’s complete reunification.” “On this basis,” Xi continued, “we have formulated a fundamental strategy of upholding the principle of ‘one country, two systems’ and promoting national reunification. With this, we have responded to the call of our time, namely to promote, in the new era, the peaceful development of cross-strait relations and unite our compatriots in Taiwan to strive for our country’s rejuvenation and peaceful reunification.”<sup>56</sup>

Xi’s address has been widely interpreted as setting Beijing’s records straight on what the 1992 Consensus prescribes—that is both Taiwan and mainland China belong to the same country under the PRC sovereign jurisdiction, and the blueprint for achieving unification is through the “one country, two systems” model that has been applied to Hong Kong and Macau. In other words, Taiwan would become a special administrative region (SAR) of the PRC. Though Taiwan is promised with a high degree of political and socioeconomic autonomy, Beijing would decide ultimately how much latitude and freedom to delegate to its subordinate units, be they provinces, autonomous regions, or special administrative regions.<sup>57</sup> Xi also devoted a great portion of his remarks denouncing and “resolutely opposing” Taiwan independence, which, he warned, would bring “disaster.” He said the PRC would “not renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures” to fight against “external interference” and “Taiwan’s separatists and their separatist activities.”<sup>58</sup> Taiwanese public opinion has been firmly against China’s “one country, two systems” model, especially in light of Beijing’s stricter and more repressive control over Hong Kong. Moreover, by erasing the ROC from the 1992 Consensus, Xi’s 2019 New Year’s Day address not only discredited the KMT’s “One-China, respective interpretations” and alienated its Pan-Blue supporters, but also blunted Tsai’s concession to handle cross-strait ties on the basis of the ROC constitutional framework. The campaign against the unpopular “one country, two systems” (and, by extension, the 1992 Consensus) and Hong Kong’s massive democracy demonstration movements throughout 2019-20 emboldened President Tsai’s reelection prospect in January 2020, propelling the DPP incumbent to a landslide victory over the populist KMT candidate Han Kuo-yu (who was also Kaohsiung mayor at the time).<sup>59</sup>

As the DPP appears to have become well-entrenched in a robust one-party dominance of Taiwan’s national politics since 2016—prompting some analysts to describe that year’s election as constituting a “critical realignment” in which the younger voters have been motivated to vote for the DPP due to the China threats—Beijing has embarked upon a series of punitive acts to combat the Tsai government.<sup>60</sup> The PRC, never a fan of the ROC, which the CCP defeated and expelled from the Chinese mainland, feels more compelled to remove the old regime to deny the DPP government any means of escaping from recognizing the One-China principle on Beijing’s terms.<sup>61</sup> In her second-term inauguration address on May 20, 2020, Tsai underscored the words peace, parity, democracy, and dialogue, stating “We will not

<sup>56</sup> Taiwan Work Office of the CPC Central Committee and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, “Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China’s Peaceful Reunification by Xi Jinping,” January 2, 2019. Accessible at: [http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201904/t20190412\\_12155687.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201904/t20190412_12155687.htm).

<sup>57</sup> Bush, *Difficult Choices*, p. 211.

<sup>58</sup> “Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China’s Peaceful Reunification.”

<sup>59</sup> T.Y Wang and Su-feng Cheng, “Threat Perception and Taiwan’s 2020 Presidential Election,” in Wei-chin Lee, ed., *Protests, Pandemic, and Security Predicaments: Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and the US in the 2020s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 127-129.

<sup>60</sup> Cal Clark, Alexander Tan, and Karl Ho, “Was 2016 a Realigning Election in Taiwan?” *Asian Survey* 60, no. 6 (2020), pp. 1006-1028.

<sup>61</sup> Ho, “Cross-Strait Relations,” p. 355.

accept Beijing authorities' use of 'one country, two systems' to downgrade Taiwan and undermine the cross-strait status quo. We stand fast by this principle." Yet, Taiwan president reiterated her 2016 pledge to "handle cross-strait affairs according to the Constitution of the Republic of China and the Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area. This has been [the Tsai administration's] consistent position for maintaining the peaceful and stable status quo in the Taiwan Strait."<sup>62</sup> Beijing has bluntly denied the existence of the ROC. On April 14, 2021, China's TAO, in response to a question on the removal of the "Republic of China government" from Hong Kong's textbook revision, stressed, "It's an indisputable historical fact that in 1949, the Kuomintang regime lost the civil war it launched against the people and retreated to the island of Taiwan, thus losing its status as the legal government representing the whole of China."<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, the CCP has stepped up its military pressure and coercive campaigns around the air and maritime vicinities of Taiwan, while relying on economic incentives, social and cultural exchanges, and even disinformation tactics to penetrate into Taiwan's civil society, media, business, and educational and political institutions to try to befriend individuals, groups, and communities who are opposed to Taiwan independence and against the cross-strait policies of the DPP/Tsai administration. For instance, the Chinese united front campaigns targeted Beijing-friendly political entities in an attempt to reinforce their chances of influencing Taiwan's cross-strait policymaking or winning electoral races across all levels.<sup>64</sup> KMT politicians and independent/centrist candidates, like the former Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je, who founded the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) in 2019, have also become optimal partners as they are supporters of either the 1992 Consensus or the notion that "the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are one family."<sup>65</sup>

