

## Working Paper

### **The Biden Administration through Taiwanese Eyes**

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#### **Rationale**

Australia and Taiwan are two places that constantly monitor developments in the United States. Taiwanese observers are some of the most acute anywhere in analysing US politics and policies.

For Taiwan even more than Australia, the attitude of each US administration is crucial to its foreign policy choices. The Trump Administration offered both challenges and opportunities for Taiwan.

Following the presidential election in November 2020, the early months of a Biden Administration is a time of flux. During the research period, the second quarter of 2021, Taiwanese observers were watching closely to glean what could be expected from a Biden Administration. This was an ideal time to gain an impression of how the US was being viewed in Taiwan.

#### **Research Design**

I arrived in Taiwan in April 2021, as travel restrictions allowed, to interview Taiwanese foreign policy elites on their views on the United States and its engagement in the region.

Interviews took place mostly using online platforms like Zoom, Jitsi Meet, Teams and LINE given that Taiwan entered level 3 restrictions shortly after my arrival.

I was able to conduct 24 semi-structured interviews with Taiwanese experts on US politics, US-Taiwan relations and on foreign policy. This included those that work directly on the United States as well as those who focus on other areas, such as cross-strait relations, but whose work is also informed by their assumptions about the United States' engagement in the region.

Interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity but a sense of the type of people interviewed can be seen in this information:

Political affiliation<sup>1</sup>:

- DPP: 6
- KMT: 2
- Not known/unaligned: 16

Sector:<sup>2</sup>

- Government: 9
- Think tank: 11
- Academic: 7
- Media: 5
- Corporate: 1

Nationality:

- Taiwanese: 18
- Expatriate observers: 6

For each interview, semi-structured questions focused on:

- What Taiwan wants from any US Administration
- Views of the Trump Administration

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<sup>1</sup> As judged by past/present roles within political parties and publicly-disclosed political alignment. The higher proportion of DPP-alignment is to be expected given that DPP is currently in government.

<sup>2</sup> A number of interviewees were cross-sector – ie they had held both government and think tank/academic roles during their careers – and have been coded to more than one sector. This means the total is more than 24.

- Expectations of the Biden Administration
- How the Biden Administration has gone so far
- Challenges ahead

Interview results were then analysed to reveal areas of consensus and divergence and to identify the varying assumptions on which they are based.

It is important to note the limitations of this research design. First, it only assesses opinion, rather than reality. For example, an interviewee made the statement “Trump really cared about Taiwan”. This does not show that Trump did really care – he may or may not have – just that interviewee believed this. Where possible, specific factual information referred to in interviews has been referenced for the convenience of readers; however this does not mean that the author has verified these claims.

Second, the research design focuses mainly on elite opinion in Taiwan, such as political insiders, think tankers and officials. Media experts and researchers were also interviewed which gave some insight into general public opinion – or rather what they believed general public opinion was – here the focus was on how this affected elite decision-making. The research design did not gather independent data on public opinion. The report thus provides information on elite views in Taiwan at the time of interviews and should be understood as opinion.

### **Taiwan in International Affairs<sup>3</sup>**

Taiwan has a distinctive place in international affairs. Its current situation is a relic of the 1940s when the Nationalists and Communists fought for control of China. The Nationalists lost the civil war and retreated to Taiwan. In theory, the government in Taiwan – officially the Republic of China – still claims all the territory of China while, in reality, it just governs Taiwan.

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<sup>3</sup> An edited version of this section was published as M Conley Tyler, “What you need to know about the status of Taiwan”, *Pursuit*, 17 May 2021: <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-status-of-taiwan>

Over the last 72 years Taiwan has developed its own [identity](#) as a distinct place. Opinion polling shows that only a [minority](#) support reunification, even under ideal economic, social and political conditions. The majority would [prefer independence](#), with [two-thirds](#) supporting this if Taiwan could maintain peaceful relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Almost 50% still think Taiwan should declare independence even if this would lead the PRC to attack.

And an armed conflict is always possible. Taiwan is one of Asia's [flashpoints](#) with The Economist recently describing it as "[the most dangerous place on earth.](#)"

The PRC regards Taiwan as a break-away province and has explicitly said it reserves the option of [using force](#). It is opposed to anything that suggests that Taiwan is an independent country, down to the [downright trivial](#). The PRC uses "[grey zone](#)" tactics short of war – like incursions into Taiwan's space and [economic pressure](#) – for two objectives. First, deterring Taiwan from declaring independence and, second, pressuring it to negotiate on reunification in the longer-term. Tensions tend to be higher at times like now when Taiwan's government is led by the Democratic Progressive Party, which is considered more independence-minded.

So what about other countries? Given that both the Republic of China and People's Republic of China claim the same territory, countries have to decide which one to recognise. Not surprisingly, almost all have chosen the PRC, with now only [15 countries](#) recognising the ROC, many of which are small island states. So, for example, [Australia is in the majority that recognise the PRC](#). At the same time it maintains friendly non-official relations, such as through the [Australia Office in Taipei](#) which focuses on trade and investment, education, tourism and people-to-people ties.

Taiwan's most important partner, the United States, also recognises the PRC, [switching its diplomatic recognition](#) following President Nixon's famous visit. However Congress passed the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) saying it is US policy that the future of Taiwan will be

determined by peaceful means. This isn't a treaty obligation, so there's some [ambiguity](#) about what the US would do if Taiwan were attacked. The aim of the ambiguity has been that Taiwan won't be tempted to declare independence (since it's not absolutely sure that the US will support it) while China will be deterred from resolving the situation by force (since it's not absolutely sure that the US won't).

It's been in everyone's interests to avoid direct confrontation given that a conflict across the Taiwan Strait could become a war between [nuclear armed powers](#). The status quo is better than other scenarios, which is why it has been broadly stable so long. China has felt it can afford to be patient and use political means to promote reunification, with the date of 2049 – the centenary of the founding of the PRC – sometimes discussed as a [target date](#).

But President Xi Jinping has moved this forward, saying the Taiwan issue [should not be passed down generation after generation](#). In 2021 months there have been [record incursions](#) into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone and [navy drills](#) off the coast. This means more chance of accident and potential escalation into a conflict from which no one is willing to back down.

At the same time, there is [debate](#) in the United States around the policy of strategic ambiguity and calls for the US to be [explicit](#) that it would respond to any use of force. US public opinion on China has soured markedly.

Looking ahead, there's no obvious resolution to Taiwan's political status. The vast majority of Taiwanese don't want reunification with the PRC on the terms they are likely to be offered, but no PRC leader can afford to be the one who lost Taiwan. While the PRC has invested hugely in military modernisation in order to be able take control what it calls the "first island chain", such a course of action still involves huge risk and is only likely if it considers itself provoked – not least because Chinese public opinion would see what it would view as 'Chinese killing Chinese' as abhorrent. If any solution

were to be found, it would likely involve some creativity and [finessing around ideas of sovereignty](#).

### **What Taiwan Wants from the United States<sup>4</sup>**

Taiwan's history and status means it has a unique relationship with the US.

Taiwan's overriding fear is of abandonment. Without US arms sales – and the deterrent effect of the possibility that the US would enter a military conflict – Taiwan's strategic options would drastically narrow.

While some are worried about the potential for escalation, most are more anxious about the PRC trying to turn Taiwan into the next Hong Kong. They are concerned about PRC use of grey zone tactics like a trade embargo or naval blockade. They worry about the PRC being able slowly to cut Taiwan off, wear down Taiwan's resolve and make it go down quietly. "The Taiwanese public need the confidence that they have allies and friends that support them so that they don't give in to Chinese intimidation." The question on their minds is, who will be there to help? Taiwanese feel their isolation acutely.

So Taiwan wants a US that is committed to stability in the region and is willing to be a deterrence figure to restrict China's aggressive action: to show presence and resolve and to sell weapons to help Taiwan maintain the capability to protect itself. They want "concrete measures supporting Taiwan, not just beautiful words".

Seen from this perspective, the US has been somewhat cagey, and certainly well short of full support. The US recognises the PRC, switching its diplomatic recognition in 1979. While the US Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act – which states that it is US

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<sup>4</sup> An edited version of this section was published as M Conley Tyler, "Taiwan's View of the Trump Administration", *Melbourne Asia Review*, 1 July 2021: <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/taiwans-view-of-the-trump-administration/>

policy that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means – this isn't a treaty obligation, so there's some ambiguity about what the US would do if Taiwan were attacked. The [aim of the ambiguity](#) has been that Taiwan won't be tempted to declare independence (since it's not absolutely sure that the US will support it), while the PRC will be deterred from resolving the situation by force (since it's not absolutely sure that the US won't). This designed to stop both Taiwan and the PRC from going too far.

Taiwan saw the Obama Administration as a continuation of previous policy: carefully crafted diplomatic talk, cautious dealing and limits on official contact. To give a sense of what this means in practice consider the following: Taiwan's president can't just call the US president; there is limited contact between diplomatic officials; Taiwan is not involved in joint military exercises; and it has no free trade agreement with the US. The relationship is well short of what any of the US' allies and partners in the region would take for granted.

### **How Taiwan saw the Trump Administration<sup>5</sup>**

Trump burst into this with his lack of concern for diplomatic niceties. He was unexpected from the start, when as president-elect he took a [congratulatory phone call](#) from Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen. This was dramatic and hugely symbolic, breaking with [protocol](#) since 1979. It was seen as a [signal](#) that Trump was prepared to stand up to China.

Throughout his presidency, Trump was viewed as being strong on China. This could have gone the other way: as a businessman with family dealings in China, he might have been seen as someone who might sell Taiwan out with a "big deal". But instead he was seen as "telling it like it is, telling China where to go" in both his trade war and provocative statements on China. For those deeply concerned by the PRC threat,

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Trump's willingness to give China a hard time was welcomed: "if someone can make Xi look embarrassed, he's your friend."

In the public perception, Trump was viewed as someone who really cared about Taiwan and was ready to go all the way for Taiwan, strange as this may seem given that his campaign explicitly advocated putting America first. "People feel, finally, the US is not restraining Taiwan but seeing China with the same eyes we've always seen China, as a threat to regional order." His resolve to stand up to China gave Taiwanese people confidence.

