

Taiwan's Identity Challenge

Malcolm Cook

Taiwan's geo-strategic position and its domestic political development have been in conflict throughout its modern, post-Chinese civil war history. Taiwan's geo-strategic position, defined by its oppositional relationship to China, has ensured that Taiwan and the cross-strait relations have remained a global flash point for close to 60 years. For the first 40 years, Taiwan's goal to reclaim China has underpinned the authoritarian Kuomintang party-state and its domestic program of enforced Sinification. Since the end of the Cold War, Taiwan's democratization has fundamentally changed Taiwan's political identity and unleashed an irreversible nation-building process. Taiwan's nation-building is moving the country away from reunification with a rising China. Unfortunately, this decision compromises its already vulnerable geo-strategic position and external support.

Taiwan's modern history has been characterized by a profound identity challenge that pits its unique geo-strategic position against its irreversible nation-building process.¹ For the first four decades after the Chinese Civil War, Taiwan's geo-strategic position as a Cold War fault line and the ruling Kuomintang's goal of reunification with China stunted Taiwan's political development and nation-building. Since the mid-1980s, Taiwan's mutually enhancing processes of nation-building and democratization have taken precedence, presenting new geo-strategic challenges for Taiwan, China and the world. Outside forces, for geo-strategic reasons, have always been deeply involved in Taiwan's identity struggle and are keenly interested in ensuring that it does not lead to a regional conflict.

Taiwan's political leaders face a particularly delicate and compromised geo-strategic position that shapes all aspects of Taiwan's political life and gives Taiwan's external supporters (particularly the United States) a deep and abiding interest in Taiwan's domestic affairs. Taiwan's gradual loss of international recognition and its dependence on an "ambiguous" U.S. security guarantee means that its geo-strategic position places external constraints on its domestic political developments that challenge its supporters' interests in cross-straits calm. Taiwan has faced the increasingly difficult challenge of balancing its search for an autonomous political identity in harmony with both its population's own views of themselves and these external constraints that are hardening due to all countries' interest in harmonious relations with China, the new global power.

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to the mid-1980s, Taiwan, boasting a successful (guided) market economy, was a Cold War exemplar at the forefront of the battle against the spread of Communism. Since the mid-1980s, Taiwan has developed into East Asia's most vibrant democracy with programmatic, mass-based parties and extremely competitive elections.

During the Cold War, Taiwan's anti-communist credentials garnered it strong external support and guaranteed its autonomous

existence as an international actor. Although the authoritarian Kuomintang party-state successfully positioned Taiwan as an international actor in the Cold War, the party imposed itself on Taiwan society, and its rule lacked popular legitimacy.² In the post-Cold War period, Taiwan's democratization enhanced the government's domestic legitimacy and embedded the state within Taiwan society.³ However, Taiwan's unique geo-strategic position has muted the global reception of its rapid and smooth democratization and its search for a national identity. Internationally, Taiwan's survival as an autonomous political entity is less certain. Taiwan's geo-strategic position is threatened, but domestically its autonomous social and democratic identity flourishes.

Taiwan's geo-strategic phase

The Kuomintang's defeat in the Chinese civil war and its subsequent flight to Taiwan established modern Taiwan's geo-strategic position and indeterminate identity internationally, as well as imposing an authoritarian political system and Sinic social identity domestically. Taiwan, under the Kuomintang party-state, was officially on a war-footing with "communist" China until 1987, retaining an ultimate goal of recapturing the mainland. Taiwan's primary strategic goal and its ideological opposition to the Chinese Communist Party placed Taiwan at the forefront of the Cold War and helped guarantee its survival and international acceptance.

Despite controlling only a very small territory and having lost the civil war, Taiwan and the Kuomintang were widely recognised as the official representatives of China. The Republic of China (Taiwan) was a founding member of the United Nations, and in 1954, the United States signed a mutual defence treaty with Taiwan, guaranteeing U.S. support if foreign (i.e. Chinese) forces invaded Taiwan. This cemented Taiwan's role as the official voice of the Chinese people in the non-Communist bloc. The treaty came on the heels of the first Taiwan Strait crisis when China bombed the islands of Kinmen and Matsu.