## THE KMT'S CHINA QUANDARY

The KMT, after losing two consecutive presidential contests in Taiwan in 2016 and 2020, is on the defensive and needs to convince a majority of skeptical Taiwanese electorates and Washington that the party fully appreciates what is possible given the prevailing strategic circumstances, not what the party thinks is desirable based on its pro-China ideational orientations. In that sense, the KMT wants to demonstrate it can effectively defend Taiwan's security, de facto independence, and self-governed democratic system from Beijing's unabated threats while reassuring Washington that a KMT administration would remain a dependable strategic partner in the maintenance of a stable and peaceful cross-strait equilibrium that not only stops short of unilaterally declaring Taiwan's de jure independence but also preventing the island from tilting toward the PRC's spheres of influence. In spite of the KMT's repeated pledges that it is a "pro-U.S., pro-democracy and close to U.S. party,"<sup>66</sup> their pro-China position has placed the party in a very difficult spot amidst the heightening U.S.-PRC competition.

<sup>62</sup> Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Inaugural Address of ROC 15<sup>th</sup> Term President Tsai Ing-wen," May 20, 2020. Accessible at: <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6004>.

<sup>63</sup> "China Says ROC Hasn't Existed since 1949," *FTV* (April 15, 2021), accessible at: <https://www.ftvnews.com.tw/video/detail/NF4WvazUfZs>.

<sup>64</sup> Bush, *Difficult Choices*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>65</sup> Xin, *Mainland China's Taiwan Policy*, p. 36.

<sup>66</sup> "Taiwan's Path Forward: A Conversation with KMT Chairman Eric Chu," Keynote and Conversation at the Brookings Institution (June 6, 2022), [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).

Indeed, like many democracies worldwide, Taiwan faces a longstanding China conundrum. On the one hand, the island relies heavily on the PRC for commercial exchanges, with approximately 40% of Taiwanese exports going to Mainland China and Hong Kong, while 20% of Taiwanese imports come from the two. On the other hand, Beijing's Leninist system and unrelenting coercive pressures on Taiwan have put the democratically self-ruled island in grave danger. But, unlike Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other ASEAN states, to name just a few, which also have, simultaneously, extensive economic interdependence with China as well as their respective territorial, maritime, and political feuds with Beijing, Taiwan cannot maintain a tenable hedging posture between Washington and Beijing. This is because the CCP government has never ceased claiming control over Taiwan, as Xi stressed in 2021: "Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the Communist Party of China. It is also a shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation."<sup>67</sup> During the early days of China's economic reform and opening period in the 1980s and 1990s, Beijing promised that its "one country, two systems" formula would ensure the people of Hong Kong (and, in the future, Taiwan, as well) to continue with their liberal socioeconomic system and enjoy a high degree of unfettered and autonomous political freedom and democracy. Nonetheless, in recent years, as the Chinese government has increasingly tightened its political grip and stepped-up its censorship capacity over the former British colony, Taiwan's people have grown more repulsive toward any calls for a political accommodation with the PRC's authoritarian system, although that does not necessarily mean a rejection of identifying with Chinese culture.<sup>68</sup>

### *The KMT's Attempt to Reinvigorate the 1992 Consensus*

As noted, having lost twice electorally to Tsai Ing-wen, the KMT has still not been able to settle on a strategically sound posture to cope with the PRC. Xi's 2019 remarks certainly derailed, to some extent, the KMT's confidence in the 1992 Consensus, given the term is now treated as synonymous with unification on the PRC's terms and its "one country, two systems" principle. Moreover, in March 2023, China's then-foreign minister Qin Gang, reading out from the preamble of the PRC Constitution, stressed that "Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People's Republic of China."<sup>69</sup> Therefore, it becomes more difficult for the KMT to accord the ROC in its definition of One-China.

The KMT's substantial electoral success in the November 2022 local mayoral races boosted the party's morale. However, its similar victory in 2018 demonstrated that municipal elections are less about national security/cross-strait issues than domestic affairs.<sup>70</sup> Hence, the KMT's prospect of recovering Taiwan's presidency in 2024 is far from ensured. Over the past seven years, the KMT has been led by four chairpersons: Hung Hsiu-chu (2016-17); Wu Den-yih (2017-20), Johnny Chiang (2020-21), and Eric Chu (2021-present), and each has formulated and articulated their stances and interpretations regarding

<sup>67</sup> Qtd. in David Sacks, "What Xi Jinping's Major Speech Means for Taiwan," Council on Foreign Relations: Asian Unbound (July 6, 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-xi-jinpings-major-speech-means-taiwan>.

<sup>68</sup> Shelley Rigger, Lev Nachman, Chit Wai John Mok, Nathan Kar Ming Chan, "Why Is Unification So Unpopular in Taiwan? It's the PRC Political System, Not Just Culture," Brookings Institution (February 7, 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-is-unification-so-unpopular-in-taiwan-its-the-prc-political-system-not-just-culture/>.