And it wasn't just his belligerent style. There was also substance.

There were very significant [arms sales](#) from 2017-2020, by contrast with the Obama Administration that [delayed and cancelled weapon sales](#). In just two years of Trump's presidency, Taiwan purchased more arms than in the previous decade, helping normalise the [process of arms sales](#). Trump was seen as focusing on the security aspects of Taiwan's situation more than previous administrations: supporting Taiwan against China and taking US obligations around maintaining infrastructure and war-readiness seriously.

Trump increased the US military commitment to Taiwan, supporting US [military aircraft](#) operating in Taiwan's air identification zone and regular patrols by [US military vessels](#). When China was being particularly aggressive Trump would be equally aggressive. Taiwanese greatly appreciated his willingness to "put planes out there" to do something concrete about Chinese pressure on Taiwan.

Also important for diplomatically-isolated Taiwan was the improved contact between officials. The American Institute in Taiwan was [redeveloped](#) to be more like an embassy, including more military presence. Bilateral initiatives included the establishment of a [US-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue](#), a [US-Taiwan Education Initiative](#), [US-Taiwan Consultations on Democratic Governance in the Indo-](#)



[Pacific Region](#) and Taiwan signing up to an [infrastructure finance initiative](#). Trump's presidency was marked by increased official contact, culminating in the visit of [Secretary of Health](#) Alex Azar, the highest-level Cabinet official to hold talks in Taipei since 1979. The US was also willing to use its pressure to help Taiwan maintain the small group of countries that [recognise it diplomatically](#).

During the Trump Administration the [Global Cooperation and Training Framework](#) was broadened not just for bilateral relations but to increase Taiwan's international space. The GCTF's mission is to provide a platform to harness Taiwan's strengths and expertise to address global issues. During the Trump Administration it held [24 international workshops](#) involving more than 1,000 officials and experts on themes like public health, women's empowerment, law enforcement, energy, cybersecurity and disaster relief. This is greatly appreciated by Taiwan as [helping it contribute to international discussions](#). It also enables Taiwan to promote its foreign policy messages, such as allowing Taiwanese experts to talk to other countries about Chinese infiltration, countering disinformation and religious freedom.

The only area in which there was less progress was on a [bilateral free trade agreement](#), with no talks on the proposed Trade and Investment Framework Agreement since 2016. Despite support among figures in the Trump Administration this did not progress, apparently due to [opposition](#) from the US Trade Representative. The main focus of the administration was on the China trade deal, with concern that an economic agreement with Taiwan might have derailed this.

An important element in the Trump Administration policy on Taiwan was the role of Trump's inner circle, with his Cabinet including many who were considered long-term supporters of Taiwan. In the early days of the administration, this gave a reliable channel to a somewhat chaotic White House. It meant that there were people willing to discuss areas that had previously been forbidden. Trump himself may have just been using Taiwan as a button he could press with China – “as a way to poke China in the eye” – but some in the inner circle had wider aims. From the Vice-President down

there were people around him who were viewed as friends of Taiwan, nudging him in the right direction and prompting him to mention Taiwan.

Another factor was the role of Congress, which is an important element in US-Taiwan relations. During the Trump Administration several laws were passed to help Taiwan promote its visibility in the US and internationally including the [Taiwan Travel Act](#) (2018), [TAIPEI Act](#) (2019) and [Taiwan Assurance Act](#) (2020). Trump didn't just not veto these pieces of legislation, he went out of his way to [sign them into law](#).

The Trump Administration's support of Taiwan continued right to the end with the announcement just 11 days before Biden's inauguration that all restrictions on official contact with Taiwan were [null and void](#). It was very Trumpian: a big announcement that surprised, but without clarity on what it meant or how it would be implemented in practice.

It typified an unconventional approach that opened possibilities and made breakthroughs, that tested limits and questioned constraints. Exciting, but unpredictable.

#### *Election 2020*

With such a positive reaction to the Trump Administration – both in style and substance – it is not surprising that there were strong pro-Trump views before the US Presidential Election, both among Taiwan's government and the general public. In some circles, not being pro-Trump might mean you were accused of being a Chinese sympathiser.

Opinion polling shows that – unlike [other parts of Asia](#) and [Europe](#) – the [majority](#) supported Trump's re-election. After the vote, there were [pro-Trump rallies](#) and thousands of Taiwanese Facebook pages were blocked from sharing claims of a stolen election.

While the Tsai Government was careful to state that Taiwan-US relations would remain strong [regardless of who won](#) the election, it was viewed as [leaning pro-Trump](#). This political alignment may appear somewhat strange, with the governing party – the socially-progressive Democratic Progressive Party – presumably doing some mental compartmentalising of its policy differences on social issues. The opposition Kuomintang (KMT) was more sceptical about the narrative that Trump represented some sort of fundamental change in the US commitment to Taiwan – and privately may have expressed concerns about Trump encouraging wishful thinking in Taiwan about how much it could rely on the US.

In the eyes of the public, Trump was viewed as someone that would support Taiwan without reserve. The more clear-eyed might admit that Trump was not fighting for Taiwan; but with Trump so hell-bent on being anti-China this would be positive for Taiwan, with Taiwan benefiting from “competition between two giants”. People had got used to Trump’s tough rhetoric and thought Biden would be more timid.

This made November 2020 was the most-followed US election ever in Taiwan, with an outpouring of support for Trump. Taiwanese report that they are one of [only two places](#) – with Israel – where there was majority support for Trump’s re-election. And the common belief was that Trump would win.

This meant that when Trump was not successful there was real anxiety and worry. Polling following the election showed that a quarter of Taiwanese were [pessimistic](#) about Biden. “Pro-Trump mania” continued with [rallies](#) and “stop the steal” campaigns. At the extreme, conspiracy theories circulated about [Hunter Biden’s](#) business dealings and Biden being compromised by Beijing. People who had become emotionally invested continued to contest the validity of the election result.

Even among the level-headed, there were fears that Biden would be soft on China. His campaign statements were interpreted as cautious, with concerns that he would be

“Obama 2.0”, having served as Obama’s Vice President and being expected to hire many Obama-era people. It was thought that with so many problems at home, he would try to de-escalate tensions with China to Taiwan’s detriment.

[Only 6%](#) of voters for the governing Democratic Progressive Party thought the US-Taiwan relationship would get better under Biden.

These were the fears and expectations that Taiwanese held when President Biden was inaugurated in January 2021.

### **How Taiwan sees the Biden Administration to Date<sup>6</sup>**

One of Joe Biden’s stated aims as president was to restore America’s [depleted leadership in Asia](#): to rebuild relationships with allies and partners and show that [America is back](#). The place in the region he faced the most uphill battle was Taiwan.

So how has Biden gone in winning over the Taiwanese? Indications are very good so far.

Biden started well from day one, inviting [Taiwan’s diplomatic representative to his inauguration](#), recalling Trump’s groundbreaking [phone call](#) with President Tsai. This was cemented by the visit of [former senator Chris Dodd](#), known to be a close friend of Biden, which was taken as a way of reassuring Taiwan of Biden’s support.

[Confirmation hearings](#) for key appointments were seen as showing “rock solid” commitment to Taiwan and its international participation. Mentions of the Indo-Pacific in early [statements](#) and the [Quad Leaders’ Summit](#) were interpreted as showing continuity in strategic approach.

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<sup>6</sup> An edited version of this section was published as M Conley Tyler, “Biden wins over Taiwan”, *East Asia Forum*, 29 June 2021: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/29/biden-wins-over-taiwan/>

An early test was whether the new administration would walk back the Trump Administration's last-gasp announcement making all restrictions on official contact [null and void](#). This was reviewed to finalise a new [contact policy](#), with the overall result that it is easier for Taiwan officials to liaise. This was seen as a real improvement, not going back to old ways.

For the first time in 40 years a [serving US ambassador](#) visited Taiwan while US ambassadors in other countries [have met](#) with Taiwanese representatives. The US has [publicly helped](#) Taiwan maintain its dwindling diplomatic allies and has continued to support bilateral initiatives like the [US-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue](#). There has even been an indication that [trade agreement talks](#) might restart: something that didn't move under Trump.

At the hard edge, the Biden Administration is judged to have "responded quickly and effectively" when China has been militarily aggressive. Following a large incursion of Chinese military aircraft just after the inauguration, the State Department immediately issued a clear [statement](#) reiterating support for Taiwan at the same time a [US carrier group](#) entered the South China Sea. The US has conducted [several rounds](#) of naval patrols [transiting the Taiwan Strait](#). [Arms sales](#) have continued and are on track to [increase](#) in 2021. And the US and Taiwan have signed a [coastguard agreement](#).

Most of all, Biden is seen as tough on China. The fear was that he would be soft, but the meeting at [Anchorage](#) put paid to that. "We're seeing more spine than we expected". People saw that "they're pretty tough. They're going to go toe-to-toe with the CCP." The Biden Administration's approach reflects the strong anti-China sentiment in the policy community that recognises that competition between US and China is real and structural. "Taiwanese are seeing a continuation and refinement of Trump's approach to China", such as [maintaining](#) US tariffs. "A different style, a different leadership – but the same focus on the issue of the malign influence of China."

Taiwanese thus see a lot of similarities in the policies of the two administrations; the difference is in the professionalism of the Biden team: “Continuity with a different tone and taste.” They like that people dealing with Taiwan are “old hands” who understand its position well. Those who were worried about Trump’s belligerence and unpredictability have been reassured that there will be no surprises from a team that has been “unified in calling out China in a principled and measured way.” Some are starting to recognise that while Trump’s ideas were good, his execution was poor and that the Biden Administration may offer more opportunities to promote Taiwan’s interests. “There’s some benefit in knowing what you can expect”.