Reflecting the tying of Taiwan's fate to the progress of the Cold War, international support for Taiwan began to weaken after the Sino-Soviet split and Cold War détente. In 1971, the United Nations voted to recognise the People's Republic of China and transferred the respective Security Council and General Assembly seats from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China (China). The United States abstained from this vote—effectively condoning it—while its simultaneous push to create a separate General Assembly seat for Taiwan failed.⁴ Following Nixon's watershed visit to China in 1972, the United States transferred official recognition from Taiwan to China and acknowledged Beijing's One China principle. In 1978, the United States withdrew from the mutual defence treaty with Taiwan and at the behest of Congress replaced it with the non-obligatory *Taiwan Relations Act*.⁵

Domestically, the Kuomintang's reunification goal, while never credible, reinforced Taiwan's political and cultural identification with China. Kuomintang rule was based on the claim that Taiwan was the true political and cultural representative of the modern China forged by Sun Yat-sen and the 1911 revolution. The Kuomintang, when fleeing from China, brought to Taiwan many of China's greatest cultural artefacts that boosted their claim to be the true representatives of Chinese culture. The National Palace Museum in Taipei serves as the principal cultural monument to this claim.

The Kuomintang used its claim to represent all of China and Beijing's threat of "revolutionary liberation" as the main sources of domestic legitimization for its authoritarian rule. The reunification goal was the root of the Kuomintang's efforts to reshape Taiwan's political and cultural identity from a multi-ethnic periphery of imperial China separated from the mainland by Japanese colonization to the center of "true," modern Chinese civilization.⁶ The Kuomintang transferred wholesale the 1946 Constitution, written when they still held power in Beijing, to provide the legal basis for their reconfiguration of Taiwan.

This drive to reshape Taiwan's identity underpinned both the Kuomintang party-state's efforts to replace Minnan (a local dialect spoken by the majority of Taiwan) with Mandarin as Taiwan's only officially sanctioned language and the political dominance of the "Mainlander" minority that fled to Taiwan during the Chinese civil war. While "Mainlanders" were a minority-in-exile in Taiwan, they represented the majority of Chinese. Within Taiwan, the Ministry of Education was the main agency of Sinicization and was heavily staffed by "Mainlanders" loyal to the Kuomintang.

China's military threat of "revolutionary liberation"⁷ and Taiwan's national mobilization status provided the justification for the Kuomintang's authoritarian rule and its early "decapitation" of the pre-existing Taiwanese political and social elite. The threat from China and Taiwan's role in the Cold War internationally legitimized an authoritarian regime that dealt harshly with local political dissent as a source of national weakness in a time of war. The declared but unfought war to recapture China facilitated Kuomintang's authoritarian rule and its Sinification drive.

In step with the thawing of the Cold War and Taiwan's eroding geo-strategic position, the Kuomintang party-state's efforts to reshape Taiwan

faced growing domestic challenges. By the mid-1970s, illegal opposition to Kuomintang rule was fast becoming an organized force that had to be dealt with.⁸ In 1979, the Kuomintang party-state cracked down on *Formosa Magazine*, the main anti-government publication of the underground resistance to Kuomintang rule and its Sinicization program.

Growing opposition to the Kuomintang party-state mobilized around the idea of an independent Taiwan no longer defined by the Kuomintang's reunification goal or controlled by its "Mainlander" minority. The Kuomintang's authoritarian rule and its reunification fixation blazed the opposing path of Taiwan's present nation-building process and the popular distaste for reunification. The Kuomintang's authoritarian rule and its attempts to reshape Taiwan society to achieve its geo-strategic goals cost the regime its domestic legitimacy and empowered its opponents. In the long run, as we are witnessing today, it also made the geo-strategic goal of reunification domestically unworkable.

Taiwan's National Identity Phase

Until the mid-1980s, the Kuomintang's geo-strategic goal of reunification on its terms dominated Taiwan's political and social development. Since then, as the Kuomintang moved to open Taiwan's political system in reaction to rising domestic dissatisfaction and the waning of the Cold War, democratization and social efforts to define and promote a Taiwanese identity have gained pre-eminence. This identity search has complicated Taiwan's vulnerable geo-strategic position and the external support Taiwan receives.