<sup>69</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, "Foreign Minister Qin Gang Meets the Press," March 7, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202303/t20230307\\_11037190.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202303/t20230307_11037190.html).

<sup>70</sup> Brian Hioe, "Once Again, the KMT Scores Big in Taiwan's Local Elections," *The Diplomat* (November 28, 2022), <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/once-again-kmt-scores-big-in-taiwans-local-elections/>.

the 1992 Consensus. However, none have been genuinely satisfying to Taiwan's voters, Washington, or even Beijing. Hung is considered the most similar to Beijing's position, as she focused on One-China and downplaying the "respective interpretations" aspect.<sup>71</sup> Hung and her advisor, Chang Ya-chung (professor of political science at the National Taiwan University), advocated for a peace agreement with the mainland to mark an official end to their decades of antagonism.<sup>72</sup> A peace agreement is also laying down a more concrete way for future reunification. Thus, Hung's view is seen to reflect the extreme pro-unification faction within the KMT, as she embraces explicitly the ultimate reunification with mainland China, even under the PRC system. She expressed, when meeting with Chinese officials, "people on both sides of the strait should uphold the 1992 Consensus and oppose "Taiwan independence," promote exchanges, enhance mutual trust, and contribute to the integrated cross-strait development and the realization of peaceful reunification."<sup>73</sup>

In contrast, Wu Den-yih prevailed over Hung in the race for the KMT chairmanship in May 2017. As the ROC's former vice-president during the second Ma Ying-jeou administration (2012-16), Wu's position was in line with his former boss, that is, "One-China, respective interpretations."<sup>74</sup> Yet, the huge KMT loss in January 2020 led to Wu's resignation, and the party then elected Johnny Chiang as its new chairman in March 2020. Chiang set up the Cross-Strait Team of the KMT's Reform Committee to examine how the party should charter its mainland policy going forward. On June 19, 2020, the committee published its preliminary report, describing the 1992 Consensus in a historical context, suggesting the party should eschew the term in any future handling of affairs with China. Furthermore, the new cross-strait approach should include the four pillars: (1) adherence to the sovereignty of the Republic of China; (2) protection of freedom, democracy, and human rights; (3) maintenance of Taiwan's security and priority; and (4) creation of a win-win situation and shared prosperity. After facing strong pushback from the KMT's senior leaders and past chairpersons, including Ma, Wu, Hung, and Lien Chan, Chiang clarified his positions, explaining that he certainly recognized the significant and positive contributions of the 1992 Consensus during the eight years of Ma's presidency. Yet, he noted, in recent years, the 1992 Consensus was "stigmatized and distorted by the ruling Democratic Progressive Party as well as Xi's government in Beijing... It seems that excessive interpretation of this discourse has instead led to more misunderstandings amongst the people of Taiwan." Consequently, Chiang wanted to unequivocally identify the most important tenet behind the 1992 Consensus as the "Constitution of the Republic of China," and "when you (Beijing) do not look squarely at the Republic of China, the '92 Consensus cannot exist."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Shih Hsiao-kuang and Jonathan Chin, "KMT Congress Approves New Policy Platforms," *Taipei Times* (September 5, 2016), <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/09/05/2003654519>.

<sup>72</sup> Amber Lin, "Does the KMT Still Have a Cross-Strait Role?" *Common Wealth Magazine* (July 20, 2018), <https://english.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=2031>.

<sup>73</sup> "Top political advisor meets with Taiwan delegation led by Hung Hsiu-chu," *Xinhua News* (May 14, 2019), [https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/14/c\\_138055563.htm](https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/14/c_138055563.htm).

<sup>74</sup> "中國國民黨主席當選人吳敦義同志回覆中共賀電," (May 20, 2017), [http://www.kmt.org.tw/2017/05/blog-post\\_77.html](http://www.kmt.org.tw/2017/05/blog-post_77.html); Shih Hsiao-kuang, "REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK: Wu Must Face KMT Factionalism over China Relations," *Taipei Times* (May 22, 2017), <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2017/05/22/2003671072>.

<sup>75</sup> "Amid Backlash, Chiang Affirms Contributions of 1992 Consensus," Fair Winds Foundation, <http://fairwindsfoundation.org/en/event/Taiwan%20Weekly/8/Amid%20Backlash,%20Chiang%20Affirms%20Contributions%20of%201992%20Consensus/60>. See also David Brown, "Pay Attention to the KMT's Chair Election," *The Diplomat* (September 15, 2021), <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/pay-attention-to-the-kmts-chair-election/>; Jessica Drun, "The KMT Continues to Grapple with its "1992 Consensus," *Global Taiwan Institute* (September 22, 2022), <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/09/the-kmt-continues-to-grapple-with-its-1992-consensus/>.