The new element that Biden offers is something Trump never could, which is to internationalise the Taiwan Strait issue. As Biden reaches out to rebuild relationships with allies and partners, he can build wider support for Taiwan as a security problem for the Indo-Pacific. This is something Trump, with his disdain for allies, would never have done. Concerns over peace and security in the Taiwan Strait has been mentioned – for the first time – at the [G-7](#), [US-Japan](#), [US-South Korea](#) and [Australia-Japan](#) summits. This approach of “raising the voice of Taiwan with US partners and allies” is much appreciated by an isolated Taiwan that doesn’t want the issue to be seen as something for China and Taiwan to “solve by themselves” (although there is concern about China’s likely reaction).

Put together, the result is that the Biden Administration has exceeded Taiwan’s expectations. Biden has pleasantly surprised a lot of people with a “real sea change” in attitudes. “It hasn’t taken too long to win Taiwanese people’s hearts.” Biden is a seasoned politician able to handle issues subtly. The image he projects of warmth, reliability and stability is one that fits people’s needs in a difficult time. “Those who were really worried about a dramatic reversal, their worst fears have been allayed.” And there are some who will feel vindicated; it’s little-recognised that some of the current positive relations stem from relationship-building efforts by the DPP during the Obama term.

There are still challenges ahead, such as the US desire to [on-shore semiconductor production](#), which has downsides for Taiwan’s technology industry. And limitations on the relationship remain, meaning that Taiwan has to be careful of wishful thinking and overstating the level of US support. But it’s clear that “both sides have the willingness to continue building this good relationship down the road.” That’s a big turnaround in only six months.

One of the last remaining tests for the Biden Administration was vaccine access. With Taiwan suffering its [first large COVID-19 outbreak](#), the public has been asking for [US support in securing vaccines](#). The answer came this month when a Senate delegation visited Taiwan to [announce](#) that the US will provide [750,000 doses](#) – in a C-17 military aircraft, no less. The symbolism of a [US Air Force plane](#) touching down in Taipei was not lost on anyone. Maybe Biden as much as Trump has a knack for an audacious gesture.

### **Looking Forward<sup>7</sup>**

But while Biden has executed a great turnaround in winning over the Taiwanese, that doesn’t mean that it’s an easy road ahead.

There are both bilateral and wider issues that mean that US-Taiwan relations will remain challenging for the the next three and half years.

#### *Bilateral issues*

#### Trade

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<sup>7</sup> An edited version of this section was published as M Conley Tyler, “The Road Ahead for US-Taiwan relations”, *The Diplomat*, 17 July 2021: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/the-road-ahead-for-taiwan-us-relations/>

Trade is important for Taiwan. At a minimum, Taiwanese wanted the Biden Administration to restart Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) talks. “This is the golden time for US-Taiwan relations, how come TIFA talks haven’t resumed?”. This was achieved when TIFA talks restarted after a four year gap on 30 June.

A trade agreement will be harder and lengthy talks are expected, but formal economic ties would be politically popular in Taiwan – and might open the door for other countries to do so. Taiwanese are conscious that this is not easy for a Democratic Administration that has to focus on the US economy first. But they want to see some movement on trade. The results of Taiwan’s referendum on US pork may be a factor.

### Industrial policy

Trade and industry policy around semi-conductors will also be an area of potential tension. With the Trump Administration, the focus was more on the trade war with China than on industrial strategy. By contrast the Biden Administration is trying to formulate an industrial strategy to build its competitiveness. This includes securing supply chains, with talk in the US of technology self-sufficiency that has downsides for Taiwan’s tech industry. Reshoring to the US means moving jobs from Taiwan.

With the US now building up its own manufacturing, there may be pressure on Taiwanese companies to relocate more factories. Taiwan may well decide to placate by moving some, but it will not want to give everything away, such as research and development. Taiwan wants to be a way ahead in the next step in technology.

Taiwan’s importance in semi-conductors is one of things that it believes to be a bargaining chip in other countries’ support. “It’s Taiwan’s ace in the hand and best security guarantee.” With the current massive shortage in semi-conductors, the global importance of Taiwanese manufacturers is clear as their share prices rocket. “The US needs chips to move their economy along.



They need Taiwan's chip manufacturing because they don't want China's chips. It's one of the biggest things Taiwan's got going for it at the moment."

Given US focus on national security considerations, to safeguard its industry Taiwan needs to focus on strategic high tech commodity control. It needs to review frameworks on how it cooperates with regional partners. "With US-China tech competition, Taiwan will be caught in the cross-fire."

The US is also likely to put pressure on Taiwan to reduce emissions in line with its environmental policy of high ambitions. This makes it harder for Taiwan to sell itself as "resilience island" offering alternative supply chains through Taiwan.

#### *Heightened expectations*

There is a danger that increased US support – whether in arms sales, military patrols or diplomatic contact – will lead to heightened expectations from Taiwan. "If you give more hope there will be more disappointment in the future". Whatever has already been done, there will be a desire for "further concrete measures supporting Taiwan."

An example would be around expectations around vaccine access. The US commitment to provide 2.5 million doses is great start. However there will probably be calls for further assistance, much as Taiwanese hate to be seen as troublemakers. With the US having so many areas of focus, it can be easily perceived as forgetting about Taiwan.

High expectations, primarily from the general public, are rooted in fear and anxiety. "When the US is willing to offer more support, we fear the support to be temporary and conditional, and seek more and stronger US commitments."

Some of the raised expectations may be difficult for the US to meet.

#### Security

Demands to help Taiwan build a next generation military include consistent improvement in arms sales (of the right type and at a cost that Taiwan is able to afford): “providing useful weapons at a reasonable rate.” There are also calls for covert or overt military exchanges, such as US generals spending time in Taiwan and the next generation of Taiwanese officers and NCOs building their capability in the US, understanding that this takes time to bring positive effects.

Some seek joint military exercises, given that Taiwanese think that military tensions with China are only going to rise, although this would be controversial. And among some there is an expectation that US will help Taiwan improve its defence effectiveness, even to push for reform in Taiwan’s military. Particularly from a KMT perspective, some would like to see the US push back against wishful thinking based on the assumption that the US will come to Taiwan’s aid. This would require hard analysis of Taiwan’s preparedness and a focus on a range of scenarios as well as full-scale invasion. Others are concerned that US military officers “don’t push Taiwan to be the Taliban”; in other words, to concentrate on the asymmetric type of warfare the US has most recently experienced.

### Diplomacy

There will continue to be a desire for high-level contact to “normalise the relationship” to “treat Taiwan as an ally, as a de facto country.”

The US will be judged on whether it gives concrete support for Taiwan’s international participation, especially to help get Taiwan back in the World Health Assembly. There are also expectations around the US countering China’s influence in international organisations.

Taiwan wants to take a more active role and increase Taiwan’s international status. It wants the US to send the message that Taiwan is indispensable in the Indo-Pacific.

Ideally this would be through involvement in a grouping like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, for example through “Quad Plus” activities.

One specific test will be Biden’s global Summit for Democracy, a campaign promise, which looks like it may be held in 2022. Finding a way to include Taiwan – one of only seven societies in Asia rated as free by Freedom House – is crucial for the US “to show their allies that they are on Taiwan’s side, on the side of democracy, of values.” This means that it cannot just be a summit of states.

Taiwan wants to be involved, but will only accept “a formula based on dignity and respect”. So the US will need to be creative to find a way for Taiwan to be included and add value to discussions on democracy.

#### Strategic ambiguity

There has been sufficient discussion around whether the US will end its position of strategic ambiguity that it has raised expectations. While those in the strategic policy community may be clear that “Biden will not break up the One China policy, he will not change strategic ambiguity”, perhaps others will get their hopes up and will be disappointed that there is no change.

Kurt Campbell’s statement in July that the US does not support Taiwanese independence – a restatement of the official US position – was greeted with some unhappiness in among the public. But the DPP leadership know that no president will support de jure independence. “Everyone know that is a red zone.” One of the DPP’s political difficulties is how to manage supporters’ expectations in the face of the reality that the US is not willing to provide a clear security commitment and that the best on offer is US friendship and partnership.

#### *Chinese pushback*

The wider question is how the US will respond to Chinese pushback whenever and however it occurs. China has continued to ramp up pressure on Taiwan with incremental increases. For example there was a record incursion of Chinese planes into Taiwan's air defence zone following the G7 Summit. Taiwanese diplomats have had to leave Macau and Hong Kong.

The question is whether there will be a change in the type of pressure, rather than in intensity. As the Biden Administration crosses over many lines, there may be something that China considers a red line which brings a new response. In general Taiwanese expect China to be more coercive. "Everyone is anxious". If China does change tactics, how will US respond? "Does the US have the will to assist Taiwan, to counter possible advances from the PRC?"

Taiwanese experts see among China's leaders a mindset that assumes that the West is in decline and views China as a strong power that wants to be talked to with respect. It is prepared to maintain its current assertiveness.

But for China the calculus remains the same. Invading Taiwan is risky; even if militarily successful, economic sanctions and embargoes can smash the Chinese economy. "Invading Taiwan is one of the things that could derail China from its priority – overtaking the US."

In the end the way that Taiwan will judge the US is if it is a successful deterrence figure deterring China from aggressive action. Taiwan will be watching Xi-Biden talks closely when they come.

#### *Building international support*

In general the Biden Administration's efforts to internationalise the Taiwan Strait issue are seen as very positive. By raising the voice of Taiwan with US partners and allies, it

means that China knows that people are watching, that “people care about what happens here”. It is not just left to Taiwan and China to solve for themselves.

There is support for what’s seen as the Biden Administration’s grand strategy of manoeuvring a power network to constrain China rather than confronting China directly.

But the downside of getting more countries involved means the need to spend more time to build consensus. This can be long and slow and may require compromise where there are countries which have different opinions on China. Some wonder if the US has time to build coalitions of stakeholders given China’s rapid rise. Is there sufficient sense of urgency?

Internationalisation is also considered likely to increase the chance of Chinese pushback. The mentions of “peace and security in the Taiwan Strait” at international summits will get a strong Chinese reaction. “If the PRC knows that there are countries that care about Taiwan, it may punish Taiwan because of that.”

Overall most seem to consider this a risk worth taking: “The Taiwanese public need the confidence that they have allies and friends that support them so that they don’t give in to Chinese military intimidation and disinformation.”

#### *Election 2024*

The final test for the Biden Administration will be Taiwan’s presidential election in January 2024 ahead of the US presidential election in November.