In the past, the Kuomintang's traditional support for reunification linked Taiwan to China politically and culturally while cutting Taiwan off from the Chinese economy. Currently, despite growing person-to-person and economic ties, Taiwan's ongoing search for an autonomous national identity is pushing Taiwan further away from China.⁹ At the same time that Taiwan's domestic change is pushing it away from China politically and culturally, China's rising power and diplomatic importance are making its long-standing threat to forcefully recapture Taiwan if its peaceful reunification strategy fails more credible.

China's recent passage of an anti-secession law addressing Taiwan reflects Beijing's deep concerns with Taiwan's domestic developments and its willingness to contemplate forceful reunification despite the high costs. As with Taiwan's nation-building, the growing influence of public opinion on Chinese foreign policy is complicating cross-strait relations and moderation. China's heightened geo-strategic influence and Taiwan's search for an autonomous identity are aggravating the foreign policy problems of Taiwan's supporters and putting into question their continued interest in supporting Taiwan.¹⁰

Taiwan today is a new, evolving society that is quickly moving away from external perceptions of what Taiwan is and how Taiwan views its relations with China. Taiwan's ongoing process of domestic change is as

ambitious and comprehensive as the Kuomintang's efforts under Chiang Kai-shek to redefine Taiwan. This time, however, domestic change is endogenous, popular and not imposed by an alien authoritarian regime. These differences suggest that the present process of change is irreversible. The real question for Taiwan and its external supporters now is whether this change can be managed in light of the constraints imposed by Taiwan's increasingly vulnerable geo-strategic position.

Three highlights from Taiwan's political and social history since the mid-1980s illustrate the speed and depth of this evolution. Presented in chronological order, they demonstrate the institutionalization of the change. Domestic pressure on the Kuomintang in the 1980s led the party, before democratization, to weaken its commitment to reunification and to soften its Sinification drive. The Kuomintang's institutional interests in holding onto power in Taiwan have shifted the party over the last two decades away from its One China origins. The triumph of the Democratic Progressive Party in the 2000 presidential election established a two-party electoral system tilted against the Kuomintang when formal independence from China became part of the mainstream political agenda. Since 2000, the Democratic Progressive Party has used executive power to institutionalize Taiwan's new, autonomous identity from China and to align Taiwan's official nation-building process with the new view of Taiwan. Reunification is now a minority political position of the opposition, with little or no institutional base in the Taiwan state.

First, in 1988 the Kuomintang chose to appoint Vice President Lee Teng-hui as President of Taiwan and head of the party after the death of Chiang Kai-shek's son and Lee Teng-hui's mentor, Chiang Ching-kuo. Chiang promoted Lee quickly as part of his strategy to "localize" the Kuomintang by bringing on board a native-born Taiwanese to dilute the Kuomintang's identity as an oppressive "Mainlander" clique party. Lee became Taiwan's first native-born Taiwanese president. Under his leadership, the Kuomintang moved away from its focus on reunification and set the stage for Taiwan's democratization. In 1991, the Kuomintang government amended the 1946 Constitution to permit elections for the Legislative Yuan and the National Assembly. In the same year, the new "Guidelines for National Unification" were released.

These guidelines, which are still officially accepted today, redefined Taiwan's approach to reunification with China as a long-term political issue dependent on democratic political change in China and popular acceptance by Taiwan's population. They offer no timeline for reunification and put the onus on China to create the conditions for peaceful, voluntary reunification. Taiwan's 1994 White Paper went even further and correctly prophesied that China's continued lack of political reform and its opposition to Taiwan's political developments would further strengthen independence supporters in Taiwan.¹¹

The "Guidelines for National Unification" officially closed the door on Chiang Kai-shek's dream of recapturing China militarily. They also recast Taiwan's pitch for external support from simple Cold War anti-communism to promoting Taiwan's new democracy and respect for the rule of law.