Nevertheless, Chiang's reform attempt ultimately led to his downfall, as the KMT establishment rallied behind Eric Chu to be the new party chair in 2021 (Chu served once as the KMT chairman back in 2015-16). When delivering a remark at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC in June 2022, Chu reaffirmed that the 1992 Consensus remains as the "key foundation" in dealing with Beijing. He defined it as a "non-consensus consensus," based on "creative ambiguity."<sup>76</sup> In any event, the KMT's quandary has shown how its "domestic security imaginary,"<sup>77</sup> which is deeply rooted in the history, culture, and identity of the Kuomintang, has led them to paint the CCP as merely an "intrastate" political rival, in contrast to the majority of Taiwanese voters who primarily perceive Beijing as an external foe. Therefore, the KMT's deeply entrenched historical baggage and identity as a China-centric party (created by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the ROC, and later led by strong Chinese nationalists Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo who pledged to restore the ROC back to China after they fled to Taiwan in 1949) has constrained the party from chartering a more assertive position on the PRC.

### *China and Taiwan's Three-Way Race for 2024*

In spring 2023, former President Ma Ying-jeou went on a 12-day visit to China. Traveling as a private citizen, his office noted that the former president's trip was just to pay homage to his ancestors (in Hunan) and, with Taiwanese university students, he visited historical sites of great significance to the KMT when it still ruled China. While in Nanjing, the former capital of the ROC when it ruled the Chinese mainland, Ma emphasized the ethnic Chinese unity between the people of Taiwan and China. He also underscored that the ROC continues to have political legitimacy and sovereignty over both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland,<sup>78</sup> per the ROC Constitution and its Additional Articles, and Taiwan's Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and Mainland Area.<sup>79</sup>

Ma's rationale might have worked when Beijing was willing to tolerate, albeit tacitly, the presence of the ROC, as what happened during the administration of Hu Jintao and the early years of Xi's administration when they acknowledged, as discussed earlier, that both Taiwan and China have their different legal and constitutional systems. Today, however, Xi would have none of that. Ma's references to the ROC were all censored by China's news media outlets.<sup>80</sup> In that sense, the KMT cannot compellingly persuade Taiwan's voters and the international community that One-China can be respectively interpreted as the ROC. Washington politicians again raised concerns that the KMT's idealism may inadvertently tie

<sup>76</sup> "Taiwan's Path Forward: A Conversation with KMT Chairman Eric Chu," Keynote and Conversation at the Brookings Institution (June 6, 2022), [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).

<sup>77</sup> Jutta Weldes, "Constructing National Interests," *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 3 (1996), pp. 275-318.

<sup>78</sup> "Former President Ma mentions 'ROC' during ancestor worship in China," *Focus Taiwan News* (April 1, 2023), <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202304010004>.

<sup>79</sup> "Ex-President Tells Chinese Students ROC Constitution Covers Taiwan, Mainland," *Focus Taiwan News* (April 2, 2023), <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202304020009>.

<sup>80</sup> "馬英九訪中提台灣總統和民國 北京喉舌全過濾," *UDN News* (April 7, 2023), [https://udn.com/news/story/123435/7082584?from=udn-relatednews\\_ch2](https://udn.com/news/story/123435/7082584?from=udn-relatednews_ch2).

Taiwan into the PRC's One-China principle.<sup>81</sup> Tsai also took a swipe at Ma, asserting that the ROC and the PRC are "not subordinate to each other."<sup>82</sup>

Table 1 below summarizes the KMT's intraparty disagreements over how the 1992 Consensus should be conceptualized, as well as the interest positions of Washington and Beijing, respectively, towards each KMT perspective. The United States has consistently stated that it does not interfere in Taiwan's domestic affairs or "register a preference in Taiwan's electoral process."<sup>83</sup> Yet, it is undeniable that Taiwan's candidates' and parties' cross-strait approach would inevitably affect Washington's national security interests toward the Taiwan Strait and the greater Indo-Pacific region, especially in a global/regional context of escalated contentious relations with Beijing in recent years. Thus, it may be reasonable to surmise that Washington would take an unpalatable stance toward the KMT position preferred by Beijing and a more receptive attitude towards platforms that are less supported by the PRC. Given that the U.S. One-China policy is an ambiguously created framework, it is not hard to imagine that Washington would be least interested in a KMT definition of One-China that boxes Taiwan into the PRC orbit.<sup>84</sup> Overall, the United States has expressed concerns about China's potential interference in Taiwan's 2024 elections, and Beijing providing support for candidates who are friendlier toward the PRC. On November 15, 2023, Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping held their second in-person meeting on the sidelines of the APEC summit in the San Francisco Bay Area. In their efforts to ease the tension between the United States and China, both nations agreed to focus on areas where they can cooperate. Their focus includes resuming military communication, curbing fentanyl, and managing the risks associated with artificial intelligence. While discussing the Taiwan issue, President Biden emphasized the United States' commitment to the one-China policy. However, he made it clear that he would not bow to President Xi's request to express stronger opposition to Taiwanese independence. As Xi warned Biden that China will eventually "reunify Taiwan with mainland China," the U.S. leader cautioned his counterpart against interference in Taiwan's election.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Lauren Sforza, "McCaul says China could influence, take over Taiwan in next election 'without a shot fired,'" *The Hill* (April 9, 2023), <https://thehill.com/homenews/sunday-talk-shows/3941129-mccaul-says-china-could-influence-take-over-taiwan-in-next-election-without-a-shot-fired/>.