If the DPP is returned this may be the trigger for a cross-Strait crisis. “If the DPP is reelected in 2024, Xi may say ‘I’ve been waiting; you’re not paying attention’.”

If the KMT is elected, how would the US see this? As a problem for its China strategy? From the KMT side an important part of the relationship is that the US understands

that any thaw in cross-Strait relations need not be seen as a betrayal of US interests. It will want the US to give its blessing to that.

Whoever is in the Presidential Office and the White House, there remain fundamental challenges in US-Taiwan relations. This means that any honeymoon will always be short. Maintaining positive views in Taiwan will continue to be a challenge for the Biden Administration.

## **Conclusion**

Biden's first six months have reassured many of the concerns that Taiwanese held. For the most part, perceptions appear to be that the Biden Administration remains tough on China, but is more professional and able to get things done. It is seen as a significant improvement over the Obama terms. The task for Taiwan now is to consolidate the gains of recent years with a more predictable administration.

But while much of Taiwan's establishment has executed a pragmatic 180 degree turn towards Biden, this does not alter their affection towards Trump. He'll be remembered as someone who shook up the bureaucratic system and forced a rethink on the terms of the relationship; as someone who pushed against established views and opened a window for US-Taiwan relations. As a "battering ram"; as having a "steroid effect"; and as someone who "kickstarted" an improvement in relations.

So in Taiwanese eyes, it looks like the Trump years will be remembered as an opening – rough and somewhat unpredictable – which was consolidated during the Biden years. They are likely to remain genuinely grateful to Trump. "Emotionally in our hearts, we always appreciate what Trump has done for us, he deserves that response." For countries inclined to see the Trump years as a "blip" with Biden bringing the US back to normal in its relations in Asia, it's worth understanding Taiwan's quite different point of view.

Looking ahead, it is hard to answer the question of how Biden will be remembered three years from now, given that I don't predict an easy road ahead. There will continue to be issues and challenges, given that some of the problems in the relationship are essentially insoluble. It may be that some disappointment is inevitable.



## Other Publications

### 1. How Australia can help Taiwan tackle global issues

*The Strategist*, 1 June 2021: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-australia-can-help-taiwan-tackle-global-issues/>

One of the difficult things about being Taiwan is the lack of normal government-to-government interaction. Taiwan is diplomatically **recognised** by only 15 countries, so it is dealt with informally in most of its international interactions. That rankles.

Taiwan actively campaigns for more international space. Last month saw Taiwan's continuing push for observer status at the World Health Assembly—something **Australia supports**, along with the **United States**, the **G7** and more than **50 countries overall**. Taiwan launched a high-profile campaign **#LetTaiwanHelp** ahead of the meeting of the World Health Assembly, arguing that it has much to share on world health and should not be **excluded**.

But Taiwan also seeks space in lower profile ways. In May, Australia was part of a little-discussed initiative, the **Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF)**. You won't find anything about it on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade **Taiwan web page**, or that of the **Australian Office in Taiwan**, but Australia is quietly supporting a mechanism designed to give Taiwan more opportunities for international engagement.

The GCTF was established in 2015 by the **US and Taiwan**, with **Japan** joining in 2019. Its mission is to **provide a platform** to harness Taiwan's strengths and expertise to address global issues of mutual concern. It provides an avenue for Taiwan's world-class experts to share their knowledge, which is not otherwise possible because many international institutions don't allow Taiwan to participate.

Since it was established, the GCTF has held more than **30 international workshops** involving 68 countries and 1,600 government officials and experts. It holds meetings on **themes** like public health, women's empowerment, law enforcement, media literacy, energy efficiency, cybersecurity and disaster relief.

For ordinary countries, that's no big deal, as they regularly join such meetings, either in regional groups such as **ASEAN**, or in cross-regional groups like the **G20**. But for Taiwan it's an opportunity that's otherwise denied. In the GCTF Taiwan can **share its knowledge and expertise** from a position of equality with other participants—and sidestep its limited diplomatic status. This year, for the first time, the **UK** and the **European Union** have co-hosted events.

Australia co-hosted two GCTF meetings in May: one on **money-laundering**, an area where Taiwan is seen as a policy leader, and the other on the Covid-19 **vaccine**



**rollout**—a topic of concern in both Australia and Taiwan. Discussions covered vaccine safety, distribution, logistics, cold-chain management, priority lists, adverse reactions and vaccine hesitancy. About 135 experts from 36 countries tuned in.

Earlier meetings hosted by Australia included workshops on **energy governance**, **pandemic-related crime** and a prescient meeting on maintaining vigilance against **further waves of Covid-19 infection**.

In the words of Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu, the GCTF provides an **excellent sharing platform** for Taiwan to demonstrate that ‘it is willing and able to contribute to ensuring a better future for mankind’. Less altruistically, it also provides a forum to promote Taiwan’s foreign policy messages, such as in a workshop on **defending democracy** from disinformation. And it helps Taiwan reach specific target audiences, such as in the **Pacific**.

There’s been discussion recently of Australia’s **policy towards Taiwan** and what we should and shouldn’t do if we want to show our support. Continuing participation in the Global Cooperation and Training Framework is a practical way for Australia to deliver on its **statements** in support of Taiwan’s international participation and role in the Indo-Pacific.



## 2. Sweet and sour: Taiwan's pork and pineapple battles

*The Interpreter*, 1 July 2021:

In August, Taiwan will hold a referendum on whether to reinstate a ban on US pork containing the additive ractopamine. This could introduce a sour taste into otherwise positive Taiwan–US relations. But it's not the only food-related political challenge on the menu. The reaction to China imposing a ban on Taiwan's pineapple exports this year showed a nationalistic consumer flavour in Taiwan's great power relations.

The pork dispute has a long backstory. In what was widely considered a “thank you” for the vocal support Taiwan received from the United States under the Trump administration, Taipei reversed its position and announced it would open Taiwan's market to US pork, with effect from January. This was seen as removing a major block to restarting bilateral trade negotiations which have not been held since 2016.

In recent months, signs that proudly boast “We only sell Taiwan pork” have become ubiquitous in the windows of restaurants throughout the country.

Allowing imports of US pork is highly contentious in Taiwan because it can contain ractopamine, a leanness-enhancing substance banned in 160 countries, including China and the European Union. While clear labelling may be a solution, inconsistency on the wider issue of consumer protection from “unhygienic” food makes for bad optics among health-conscious Taiwanese. Critics see the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government giving up something important to Taiwan without getting anything in return.

The opposition Kuomintang (KMT) garnered support to continue the ban not only through a scare campaign on the health dangers of US pork – with major retailers taking part in a scheme to help consumers avoid ractopamine-tainted meat – but also by appealing to nationalist consumers' patriotic preference for their local, trusted pork. In recent months, signs that proudly boast “We only sell Taiwan pork” have become ubiquitous in the windows of restaurants throughout the country.

A vote to ban pork containing ractopamine could upset American interests and call into question the pro-US narrative that has grown through the term of Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen. It would be an unexpected setback for the American Chamber of Commerce, which has long-campaigned to get the Taiwanese government to open up the market. Closer US–Taiwan ties are no guarantee the referendum will swing in Washington's favour.

But people power is also on display in Taiwan's other food spat, this time with China. Beijing announced in February that it would ban all imports of Taiwanese pineapples in what was interpreted as a political move of economic coercion. It appeared to be

targeted at the voter base of the more independence-leaning DPP in Taiwan's tropical south.

Yet rather than hurting farmers, a wave of patriotic public support led to a sudden rebound in fortunes for pineapple growers. The ban became a boon for local industry, with restaurants featuring new pineapple dishes and Taiwan's consumers buying up a year's worth of exports to China in just four days.

Internationally, too, Taiwan's "Freedom Pineapples" campaign opened up new markets for producers, including a record order from Japan, and has accelerated the diversification of export markets.

If the referendum succeeds in banning pork containing ractopamine, the government will try to insulate the wider US relationship from the result.

The passionate domestic response, likely unanticipated by Chinese authorities, shows Taiwanese consumer sentiment to be a volatile factor that can foil Beijing's playbook of intimidation. It provides another example that the economic coercion China metes out is often counterproductive. At the risk of a pun, a prickly China is sweet for Taiwanese nationalists.

How the pork referendum will unfold is not yet clear. With opinion polls last year showing up to 70 per cent of Taiwanese opposing US pork imports, the KMT was confident the referendum would pass. The unknown factor now is how Taiwan's first significant spike in Covid-19 infections will affect the vote. During lockdown, emotions may have cooled. But existing positions may have hardened with traditional methods of campaigning impossible. The outbreak has also increased dissatisfaction with the government and led to a loss in public confidence. With Covid-19 restrictions in place until at least 12 July, it's possible that the referendum might be postponed.

If by mid-July the danger from the virus has eased, the Tsai government will need to campaign ahead of televised referendum debates. Its strategy might be to link the referendum with gratitude felt for US vaccine support, with Taiwan recently receiving 2.5 million doses. The message: We gave up pork, but they gave us vaccines. If the referendum succeeds in banning pork containing ractopamine, the government will try to insulate the wider US relationship from the result.

But, as with pineapples, nationalistic sentiment among Taiwanese consumers continues to be a factor in trade relations with its biggest partners. The risk of a public backlash is another delicate factor to manage in Taiwan's diplomacy.

### 3. Why Is Australia Talking so Much about Taiwan?

*Prospects & Perspectives 2021 No. 34, 9 July 2021:*

Taiwan has been much in the news in Australia in recent months. Former defense minister Christopher Pyne said Australia may need to engage in a kinetic war with China in the next 5-10 years, with Taiwan as the likely flashpoint. Peter Dutton, the current defense minister, said that a battle over Taiwan cannot be discounted, while Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs Mike Pezzullo warned that the “drums of war” are beating.

Media coverage blared “Canberra prepares for Taiwan conflict as tensions escalate” and “Australia discussing ‘contingency’ plans with United States over possible Taiwan conflict.” The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) opined that the “US and its allies must ensure Taiwan doesn’t fall to Beijing” while the Lowy Institute released a significant report on “Countering China’s Adventurism over Taiwan.”