Then, in 1996, Lee Teng-hui became Taiwan's first directly elected president. In the run-up to the election, which he won with 54 percent of the vote, Lee became the first leader of Taiwan to publicly promote Taiwan's move away from the reunification goal. In response, China cancelled informal track-two discussions with Taiwan and test fired Chinese missiles near Taiwan during the presidential campaign in a counterproductive effort to dissuade Taiwan's voters from supporting Lee.

In 1999, Lee went further while appearing on German radio by referring to cross-straits relations as "state-to-state or at least special nation-to-nation relations."¹² Reflecting Beijing's growing frustration with the Kuomintang leader, in China's 2000 White Paper on the Taiwan issue, Lee was referred to as "the general representative of Taiwan's separatist forces, a saboteur of the stability of the Taiwan Straits, a stumbling block preventing the development of relations between China and the United States, and a troublemaker for peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region."¹³ Indeed, Lee's personal political voyage from member of the Chinese Communist Party, to Kuomintang leader and President of Taiwan, to Taiwan's most ardent mainstream promoter of immediate independence today serves as an exaggerated microcosm of Taiwan's identity change.

Second, the surprise 2000 presidential win by the Democratic Progressive Party's Chen Shui-bian signified that the Kuomintang faced a formidable opponent able to take power and guide Taiwan's political development. Chen's victory immediately placed Taiwanese independence on the mainstream political agenda. Chen won the election with 39 percent of the vote after the Kuomintang split into two parties with two separate presidential candidates. Chen is the spearhead of the Democratic Progressive Party that traces its roots directly from the *dangwai* illegal opposition movement that favored formal independence. The Democratic Progressive Party rose in less than two decades from an illegal opposition movement, with many of its leaders, including Chen, spending time in jail, to the largest political party in Taiwan holding executive power. The rise of the party was reconfirmed in 2004 when Chen Shui-bian won a second term with 50.11 percent of the vote against a single Kuomintang challenger. With Lee's 1996 victory and Chen's two victories, Taiwan's electorate has thrown their support behind the two most important promoters of the new Taiwan social and political identity that is autonomous from China.

The Democratic Progressive Party, especially under Chen's leadership, which will end in 2008, has been both the major driver and beneficiary of Taiwan's search for an autonomous national identity. The party gains most of its support from the majority *Hoklo* (Taiwanese) community in Taiwan, which was largely shut out of power until the 1990s. The party is strong amongst Taiwan's rural sector and working class, giving it a different and more attractive profile than the elite, "Mainlander"-associated Kuomintang. Popular anger at the Kuomintang authoritarian era has aided the party's success, as has the party's more assertive and empowering position that Taiwan is a *de facto* independent country.

The rise of the Democratic Progressive Party and Chen's popularity, despite Beijing's steadfast opposition and Washington's expressions of con-

cern, have forced the Kuomintang to accelerate its own “localization drive” and to change its tune on relations with China.¹⁴ The Kuomintang is now split between a mainstream faction, popular with *Hoklo* and *Hakka* voters, that largely agrees with the assertion of Taiwan as a de facto independent country, and a resilient minority faction still wedded to the Kuomintang’s traditional promotion of reunification. The People First Party and the New Party both split from the Kuomintang in recent years, claiming that it was no longer true to its roots. After an initial period of success, both of these pro-reunification parties have seen their share of the vote decline.

Today, Taiwan’s political system is organised around two major parties that largely agree that Taiwan is a de facto independent country.¹⁵ Their partisan debate arises over which party can balance promoting Taiwan’s autonomous identity and managing its geo-strategic relations with China and the United States best. The Democratic Progressive Party faces competition on its flank from the Taiwan Solidarity Union and its call for formal independence. The Kuomintang faces a diminishing challenge on its flank from the pro-reunification People First Party.

Party preferences on cross-strait relations

Party Identification	Independence	Conditional*	Unification
PPF	10.0%	48.7%	41.3%
KMT	11.6%	50.2%	38.2%
DPP	53.0%	42.2%	4.8%
TSU	23.2%	46.7%	27.3%

Source: Emerson Niou, “Understanding Taiwan’s Independence and Its Policy Implications,” *Asian Survey* 44, no. 4 (2004): 561.