<sup>82</sup> Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), "President Tsai delivers remarks on the termination of diplomatic relations with the Republic of Honduras," March 26, 2023, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6464>.

<sup>83</sup> Jude Blanchette and Ryan Hass, "How the United States Can Support Taiwan's Democracy," CSIS Analysis (June 15, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-united-states-can-support-taiwans-democracy>.

<sup>84</sup> Dean P. Chen, "Taiwan's Upcoming 2024 Presidential Election and the Biden-Xi Summit in San Francisco," *The National Interest* (November 11, 2023), <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/taiwan%E2%80%99s-upcoming-2024-presidential-election-and-biden-xi-summit-san-francisco-207242>.

<sup>85</sup> Kristen Welker, Courtney Kube, Carol E. Lee and Andrea Mitchell, "Xi warned Biden during summit that Beijing will reunify Taiwan with China," *NBC News* (December 20, 2023), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/china/xi-warned-biden-summit-beijing-will-reunify-taiwan-china-rcna130087>.

**TABLE 1. KMT's Intraparty Differences over 1992 Consensus and Interests of the US and PRC**

KMT's intraparty differences over the 1992 Consensus and relations with China	The 1992 Consensus should focus only on One-China, leaving out respective interpretations; supporting a peace agreement to pave for eventual unification (Hung Hsiu-chu)	The 1992 Consensus is "One-China, respective interpretations"; with the KMT's interpretations that One-China is the ROC (Ma Ying-jeou, Wu Den-yeh, Eric Chu)	The 1992 Consensus is squarely based on conforming with Taiwan's democracy, sovereignty, security, ROC Constitution; explicitly rejecting "one country, two systems" (Johnny Chiang, Hou Yu-ih)
U.S. interests	No	Ambiguous/No	Ambiguous/Yes
PRC interests	Yes	Ambiguous/Yes	No

Meanwhile, Hou Yu-ih, the KMT's 2024 presidential nominee and the mayor of New Taipei City, has sought to convince the Taiwanese people and Washington that the KMT is clear-eyed about Beijing's intentions and sovereign claims with respect to Taiwan. Hou argued in the page of *Foreign Affairs*, "I have no unrealistic expectations about Beijing's intentions of seeking unification, and if necessary, by force. Taiwan's most important priority should be to strengthen its national defense and deter the use of force by mainland China." He reassured Taiwan's "collaboration with the United States in various areas such as sharing intelligence and promoting regular joint training exercises."<sup>86</sup> He also sought to improve cross-strait relations on the basis of the 1992 Consensus, in accordance with the ROC Constitution and its amendments, adding that his formulation is firmly opposed to both de-jure Taiwan independence and the PRC's "one country, two systems."<sup>87</sup> Hou promised to advance a "3D" strategy—deterrence, dialogue and de-escalation—to maintain a balanced approach to defend Taiwan and deepen security ties with the United States while engaging in some limited cooperation with China. By endorsing the 1992 consensus, Hou is perceived by Beijing to be more appealing and be the best candidate to lower China's displays of military intimidation post-election if he would win Taiwan's presidency. Nevertheless, the KMT's intention to restore dialogue and economic cooperation with Beijing, while peace-inducing, could also undermine the liberal, democratic interests the U.S. needs to preserve as America competes for influence with an illiberal and authoritarian China. In short, given Taiwan's democratic identity and critical role in the production of highly advanced semiconductor chips, its close leaning to the PRC could jeopardize the integrity of global supply-chains and strategic calculations of Washington and its like-minded allies/partners.

In contrast, the DPP nominee Lai Ching-te, who is currently Taiwan's vice-president and also the frontrunner in the race, seems to be the candidate most compatible with the U.S. interests long-term (though it's important to emphasize that the U.S. has stated repeatedly that it is neutral to Taiwan's electoral process and would be ready to work with any party that wins the race), hence explaining why Beijing officials had expressed their worries about a Lai victory when meeting with their counterparts from the Biden administration.<sup>88</sup> By proposing to bolster Taiwan's military self-defense and asymmetric capabilities that would lessen Taiwan's dependence on the U.S. to deter China, Lai's Four Pillar Plan<sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Hou Yu-ih, "Taiwan's Path between Extremes," *Foreign Affairs* (September 18, 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwans-path-between-extremes>.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Lingling Wei, Charles Hutzler, and William Mauldin, "China Tries to Gain U.S. Cooperation over Upcoming Taiwan Elections," *The Wall Street Journal* (June 25, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taiwan-elections-a-big-topic-during-blinkens-talks-in-china-afaa6def>.