This does not mean, however, that all of Australia’s discussion about Taiwan has been well-informed: Prime Minister Scott Morrison, for example, got into trouble when he appeared to misstate Australia’s Taiwan policy as “one country, two systems” and needed to be corrected. Mark Harrison, professor at the University of Tasmania and a Taiwan expert, has been dismissive of the lack of depth in Australia’s Taiwan debate.

#### So why has Taiwan become a hot topic in Australia?

The main explanation for this recent focus is the rapid increase in negative perceptions of China among Australians. As such views of China have plummeted, this has translated into support for Taiwan.

Because it’s really all about Australia-China relations, Taiwanese observers should be wary of reading too much into the Australian debate just yet. It is not clear that Australia has really thought through its position on involvement in any future cross-Strait crisis.

#### Australia’s Relationship with the PRC: A Rapid Downward Spiral

The deterioration of Australia’s relations with China over the last six years has been dramatic.

Between 2014 and 2015, bilateral relations hit something of a high point. Australia and China agreed to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the highest designation short of a formal alliance, and signed the China Australia Free Trade Agreement, opening up significant trade opportunities. With no historical enmities or territorial disputes, highly complementary economies and a large Chinese-Australian diaspora, there

seemed to be the basis for Australia to have a good relationship with China, even if this occurred within the parameters of very different political systems.

Today the relationship looks very different. Many have described it as the worst it has been since official diplomatic relations were established.

This is particularly evident in public opinion, with the Lowy Institute Poll recording a massive drop in warmth towards China over this period. For the first time this year, most Australians regard China more as a security threat than an economic partner.

From Australia's point of view, some of the major factors include ongoing cyber attacks, espionage, and foreign interference in Australian domestic politics. Australia is concerned about China's continuing human rights abuses and increasing assertiveness in the region, including encroachment into Australia's historic "patch" in the Pacific.

From China's point of view, concerns include foreign investment blocked on opaque national security grounds; the decision banning Huawei and ZTE from Australia's 5G network, which served as a model for other countries; and Australia's foreign interference legislation, which is viewed as targeting China. Australia's human rights advocacy is a continuing irritant, particularly criticism of abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. But it was Australia's call for an inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 virus that seems to have been the final straw for Beijing.

The result has been that Australia is in a diplomatic deep freeze, with no contact between ministers and the China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue officially suspended. China has imposed import restrictions on Australian products — including beef, lamb, barley, wine, lobsters, timber and coal but, crucially, not iron ore — and has issued travel warnings to prospective tourists and students.

As has been seen in other cases, China's economic coercion has not worked. Australia has said that it is willing to talk, but not to change its policy. In fact, Beijing's actions have only succeeded in hardening both political and public opinion against China.

### Australia and Taiwan

In many areas, Australia's concerns about China's behavior align with Taiwan's. For example, Australia is concerned about China's foreign interference, aggression and cyber attacks and lack of respect for human rights. Australia wants a rules-based international order where China cannot unilaterally set the rules.

Australia has supported U.S. efforts under the Biden Administration to internationalize the Taiwan Strait issue. As Biden reaches out to rebuild relationships with allies and partners, he has created wider support for Taiwan as a security challenge for the Indo-Pacific. Australia signed onto this when, for the first time, peace and security across the Taiwan Strait was included in the statement of Australia–Japan Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations, along with the G7, U.S.–Japan, and U.S.–South Korea summits.

Australia has also supported Taiwan in its campaign for more international space, including vocal support for its push for observer status at the World Health Assembly. Australia works with Taiwan through the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) to host international workshops, a platform that enables Taiwan to share its knowledge and expertise with other countries from a position of equality with other participants, sidestepping its limited official diplomatic status.

In response to China's import ban earlier this year, an agreement was reached to allow Taiwan to export a large shipment of pineapples to Australia.

### How Deep Is Australia's Support?

Despite all this, Taiwan should be careful not to read too much into Australia's debate. There has been no substantive change in Australia's policy. It was formally clarified after the prime minister's misstatement that:

"Australia's one-China policy has not changed. However, Australia maintains close and positive unofficial ties with Taiwan, an important trade and economic partner."

There have been influential voices warning against talking up war over Taiwan, including former foreign minister Gareth Evans. Another former foreign minister, Bob Carr, has warned against loose talk of war saying "a horrendous war fought over which political order prevails in Taiwan is not worth this price."

It is not possible to say with certainty what Australia's response to a crisis in the Taiwan Strait would be. That is not strategic ambiguity, just a statement of fact that Australia's response will depend on public and political views at the time. Six years ago these views were very different from today. It is hard to imagine that Australia-China relations will go back to where they were quickly; it will be hard to find a path to a more normal relationship. But that does not mean that Australia has thought about the hard decisions it might need to make.

In the 2021 Lowy Poll, a majority of Australians rated a military conflict between the U.S. and China over Taiwan as a critical threat to Australia. But in the event of a military conflict between China and United States, 57% think Australia should remain neutral. The last time they were asked, in 2019, only 42% of Australians supported deploying military forces, even in the clearest possible case where China invaded Taiwan and U.S. decided to intervene.

Looking forward, it is possible that increased debate over and awareness of Taiwan's situation will change these views. We will watch and see how increased China-skeptic sentiment and awareness of Taiwan in Australia play out over time.

#### **4. Can Taiwan rely on Australia when it comes to China? New poll shows most Australians don't want to send the ADF**

*The Conversation*, 9 July 2021:

I have been in Taiwan since April as a visiting fellow. During this time, there are two questions I've been consistently asked. What's happened to Australia's relationship with China? And what does it mean for Australian support for Taiwan?

The Australia-China relationship I can explain somewhat. I can chart the causes of the downward spiral of relations. I can say why it's unlikely to improve anytime soon. The 2021 Lowy Institute poll shows how deep the negative sentiment now runs, with only 16% of surveyed Australians expressing trust in China compared with 52% just three years ago.

But how to answer what level of support there is for Taiwan in Australia?

##### New poll: what do Australians and Taiwanese think?

The Lowy poll last asked Australians this question in 2019. Given the most compelling scenario — where Chinese invades and the United States decides to intervene — only 43% of respondents supported deploying military forces.

With the deterioration of the Australia-China relationship and the talk of war, would we expect this to go up or down?

To try to answer this, I worked with the Australia Institute to survey both Taiwanese and Australians citizens (asking more than 600 people in each country with a 4% margin of error) about each nation's security and relationship with China.

##### A China attack?

The results are surprising on two fronts.

First, the degree of threat felt by Australians surveyed is striking. A similar number of Australians think China will launch an armed attack on Australia (42%) as on Taiwan (49%). I don't think I could find a military planner in the world that would agree with this.

Despite Australia's distance from China, Australians and Taiwanese have a similar threat perception. Both see China as being a very aggressive country (62% and 65%). Given the great differences of geography and history, this convergence is noteworthy.

Second, more Australians (13%) than Taiwanese (4%) think a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is likely sometime soon. Perhaps Taiwanese think it more likely that China will

continue to use “grey zone” coercive tactics rather than attack. Certainly they are not in imminent fear.

Taiwanese are very clear they want independence, with 73% surveyed preferring independence if peaceful relations with China could be maintained. This is in line with other polls.

About half still want independence, even if this leads China to attack. Only 14% of Taiwan’s citizens think they could defend themselves unaided. And only 26% of Taiwanese think the US would commit its armed forces to fight a war against China in defence of Taiwan. But they still want independence. That’s the depth of feeling.

### The importance of support for Taiwan

Taiwan has an overriding fear of abandonment. It doesn’t want its security and independence to be seen as something for China and Taiwan to “solve by themselves”. So it is highly relevant whether other countries would come to Taiwan’s aid.

Clearly, Australians are sympathetic to Taiwanese aspirations for independence. Two thirds of those polled agreed Taiwan should still become a new country, even if China decides to attack after Taiwan declares independence.

But in a crisis, could Taiwan rely on Australia? With these polling numbers, I’d advise Taiwanese to be very cautious.

Only 21% of Australians agreed the Australian people are prepared to go to war to help the Taiwanese people gain their independence from China. A further 40% were against and 39% were undecided. When we asked the question as “if China incorporated Taiwan, do you agree Australia should send its defence forces to Taiwan?” 37% agreed, 29% were against and 34% were undecided.

While neither is directly comparable to the Lowy poll result (where 43% supported deploying the military), the response is consistent with a relatively low level of support. By contrast, 80% supported using the military to stop a government from committing genocide and 77% to restore law and order in a Pacific nation in the 2019 Lowy poll.

These results suggest that the number of people who support military involvement in Taiwan may even have decreased in the last two years as there has been more talk of war. In the 2021 Lowy Poll, 57% of Australians said in the event of a military conflict between China and US, Australia should stay neutral.

### The trouble for Taiwan

Some of the recent tough talk about China from Canberra (think “drums of war”) might give the Taiwanese the impression they can rely on Australia. But Australia should not give Taiwanese false hope.



Whether Australia would decide whether to become involved in a crisis in the Taiwan Strait would depend on a host of factors, including political and public opinion. Yet the high number of undecideds in the polling figures suggest it would be unwise to assume it would be an easy or popular decision.

Taiwan would be unwise to count on Australia as things currently stand.



# Should Australia go to war with China in defence of Taiwan?

Polling on defence and security issues in Australia and Taiwan

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*Australia fearful of attack but opposed to war.*

Discussion paper

Allan Behm

Melissa Conley Tyler

Bill Browne

Liam Carter

July 2021

## **ABOUT THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE**

The Australia Institute is an independent public policy think tank based in Canberra. It is funded by donations from philanthropic trusts and individuals and commissioned research. We barrack for ideas, not political parties or candidates. Since its launch in 1994, the Institute has carried out highly influential research on a broad range of economic, social and environmental issues.

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# Summary

In April this year, Australians were warned by no less an expert than the former Minister for Defence, Christopher Pyne, that they may need to engage in a 'kinetic' war with China in the next five to ten years.<sup>8</sup> This warning was followed up by a senior member of the national security bureaucracy advising Australians, in terms more ominous than bureaucrats normally use, that "the drums of war beat".<sup>9</sup>

To illuminate these issues, The Australia Institute surveyed nationally representative samples of both Australians and Taiwanese about their views on a series of questions regarding each nation's security and relationship with China.