* Conditional reflects those voters polled who would consider supporting independence or unification in the future if conditions such as the Chinese military threat, U.S. support for Taiwan, etc. change.

The development of a mass-based, two-party electoral system organized around Taiwan’s autonomous identity has changed Taiwan’s political response to external concerns. External criticism of Taiwan’s social and political development and its cross-strait complications now lead to bi-partisan expressions of support for Taiwan. When U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell commented in Beijing that Taiwan “does not enjoy sovereignty as a nation,” both the Kuomintang and Democratic Progressive Party harshly attacked Powell for “betraying Taiwan.” The Taiwan Solidarity Union used the comments as another reason to call for immediate formal independence.¹⁶

Third, in late 2004, the Ministry of Education’s draft outline for 2006 history courses removed Sun Yat-sen and the 1911 Revolution from the Taiwan (domestic) history course and placed it in the Chinese (foreign) history course.¹⁷ This announcement, which received widespread, scandalized coverage in China, followed soon after the decision to bury Chiang Kai-shek permanently in Taiwan. In his dying days, Chiang had refused to

countenance being buried permanently in Taiwan, preferring to hold this off until Taiwan reunited with China.

The decision to officially consider treating the 1911 Revolution as a foreign event is a clear symbol of how far the Taiwanese state under the two Democratic Progressive Party administrations has shifted Taiwan's official political identity. In 1994, Sun Yat-sen and the 1911 Revolution were presented by the Kuomintang regime as the founding events in Taiwan's modern history and the basis of Taiwan's claim to China. Only a decade later, the Ministry of Education, once the bastion of traditional Kuomintang thought, is considering completely overturning this view of history and detaching Taiwan from China.

This provocative move is not out of step with the way Taiwan's people see themselves. According to the National Chengchi University's polls on Taiwan's self-identity, over the last decade self-identification as a Taiwanese person has shot up from 20.2 percent to 48.3 percent. Over the same period, the percentage of respondents identifying themselves as Chinese has fallen from 26.2 percent to 6.8 percent.¹⁸ Taiwan's people increasingly see themselves as Taiwanese, as distinct from Chinese. Taiwan's people's voting habits have followed a similar but more moderate shift, lifting the Democratic Progressive Party and leading the Kuomintang to move away from its One China traditions.

The synchronicity between the Democratic Progressive Party's view of Taiwan and Taiwan people's own views of themselves is in sharp contrast to the Kuomintang's earlier efforts to impose its One China claim on Taiwan. This synchronicity suggests that the nation-building process and its focus on social separation from China are well advanced and are not dependent on which party is in power. Rather, the Kuomintang, in its efforts to remain an electoral force, has changed its tune. History holds little promise for those hoping that external geo-strategic concerns can halt internal social change. China's own modern history and the 1949 Revolution reflect the unlikelihood of such an occurrence.

Geo-Strategic Strains

Taiwan's indeterminate international status and its fraught relations with China, the new global power, explain why Taiwan's rapid democratisation has not been internationally celebrated but rather is the source of growing concern. Taiwan's democratization and nation-building process have undermined the basis of the long-standing, U.S.-sponsored, cross-straits status quo. All countries involved have to learn how to deal with the new Taiwan and its popular and party-political foreign policy drivers. Even though Taiwan and China were at war during the Kuomintang party-state era, they agreed that there was only one China and that reunification was the end goal. They were fighting for the same thing but approaching the question from different directions. Now Taiwan is moving away from reunification and the One China claim. The bond that tied Taiwan to China continues to fray, as do the foreign policy settings of countries involved in

the cross-straits status quo that has long been premised on reunification as the mutually supported end goal.

Democratization and nation-building is distancing Taiwan from China while making it less sensitive to foreign pressure. At the same time that countries committed to the cross-straits status quo are growing increasingly concerned about Taiwan, their ability to influence Taiwan's policies affecting cross-strait relations is diminishing. This trend is particularly true for China, whose efforts to shape Taiwan's political development have largely backfired, and for the United States, which has seen Taiwan recently refuse to purchase defensive arms the United States sees as essential to maintaining the cross-straits military balance aimed at deterring Chinese military adventurism.