<sup>89</sup> Lai Ching-te, "My Plan to Preserve Peace in the Taiwan Strait," *The Wall Street Journal* (July 4, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/my-plan-to-preserve-peace-between-china-and-taiwan-candidate-election-race-war-7046ee00>.

suggested how the U.S. could further the opportunity to pursue strategic initiatives “that includes reinforcing the U.S. military presence in East Asia and hardening Taiwan’s defense.”<sup>90</sup> Notably, the second pillar of his plan, “economic security is national security,” calls for Taiwan to pursue more diversified trade agreements. As Taiwan enhances its economic interdependence with the U.S. and other like-minded democratic partners (known as “friendshoring”) around the world,<sup>91</sup> it also builds up an economic deterrence to force China to reconsider the risk and costs it would incur during a conflict with Taiwan. “Chinese economy remains highly dependent on access to international financial markets, as well as on imports of key technologies, technical know-how, oil, gas, and food.”<sup>92</sup> The third pillar, “developing partnerships worldwide,” continues to deepen Taiwan’s international ties. By aligning itself with democracies worldwide, Taiwan not only further solidifies its image as a thriving democracy, but it also internationalizes the issue of Taiwan security.<sup>93</sup> By developing partnerships internationally, Taiwan increases its friends and their support for the island democracy. This support increases the cost calculations of a cross-strait conflict, thereby constraining Beijing’s belligerent moves.

To be sure, as Taiwan strives to enhance their deterrence capacities and deepen cooperation with the U.S. and other democratic friends, Taipei, regardless of which party wins the presidency in January 2024, will also need to offer some reassurances to ease Beijing’s constant fears, namely the island growing embrace of a permanent separation from China. Observers and analysts have advised that in addition to credible military deterrence, Taipei should “refrain from potentially provocative actions, such as holding a referendum to change its official name, the Republic of China, or revising its territorial claims to exclude mainland China—changes that would indicate a declaration of formal independence. Regardless of who is elected Taiwan’s next president, Taipei will need to convincingly reassure Beijing that it has no intention of fundamentally altering the status quo.”<sup>94</sup>

The ROC, therefore, remains the only common ground amongst all three candidates. Hou, as noted, has reiterated his position to endorse the 1992 consensus that is consistent with the ROC Constitution while Lai’s fourth pillar also asserted that he would continue with Tsai’s cross-strait status quo platform which is in the “best interest of the Republic of China as Taiwan is formally known.”<sup>95</sup> The third-party candidate, Ko Wen-je of the TPP, has sought to charter a middle-way between the KMT and DPP. Though rejecting the use of the 1992 consensus, Ko promised to search for a “new consensus” with Beijing predicated upon “Taiwan’s sovereignty,” “cross-strait peace” and an attitude of “amicable relationship and mutual prosperity.”<sup>96</sup> Yet, he also acknowledged that the ROC “is the greatest common denominator” in Taiwan.<sup>97</sup> A Taiwan that continues to adhere to the ROC constitutional framework and institutional arrangements would be helpful in maintaining cross-strait peace and stability, and this seems to be conducive to Washington’s security interests. Still, the KMT’s reliance on the 1992 consensus may place Taiwan too closely within Beijing’s political framework as it accords the latter with too much leeway to define One China as the PRC. Table 2 summarizes the key China positions of the three Taiwanese presidential candidates, Lai, Hou, and Ko.

<sup>90</sup> Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen-Weiss, and Thomas Christensen, “Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs* (Jan/Feb 2024), p. 100.

<sup>91</sup> “What Is Friendshoring?” *The Economist* (August 30, 2023), <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2023/08/30/what-is-friendshoring>.

<sup>92</sup> Ryan Hass and Jude Blanchette, “The Right Way to Deter China from Attacking Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs* (Nov 8, 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/right-way-deter-china-attacking-taiwan>.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Glasser, Chen-Weiss, and Christensen, “Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence,” p. 95.

<sup>95</sup> Lai Ching-te, “My Plan to Preserve Peace in the Taiwan Strait.”

<sup>96</sup> “Taiwan People’s Party: Our Platform on Cross-Strait Relations,” [https://www.tpp.org.tw/en/our\\_platform-detail.php?id=24](https://www.tpp.org.tw/en/our_platform-detail.php?id=24).

<sup>97</sup> “Double Ten National Day: Taiwanese Prefer to Use the Name ROC, Ko Says,” *Taipei Times* (October 11, 2022), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2022/10/11/2003786810>.

**TABLE 2. Summary of the China Policy Positions from the 2024 Taiwan Presidential Candidates<sup>98</sup>**

Lai Ching-te (DPP)	Hou Yu-ih (KMT)	Ko Wen-je (TPP)
Lai Ching-te will not endorse the 1992 Consensus or “one country, two systems,” believing Taiwan is already an independent, sovereign nation that does not need or plan to declare independence; cross-strait status quo is in the best interest for the ROC (Taiwan)	Hou Yu-ih does endorse and plans to adhere to the 1992 Consensus based on ROC Constitution, but not an independent Taiwan or “one country, two systems”	Ko Wen-je opposes an independent Taiwan and will not endorse the 1992 Consensus. Agrees that the ROC is Taiwan’s greatest common denominator
Welcomes the development of reciprocal, dignified cross-strait dialogue	Intends to restore cross-strait dialogue under Taiwan’s constitution and laws, especially the 1992 Act Governing Relations	Proposes an alternative, cross-strait collaboration on a “New Consensus”
Four Pillar Plan: builds up deterrence, secures economic security, develops partnerships with democracies worldwide, and steady, principled cross-strait relations	Three “D’s:” deterrence, dialogue, and de-escalation  Enhancing Taiwan’s self-defense while rebuilding dialogue with China	Five Mutual Principles for cross-strait communication: recognition, understanding, respect, cooperation, and consideration
Continue President Tsai Ing-wen’s increase in military defense as a form of deterrence for China	Advocates for strengthening national cybersecurity and military defense to deter mainland China	Increase military defense capability and ability to counter Chinese cognitive and public opinion warfare
Decreases trade dependency with China to build economic security by pursuing diverse trade agreements and establishing secure supply chains	Develops energy infrastructure to lower Taiwan’s dependence on imported energy and increase resilience in case of national emergency	Ratify the Cross-Strait Agreement Supervisory Act while remaining cautious of becoming overly dependent on trade with China
Deepens Taiwan-US ties; encourages Taiwan in partnerships with democracies, showing China that Taiwan has worldwide support	Increases collaboration with US in intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, and international trade agreements	Foster “democracy, human rights, and environment governance” within Chinese society by sharing Taiwan’s experience
A known proponent of Taiwanese independence, China’s least preferred candidate	China’s preferred candidate	Claims to be in touch with Chinese authorities on “New Consensus”