The results suggest that Australians are very fearful of China but that only around one in five Australians is prepared to commit to war in support of the people of Taiwan.

Several key themes emerged from the results:

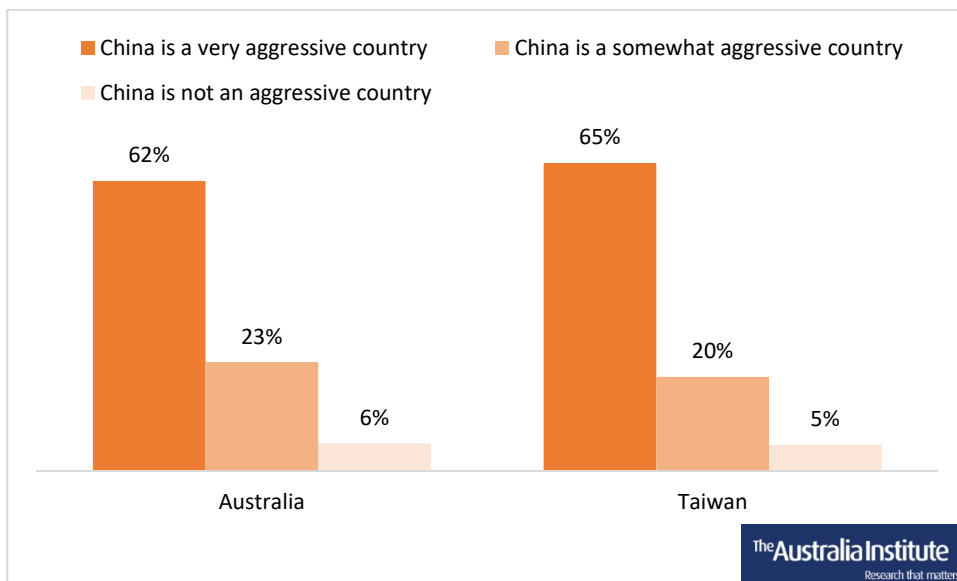
- Australia's geographical distance from China notwithstanding, Australians and Taiwanese are equally fearful of China.
- A similar number of Australians think China will launch an armed attack on Australia (42%) as on Taiwan (49%)
- Taiwanese people do not want to be governed by China or to be a part of China.
- Around half (49%) of Taiwanese people are in favour of independence, regardless of the consequences.
- Taiwanese do not expect an imminent attack, but expect one at some point in the future.
- Australians expect China to launch an armed attack on Taiwan sooner than Taiwanese do.
- Taiwanese people are clear-eyed that war with China would be unwinnable without international assistance, and would likely only be a draw even with US help.
- Australians are sympathetic to Taiwanese aspirations for independence with two-thirds agreeing that Taiwan should still become a new country, even if China decides to attack after Taiwan declares independence.
- There is a strong age correlation in Taiwan, with young people supporting independence and measures to achieve it, and fearing China, to a greater extent than older people.

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<sup>8</sup> Greene (2021) *Former Defence Minister Christopher Pyne warns of potential war with China in the Indo-Pacific region*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-12/christopher-pyne-potential-conflict-china-politics/100064226>

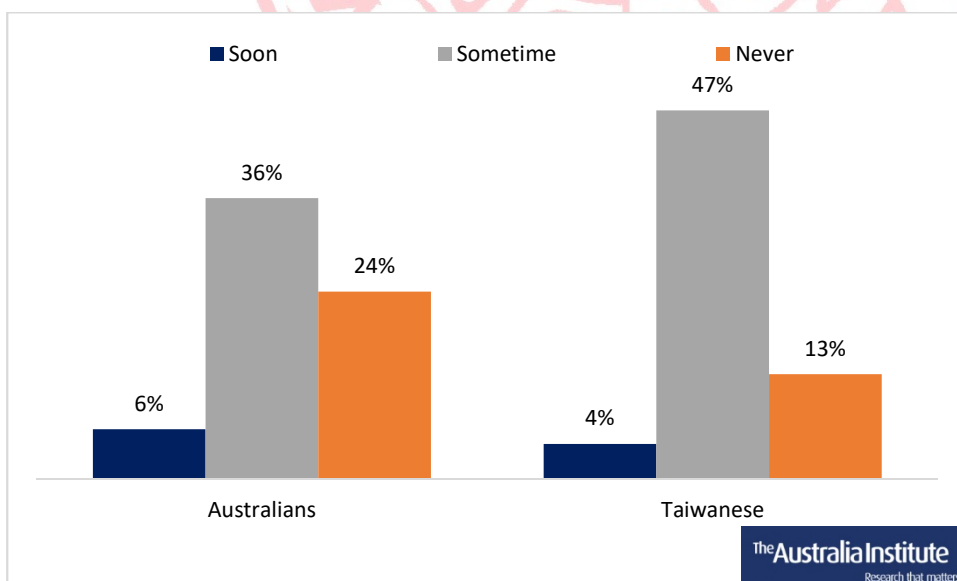
<sup>9</sup> Pezzullo (2021) *The drums of war are growing louder*, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/the-drums-of-war-are-growing-louder/news-story/bf29fb3cf94b89f84eae22fd32d9724>

Figure 1: Views on whether China is an aggressive country



Both Australia and Taiwan see China as being a very aggressive country (over 60 percent in both cases). Taiwanese are nearly twice as likely (43 percent) as Australians (25 percent) to regard the US as very aggressive but most Australians and Taiwanese agree that the US is *at least* somewhat aggressive (74% and 75% respectively). A significant proportion of Australians think that China will attack Australia soon or sometime (42%), with the proportion of Taiwanese that think that China will attack Taiwan at only slightly higher levels (51%). Given the great differences of geography and history, the convergence of threat perception is noteworthy.

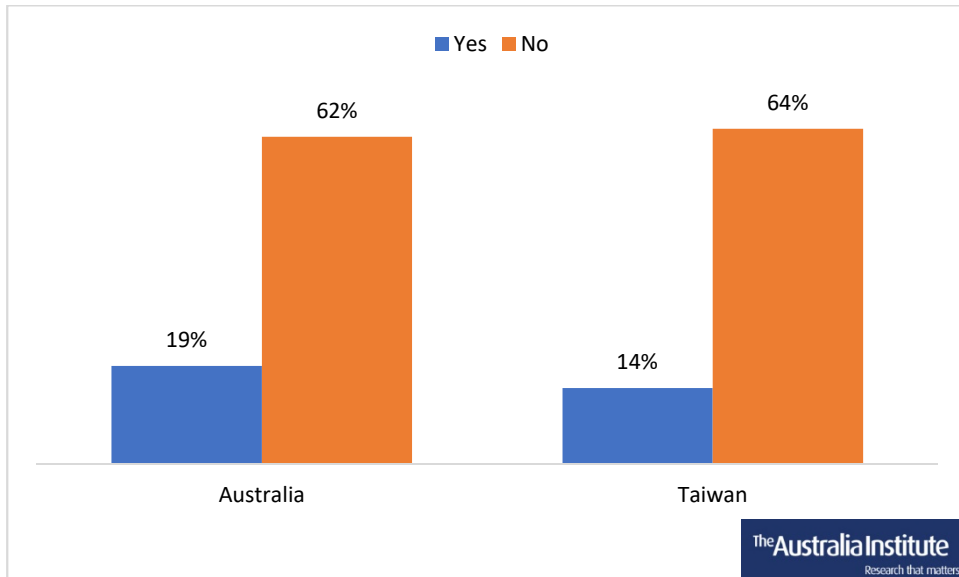
Figure 2: Do you think China will launch an armed attack on your country...



Nearly one in five (19 percent) Australians think that Australia could defend itself against China without international support, whereas only 14 percent of Taiwan's citizens think that

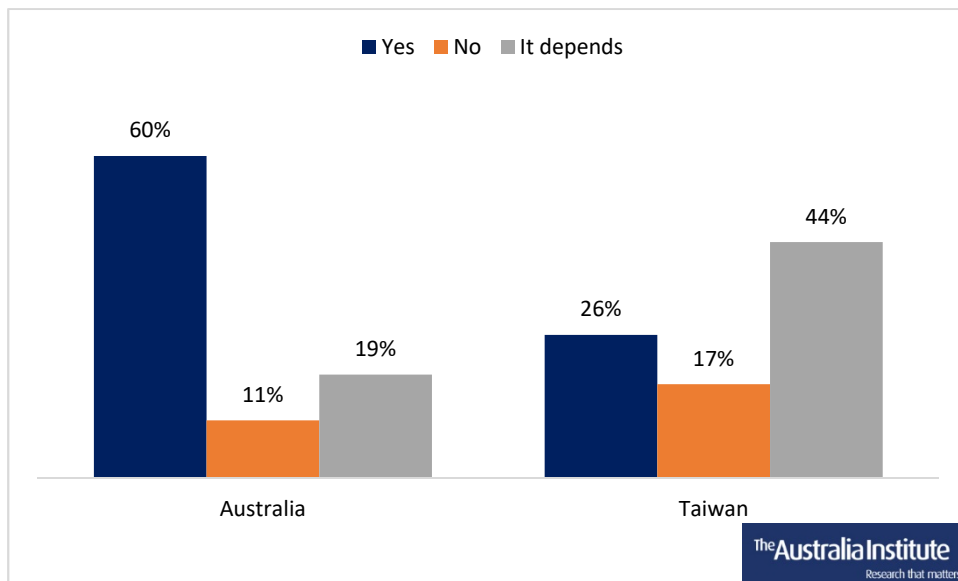
they could defend themselves unaided. Interestingly, only 15 percent of Taiwanese think that the people of Taiwan are willing to go to war against China for Taiwan’s independence; this suggests that despite their own pro-independence views they are concerned about their compatriots’ resolve.