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These changes are making it harder for Taiwan to maintain tolerable political relations with an increasingly anxious China. Taiwan's domestic changes are worrying supporters of Taiwan that a cross-straits conflict or a decisive shift away from its present focus on peaceful delay is on the horizon. Taiwan's nation-building is politically irreversible, but is it strategically suicidal? All countries will have to learn how to deal with the "new Taiwan," defined by democratic nation-building. Taiwan will have to learn how to ensure that its new identity does not trigger a conflict with China or a drastic loss of international support. Taiwan has to ensure that it respects its geo-strategic constraints defined by its need for outside support, while the United States, China and others have to learn to deal with Taiwan's new autonomous identity with cool heads.

Notes

¹ This article comes out of research conducted for a larger policy paper, *Balancing Act: Taiwan's Cross-Strait Challenge*, published by the Lowy Institute in Sydney and written with Dr. Craig Meer from Taipei. The author would like to thank Dr. Meer, the institute and the paper's referees for their support and insights. This article adopts the common practice of using Taiwan to refer to the Republic of China and China to refer to the People's Republic of China.

² Alan Wachman, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).

³ Yun-han Chu, *Crafting Democracy in Taiwan* (Taipei: Institute for National Policy Research, 1992).

⁴ Taiwan's government is now also seeking a separate Taiwan seat in the U.N. General Assembly with almost no international support. It is a fascinating historical counterfactual to ponder how things would be different if the U.S. proposal for a separate seat had succeeded in 1971.

⁵ Robert Sutter, "Congress and the U.S. Policy towards Taiwan" in Joanne Jaw-ling Chang and Robert Boyer, eds., *United States-Taiwan Relations: 20 Years after the Taiwan Relations Act* (Baltimore: University of Maryland Press, 2000), 91-108.

⁶ Ai Dun, *Dapo Shenhua: Taiwanren de Rentong yu Guomindang Yihai* [Shattering the Myths: Taiwanese Identity and the Legacy of KMT Colonialism] (Taipei: Yushan Chushanbe, 2004).

⁷ Revolutionary liberation was the slogan used during Mao's reign to describe China's approach to Taiwan. This approach included the possibility of forceful reunification and saw reunification as part of China's own socialist revolution. After Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, China changed its reunification slogan to "peaceful reunification" and now promotes the one country, two systems model for Taiwan.

⁸ Shelley Rigger, *From Opposition to Power: Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

⁹ Yun-han Chu, "Taiwan National Identity Politics and the Prospects for Cross-strait Relations," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 4 (2004): 484–512.

¹⁰ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *A China-Taiwan Crisis: US Debates and Policy Choices* (Taipei: CAPS, 1998).

¹¹ The 1994 White Paper, *Relations across the Taiwan Strait*, can be viewed at www.mac.gov.tw/english/index1-e.htm.

¹² Cited in Jacques deLisle, "The Chinese Puzzle of Taiwan's Status," *Orbis* 44, no. 1 (2000) 40.

¹³ The 2000 White Paper, *The One China Principle and the Taiwan Issue*, can be viewed at www.chinaconsulate.se/Content/Taiwan/whitepaper1.htm.

¹⁴ Gunter Schubert, "Taiwan's Political Parties and National Identity: The Rise of an Overarching Consensus," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 4 (2004).

¹⁵ Malcolm Cook and Craig Meer, *Balancing Act: Taiwan's Cross-strait Challenge* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2005).

¹⁶ "MOFA Blasts 'U.S. Betrayal,'" *Taipei Times*, Oct. 27, 2004.

¹⁷ Lawrence Chung, "Taiwan Rewrites History Books," *Straits Times*, Nov. 11, 2004.

¹⁸ Statistics taken from "Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese as Tracked in Surveys by the Election Study Center, NCCU," Center for Election Studies, National Chengchi University, Feb. 20, 2004, www2.nccu.edu.tw.