<sup>98</sup> Compiled by Kiely Paris-Rodriguez based on information collected from: “Taiwan People’s Party: Our Platform on Cross-Strait Relations,” [https://www.tpp.org.tw/en/our\\_platform-detail.php?id=24](https://www.tpp.org.tw/en/our_platform-detail.php?id=24); “Taiwan’s Election 2024,” *The Economist* (Jan 2, 2024), <https://www.economist.com/interactive/2024-taiwan-election>; Lai Ching-te, “My Plan to Preserve Peace in the Taiwan Strait,” *The Wall Street Journal* (July 4, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/my-plan-to-preserve-peace-between-china-and-taiwan-candidate-election-race-war-7046ee00>; and Hou Yu-ih, “Taiwan’s Path between Extremes,” *Foreign Affairs* (September 18, 2023), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/taiwan/taiwans-path-between-extremes>.

### *Can Beijing Accept the ROC's Continued Existence?*

The KMT does not need to eschew or discard their China roots, for that's the party's history, culture, and identity. Denying it would only make the KMT look disingenuous and hypocritical. Taiwan's voters will be the ones to ultimately judge and decide whether they can endorse the KMT's platform. However, there needs to be a red line drawn: the KMT must not permit any more respective interpretations to the notion of One-China" to appease Beijing. That approach has only backfired by strengthening the PRC's monopolizing power in the cross-strait and international arenas regarding the Taiwan Strait impasse. The KMT should make it clear to Beijing that it will have to accept the reality of the ROC's continued existence to ameliorate cross-strait tensions and mistrust. Despite differing opinions within Taiwan, the ROC is a widely supported institutional arrangement that helps maintain the current cross-strait status quo. It is important to note that polls conducted in Taiwan have consistently shown that a vast majority of respondents reject defining One-China as merely the PRC and unification under Beijing's "one country, two systems" model. However, when presented with the idea of One-China with the ROC being that China, respondents have reacted with more positive attitudes, with approximately 60% supporting it between 2005 and 2019.<sup>99</sup> Even after Xi's January 2019 speech, roughly 46% of respondents expressed their support for OCRI, with the ROC being the One-China.<sup>100</sup> Hou Yu-ih asserted that the ROC and Taiwan are "inseparable," underscoring that the existence of the ROC should be recognized by the international community. More specifically, Hou told reporters that Taiwanese society should come to the consensus that the ROC and Taiwan cannot be separated from each other, just like "glass and water," and advocated for the recognition of the ROC by the international community. When a glass breaks, the water in the glass spills out.<sup>101</sup> As noted, Hou affirmed he would accept a version of the 1992 Consensus that conformed to the ROC Constitution, not the interpretation of the consensus as "one country, two systems." He also strongly opposed to the DPP's "stigmatization" of the consensus.<sup>102</sup>

The 2024 presidential election in Taiwan pitted the KMT's Hou against former Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je of the TPP, and the DPP's William Lai. Lai had claimed to be a "pragmatic worker for Taiwan independence," though he later clarified his position and stressed that the DPP, under his watch, would follow Tsai's cross-strait status-quo platform. Lai, however, charged the KMT's attempt to connect the ROC Constitution with the 1992 Consensus as promoting a "disaster."<sup>103</sup> Tsai Ing-wen stated that her administration and a future Lai presidency would continue to abide by the ROC Constitution, the Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area, and other related cross-strait laws to handle relations with China. Despite this, the outgoing president emphasized that the 1992 Consensus and the ROC Constitution "are two different things and linking them was worrisome."<sup>104</sup> The DPP argued that Xi never accepted the ROC Constitution, so the KMT's position was too naïve and risky for Taiwan.

<sup>99</sup> Wang and Cheng, "Threat Perception and Taiwan's 2020 Presidential Election," pp. 126-127.

<sup>100</sup> The Taiwan National Security Studies Survey, October 27-31, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> "ELECTION 2024/Possible presidential candidate likens ROC and Taiwan to 'glass and water,'" *Focus Taiwan News* (April 28, 2023), accessible: <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202304280022>.