**Figure 3: If China attacked, could your country successfully defend itself without international assistance?**



Confidence in the preparedness of the US to come to Taiwan’s and Australia’s assistance varies considerably, with 60 percent of Australians thinking that the US would defend Australia, against 26 percent of Taiwanese thinking that the US would commit its armed forces to the defence of Taiwan. Many more Taiwanese appreciate the conditionality of the US commitment to their defence – only 19 percent of Australians think “it depends”, whereas 44 percent of Taiwanese people think “it depends”.

**Figure 4: If China attacks your country, do you think that the United States will commit its military forces to fight a war against China?**



Several factors may intersect in these results:

- Taiwanese citizens may have a greater appreciation of what would be at stake in a kinetic conflict with China.
- Similarly, Australians may have less appreciation than Taiwanese of the consequences and implications of armed conflict. War and its consequences remain real for the Taiwanese.
- A long history of uncritical belief in the ANZUS treaty as a security guarantee may influence Australian thinking.
- Anti-China sentiment has generated fear and insecurity in the Australian community.

The Australia Institute's poll results are generally consistent with other recent polls.

The Lowy Institute poll, published on 23 June 2021, records that trust in China has fallen to new record low, with only 16 percent of Australians expressing trust in China, compared with 52 percent only three years ago.<sup>10</sup> Over 60 percent of Australians now see China as a security threat. These views are supported in large measure by the recent survey released by the Pew Research Center, which records that unfavourable views of China are at or near historical highs in most of the 17 advanced economies surveyed.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the Pew survey records more Australia (78 percent) as entertaining a negative opinion of China than Taiwanese people (69 percent) do. According to the Pew survey, Taiwan's view has not

<sup>10</sup> Kassam (2021) *The Lowy Institute Poll 2021*, <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/report/2021/>

<sup>11</sup> Silver et al. (2021) *Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/30/large-majorities-say-china-does-not-respect-the-personal-freedoms-of-its-people/>

changed over two decades, while Australia's has practically reversed.<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that the outlier here is Singapore, where six in ten view China favourably.

On Taiwan, in the 2021 Lowy Poll a majority of Australians rated a military conflict between the US and China over Taiwan as a critical threat to Australia. But in the event of a military conflict between China and United States, 57% think Australia should stay neutral. The last time they were asked, in 2019, 43% of Australians supported deploying military forces, even in the clearest possible case where China invaded Taiwan and US decided to intervene.

The two questions asked by The Australia Institute on this subject are not directly comparable to those in the Lowy poll, however in both cases support was lower for deployment of Australian forces against China than in the Lowy poll. Only 21% of Australians agreed that the Australian people are prepared to go to war to help the Taiwanese people gain their independence from China, with 40% against and 39% undecided. When the Australia Institute asked "if China incorporated Taiwan, do you agree or disagree that Australia should send its defence forces to Taiwan to fight for their freedom?" 37% agreed, 29% were against and 34% were undecided. It is possible that public support may be declining due to talk of war as the decision feels more real.

Polling in Taiwan is consistent with other surveys which show that most Taiwanese do not want to be part of China, with around two-thirds preferring independence if peaceful relations with China could be maintained and a slim majority preferring independence even if it might lead to a Chinese attack.<sup>13</sup>

The Australia Institute's polling results suggest that the defence of Taiwan is a live issue in the Australian electorate. It is also an issue that lacks a contemporary policy context. The question is: what should that policy context look like?

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<sup>12</sup> Kassam (2021) *The Lowy Institute Poll 2021*, <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/report/2021/>

<sup>13</sup> Rich and Dahmer (2020) *Taiwan Opinion Polling on Unification with China*, <https://jamestown.org/program/taiwan-opinion-polling-on-unification-with-china/> and Pan (2020) *Independence support spikes: survey*, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/06/23/2003738708>



# What should inform Australia's policy response?

Taiwan presents a set of wicked problems the negotiation of which will require extreme care on Australia's part.

The position of Taiwan is not just a matter of ending a domestic dispute, whether by negotiation or armed force, in the aftermath of an ongoing civil war that has never been resolved. It is not just Taiwan's future that hangs in the balance, because the interests and prestige of both China and the US are engaged – as well as of neighbouring states, especially Japan.

As a determined and vociferous barracker from the geographic bleachers, Australia may be willing itself into the consequential dimension of Taiwan's political future. But it is a situation where, although Australia may have preferences, it is not a major actor. Perhaps a good analogy would be another historically complex situation: that of the Korean peninsula. There, Australia has long maintained a carefully nuanced policy that balances a sympathetic strategic appreciation with not creating expectations.

However, that does not mean that Australia cannot be caught in the crossfire. At a minimum, the economic consequences of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait that disrupted trade would be severe.<sup>14</sup> A crisis over Taiwan could pose Australia with a difficult decision: to get involved and become a direct combatant and thus a Chinese military target; or, if Australia refuses a US request to come on board in defence of Taiwan, to deal with the implications for Australia's alliance with the US.<sup>15</sup>

The Australia Institute's polling results suggest that many in Australia believe that Australia will become a belligerent in support of the US. But what kind of war would it be, and what would be its consequences?

Here are some principles that need to be kept in mind for Australia's Taiwan policy.

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<sup>14</sup> Uren (2021) *What if ...? Economic consequences for Australia of a US-China conflict over Taiwan*, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/what-if>

<sup>15</sup> Dupont speaking at Australian Institute of International Affairs Victoria (2021) *The Taiwan Test: How to Keep Democracy Alive in Asia*, <https://aiiavic.tidyhq.com/public/schedule/events/35733-the-taiwan-test-how-to-keep-democracy-alive-in-asia>

# THERE IS NO EASY SOLUTION TO THE STATUS OF TAIWAN

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There can be a tendency to try to paint the situation as simple when it is anything but.

Taiwan is not an independent country like any other. But equally Taiwan is not a part of China like any other. Former foreign minister Gareth Evans put this well when he wrote:

Taiwan is a special case. Whether comfortable to acknowledge or not, it is not a sovereign independent state like any other.... It prefers now to be independent, but does not formally claim to be, and is not recognised as such by more than a handful of states.<sup>16</sup>

The current situation is a relic of the 1940s when the Nationalists and Communists fought for control of China.<sup>17</sup> The Nationalists lost the civil war and retreated to Taiwan. In theory the government in Taiwan – officially the Republic of China – claims all the territory of China while, in reality, it just governs Taiwan. Given that both claim the same territory, countries have had to decide which government to recognise; not surprisingly, almost all have chosen the People’s Republic of China, with now only 15 countries recognising the Republic of China.

The 1972 Joint Communiqué establishing diplomatic relations between Australia and China makes Taiwan’s legal status crystal clear: “The Australian Government recognises the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China, acknowledges the position of the Chinese Government that Taiwan is a province of the People’s Republic of China.”

For China, the status of Taiwan is unfinished business. It regards Taiwan as a break-away province and has explicitly said it reserves the option of using force. It is important to recognise the intensity of the issue for Beijing which sees vital interests at stake: the unity of the nation and the credibility of its government. No Chinese leader can afford to be the one that lost Taiwan. For China, Taiwan is a first-order issue and the centrepiece of its military planning.<sup>18</sup> In a recent speech celebrating the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party, President Xi Jinping described reunification as “a historic mission and an unshakable commitment” and stressed “No one should underestimate the resolve, the will, and the

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<sup>16</sup> Evans (2021) *Talking up war over Taiwan flouts reason, fact, judgment and Australia’s national interest*, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/05/09/talking-up-war-over-taiwan-flouts-reason-fact-judgment-and-australias-national-interest/>

<sup>17</sup> Conley Tyler (2021) *What you need to know about the status of Taiwan*, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-status-of-taiwan>

<sup>18</sup> Porter and Mazarr (2021) *Countering China’s Adventurism over Taiwan: A Third Way*, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/countering-china-s-adventurism-over-taiwan-third-way>

ability of the Chinese people to defend their national sovereignty and territorial integrity.”<sup>19</sup> He has said that the Taiwan issue should not be passed down generation after generation.

But in practice, Taiwan has had more than 70 years of functioning as an independent and separate society, albeit unrecognised. While deprived of the status of independent state and membership of the United Nations, it has a democratically-elected government and boasts a thriving economy, vibrant civil society and media debate.

## TAIWANESE WANT TO CHOOSE THEIR OWN FUTURE

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Taiwanese have a distinct identity. Around two-thirds identify themselves as “Taiwanese”.<sup>20</sup> This is a significant shift from 1992 when almost half identified as “both Taiwanese and Chinese” and a quarter as “Chinese”. Today only 3% view themselves as Chinese.

They are entitled to want not to be citizens of the People’s Republic of China, even if that may lead to war.

The Australia Institute’s polling results confirm other surveys which show that most Taiwanese do not want to be part of China, even under ideal economic, social and political conditions.<sup>21</sup> The desire for independence is strong, even if it might lead to a Chinese attack.

Polling also shows that, unlike perceptions in Australia, Taiwanese are not expecting a Chinese attack soon.<sup>22</sup> This may mean that they think it is more likely that China will continue its “grey zone” coercive tactics.<sup>23</sup> It shows they are not at all clear about what would happen if there were an attack. This is a complex political issue for Taiwan.

Ultimately, it is for the people of Taiwan to determine their status, though they will not do so without China’s involvement.<sup>24</sup> It is a matter for other countries to decide whether and how to support Taiwan.

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<sup>19</sup> Xi (2021) *Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China*, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c\\_1310038244.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm)

<sup>20</sup> National Chengchi University Election Study Center (2021) *Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese 1992-2020*, <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>

<sup>21</sup> Rich and Dahmer (2020) *Taiwan Opinion Polling on Unification with China*, <https://jamestown.org/program/taiwan-opinion-polling-on-unification-with-china/>

<sup>22</sup> Pan (2020) *Independence support spikes: survey*, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/06/23/2003738708>

<sup>23</sup> Jakobson (2021) *Why should Australia be concerned about... rising tensions in the Taiwan Straits?*, <https://chinamatters.org.au/policy-brief/policy-brief-february-2021/>

<sup>24</sup> Hass and Kapetas speaking on Australian Strategic Policy Institute (2021) *Policy, Guns and Money: Is Alarm on Taiwan Wrong*, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/policy-guns-and-money-taiwan-climate-change-and-the-cost-of-defence/>

# AUSTRALIA MUST CONSIDER ITS OWN INTERESTS

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For Australia, involvement in a Taiwan Strait crisis would be a war of choice. This needs to be clear in debate: “Much of the recent discussion of Australia’s next war portrays it as something that would happen to Australia, rather than the result of a decision which Canberra would make.”<sup>25</sup>

Proponents and opponents must be very clear about what they are willing to go to war for and why. It is not sufficient to say that Australia should automatically follow the US. But it is also not sufficient to say Australia should not do so based on past imperial wars.<sup>26</sup> The decision must be made on the merits of the specific case.