<sup>102</sup> "ELECTION 2024/KMT's Hou Backs '1992 consensus that Conforms with ROC Constitution,'" *Focus Taiwan News* (July 4, 2023), <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202307040017>.

<sup>103</sup> Lawrence Chung, "Taiwan election: President Tsai Ing-wen Weighs in after DPP's William Lai Faces New Independence Row," *South China Morning Post* (Jan 1, 2024), <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3246914/taiwan-election-president-tsai-ing-wen-weighs-after-dpps-william-lai-faces-new-independence-row>.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

The KMT is the only party that remains with the 1992 Consensus, to maintain some level of amicable relations with Beijing while assuring the Taiwanese voters, Washington, and the international community of the party's resolve and resilience in deterring and defending the island democracy against the PRC aggressions. The U.S. has already raised concerns about Beijing's attempts to interfere in Taiwan's election, especially with a KMT victory. The CCP could use Hou's acceptance of the 1992 Consensus to cage in Taiwan with the PRC's One-China principle.<sup>105</sup> Xi Jinping chose to speak of reunification with Taiwan in less than two weeks before Taiwan's presidential election.<sup>106</sup> The Chinese leader isn't only concerned about a Lai electoral victory, but he is also wary of the U.S. unabated strong support for Taiwan. For Washington, too much deterrence could push Xi into a corner and force him to embrace greater truculence towards Taiwan. Therefore, the Biden administration and whoever wins the White House in November 2024 will need to display a commitment to a peaceful resolution in its actions while communicating to China it will not restore diplomatic ties with Taiwan or backing displays of formal Taiwanese independence. Washington should signal to Beijing that it will defend Taiwan only if it's forced to do so (i.e., in a situation of the PRC's armed attack or other forms of coercion), hence cultivating a "reputation for restraint in the face of compliance" from Beijing.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the U.S., while beefing up its military cooperation with Taiwan, should continue to abide by their longstanding One-China policy that includes the Taiwan Relations Act, three Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances to prevent any miscommunication and unwanted rise of tensions amidst America's continued competition with the PRC.

If the Xi government truly seeks to pursue a peaceful approach toward Taiwan and wants to convince the people there to back the 1992 Consensus, then it must revise its obdurate position on One-China and the one country two systems. It is imperative to accept the reality of the continued existence of the ROC as the most pragmatic way to foster goodwill and ameliorate cross-strait animosities. The ROC and its constitution serve as the most viable institutional arrangements to bridge the China-Taiwan divide while retaining some attributes of the One-China concept. It is important to recognize the differences between the democratic ROC and the autocratic PRC, and such a distinction matters significantly. Without greater understanding and empathy toward Taiwan's desires for a democratic way of life, freedom, and participation in global activities, the PRC may further escalate tensions across the Taiwan Strait. Hopefully, Xi's nationalist ambition will not preclude him from choosing a sensible path forward for greater peace and stability across the strait.

---

<sup>105</sup> Eric Bazail-Eimil, "The Global Elections Washington Should be Watching in 2024," *POLITICO* (Jan 1, 2024), <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/01/01/what-to-watch-global-elections-2024-00133027>.

<sup>106</sup> "China's Xi Says 'Reunification' with Taiwan Is Inevitable," *Reuters* (Jan 1, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-calls-taiwan-president-frontrunner-destroyer-peace-2023-12-31/>.

<sup>107</sup> Glasser, Chen-Weiss, and Christensen, p. 91.

**Dean P. Chen** is Professor of Political Science at Ramapo College of New Jersey. He holds his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California at Santa Barbara. He is the author of *U.S.-China-Taiwan in the Age of Trump and Biden: Towards a Nationalist Strategy* (New York: Routledge, 2022), *U.S.-China Rivalry and Taiwan's Mainland Policy: Security, Nationalism, and the 1992 Consensus* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), and *U.S.-Taiwan Strait Policy: The Origins of Strategic Ambiguity* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012). His articles have appeared in *Asian Survey*, *Asian security*, *Asian Politics & Policy*, *Pacific Focus*, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, and *American Journal of Chinese Studies*. Commentaries have appeared in *The National Interest*, *Global Taiwan Brief*, *Taiwan Insight*, and *China-US Focus*. In 2014-16, Chen was coordinator of the Conference Group on Taiwan Studies of the American Political Science Association. He was a MOFA-ROC Taiwan Fellow in 2014 and a Fulbright U.S. Scholar in 2017-18. Currently, Chen serves on the board of directors of the American Association for Chinese Studies.

**Kiely Paris-Rodriguez** is a recent graduate of Ramapo College of New Jersey where she received her B.A. in a double-major of Political Science and Social Science with a Concentration in Space Psychology. Her academic interests include International Space Politics, Antarctic Relations, and Intersectionality. In her tenure at Ramapo, Kiely has worked as a Research Assistant for both the Psychology and Political Science Departments, managed the Summer Conference Program, volunteered as a student mentor to first year students, and presented original research at the 2023 COPLAC Northeast Regional Undergraduate Research Conference. She is currently applying to graduate schools to further her knowledge of international space politics and progress toward a career as an academic.