**Taiwan is not an ally of the US.** When the US established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1979, the Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and the Republic of China, in force since 1955, was abrogated. This was upheld in a legal challenge. In its place, the US Congress enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). The TRA explicitly recognises that any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means would be a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area. It authorises the provision of arms “of a defensive character” and declares an explicit policy of the US “to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardise the security, or the social and economic system, of the people on Taiwan”. The TRA does not provide for automatic military engagement by the US in defence of Taiwan, not does it preclude such military assistance. The US does, of course, provide significant military support to Taiwan through its military sales and training for Taiwanese military personnel.

**The ANZUS treaty would not be automatically invoked by a crisis in the Taiwan Strait.**<sup>27</sup> This was publicly recognised by Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer in 2004.<sup>28</sup> Nor does the treaty address the relationship between Taiwan and the US. It is critically important that people who invoke the ANZUS treaty actually read and understand it and appreciate the deep historical background of the ANZUS treaty.<sup>29</sup>

**Taiwan is also not an ally of Australia.** It is thoroughly specious to suggest that because Australia is an ally of the US, US actions to uphold the security interests of Taiwan would necessarily involve Australia. Because of regional and global strategic consequences, Australia and the US would consult in any situation in which China were to threaten or use

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<sup>25</sup> Scott (2021) *Australians need clarity on war or peace*, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/australians-need-clarity-on-war-or-peace-20210506-p57pg1>

<sup>26</sup> Harrison (2021) *Australia’s dangerously inadequate Taiwan policy debate*, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-dangerously-inadequate-taiwan-policy-debate/>

<sup>27</sup> Blaxland (2021) *China does not want war, at least not yet. It’s playing the long game*, <https://theconversation.com/china-does-not-want-war-at-least-not-yet-its-playing-the-long-game-160093>

<sup>28</sup> The Age (2004) *Downer flags China shift*, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/downer-flags-china-shift-20040818-gdyh62.html>

<sup>29</sup> Behm (2020), *ANZUS and Australia’s Security*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/anzus-and-australias-security/>

military force against Taiwan. But such consultations would not reflect any obligation to Taiwan pursuant to the ANZUS treaty.

**Australia's direct strategic interests are not engaged in Taiwan.** Australia and Taiwan do not share deep strategic interests relating to individual or mutual defence.

Australia's defence priority as set out in the *Defence Strategic Update* is on its immediate region "ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland South East Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific."<sup>30</sup> This does not include Taiwan.<sup>31</sup> The *Strategic Update* explicitly states that actions outside this region – such as in North Asia – remain possible, but "any such wider contributions must be based on specific national interests."

The argument for Australian involvement would be a systems argument – that Australia does not want an order where China sets all the rules – rather than one based on direct strategic interests. But it does not follow that Australia has to choose a military response.

It is important to guard against reducing the strategic complexity of the Taiwan issue to a simplistic values argument focused on the imperative that democracy must be defended everywhere and at all times. Australia clearly benefits, both economically and strategically, from the continued prosperity, stability and security of Taiwan, just as Taiwan benefits from Australia's economic strength and security. Linda Jakobson is correct that Australia should care about Taiwan's fate because "Taiwan typifies the kind of vibrant, free and democratic society that Australia wants to see flourish across the Indo-Pacific."<sup>32</sup> The fact that both are democracies does not necessitate military support should one or the other come under threat.

A decision by China to integrate Taiwan into China forcibly, abrogate its parliament and enforce Chinese law would have profound implications for Asia, its cohesion, and its security. The use of force always has such implications.

One implication is that a forcible seizure of Taiwan would weaken China: "The PRC would likely suffer huge losses in the process and spend years pacifying Taiwan, militarily and politically; it would be depleted, not energised for further conquest."<sup>33</sup> It is one of the few things that can derail China's national rejuvenation.<sup>34</sup> The status quo is in China's interests,

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<sup>30</sup> Department of Defence (2020) *Defence Strategic Update* p. 21, <https://www1.defence.gov.au/strategy-policy/strategic-update-2020>

<sup>31</sup> Scrafton (2021) *Not the war over Taiwan again!*, <https://johnmenadue.com/not-the-war-over-taiwan-again/>

<sup>32</sup> Jakobson (2021) *Why should Australia be concerned about... rising tensions in the Taiwan Straits?*, <https://chinamatters.org.au/policy-brief/policy-brief-february-2021/>

<sup>33</sup> Porter and Mazarr (2021) *Countering China's Adventurism over Taiwan: A Third Way*, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/countering-china-s-adventurism-over-taiwan-third-way>

<sup>34</sup> Jakobson speaking on Lim and Gyngell (2021) *Australia in the World* <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/episode-73-china-and-chinese-politics/> and

even if it does not recognise this. Equally, it is not obvious that a war would assist America in maintaining its regional leadership; instead it may destroy America's strategic leadership in Asia.<sup>35</sup>

There is a danger that a sense of inevitability will be created about Australian military involvement in any Taiwan crisis. This must be resisted.

Above all, what Australia should not do is send signals to Taiwan that it will help if that is not true. It would be morally reprehensible to give Taiwanese false hope and then betray them. Some of the "tough talk" from Canberra might give Taiwanese the impression that they can rely on Australia. Given the precipitous decline in the relationship between Australia and China, there has been a tendency to talk up the prospects of war. Public commentators amplify what they deem to be the drum-beats of war, normalising anxiety and apprehension.

But any decision to be involved will be made at the time and will depend on a host of factors. The high number of undecideds in the polling figures on public support suggest that it would be unwise to assume it would be an easy or popular decision. The honest answer would be: we do not know what we would decide until the circumstances requiring a decision are clear.

It is important for Taiwan not to mistake Australia's anti-China sentiment for unqualified support.

## WAYS AUSTRALIA CAN HELP TAIWAN WITHOUT COMMITTING TO WAR

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Focusing on the military aspects of a possible future crisis blinds us to what Australia can do to support Taiwan right now.

Australia can continue to clearly and consistently state its expectation that the situation can only be resolved by peaceful means. Taiwan's overriding fear is of abandonment: it does not want the issue to be seen as something for China and Taiwan to 'solve by themselves'.<sup>36</sup> In particular, Australia can support US efforts to internationalise the Taiwan Strait issue. As Biden reaches out to rebuild relationships with partners, he has been creating wider support for Taiwan as a security problem for the Indo-Pacific. Australia supported this when – for the first time – peace and security across the Taiwan Strait was mentioned at the Australia–

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<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/episode-73-china-chinese-politics-and-finlandisation/>

<sup>35</sup> White (2021) *A war over Taiwan would be nothing like Afghanistan*, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/morrison-may-have-to-decide-on-war-or-peace-20210422-p571en>

<sup>36</sup> Conley Tyler (2021) *Taiwan's View of the Trump Administration*, <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/taiwans-view-of-the-trump-administration/>

Japan Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations, along with the G7, US–Japan and US–South Korea summits.<sup>37</sup>

In doing so Australia assists deterrence. In particular, a calculation by Beijing that Australia would be likely to be involved in economic sanctions raises the costs to China of aggression. “This approach is designed in part to intensify the stakes of the choice China would confront in attacking Taiwan – to make clear to Beijing that it can either have ‘national rejuvenation’ or take Taiwan by intimidation or force.”<sup>38</sup>

At this point, economic sanctions may be more of a factor for China than military deterrence given China’s growing military confidence,<sup>39</sup> seeing itself becoming more powerful while the US is in decline.<sup>40</sup> Chinese commentators are aware that the “United States and its allies can effectively isolate China economically, diplomatically and militarily... [to] make China a pariah in the international community and prevent it from achieving its modernisation goals.”<sup>41</sup> In case of military action, Australia’s contribution would be welcome but not likely to be decisive. But if the response is to impose economic sanctions, Australia can be an important actor. For example, cutting off supplies of iron ore to China would be significant blow. The economic consequences for Australia would also be significant.

And on the economic front, given that one way China attempts to deter Taiwanese independence is through economic coercion,<sup>42</sup> Australia can continue to promote trade with Taiwan. This helps both countries diversify their trade. A trade agreement with Taiwan is not out of the question and would not involve recognising Taiwan as independent; Australia already has a trade agreement with Hong Kong.

Australia can also support Taiwan in its campaign for more international space, including its continuing push for observer status at the World Health Assembly, something Australia supports. Australia works with Taiwan through the Global Cooperation and Training Framework to host international workshops to enable Taiwan to share its knowledge and expertise with other countries from a position of equality with other participants,

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<sup>37</sup> Conley Tyler (2021) *Biden wins over Taiwan*, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/29/biden-wins-over-taiwan/>

<sup>38</sup> Porter and Mazarr (2021) *Countering China’s Adventurism over Taiwan: A Third Way*, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/countering-china-s-adventurism-over-taiwan-third-way>

<sup>39</sup> Mastro (2021), *The Taiwan Temptation: Why Beijing Might Resort to Force*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-03/china-taiwan-war-temptation>

<sup>40</sup> Kassam (2021) *Closer Taiwan-US ties are stabilising the region, not the opposite*, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/closer-taiwan-us-ties-are-stabilising-region-not-opposite>

<sup>41</sup> Lei (2021) *Mainland China is in no position to take Taiwan by force*, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/02/26/mainland-china-is-in-no-position-to-take-taiwan-by-force/>

<sup>42</sup> Conley Tyler (2021) *How Australia can help Taiwan tackle global issues*, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-australia-can-help-taiwan-tackle-global-issues/>

sidestepping its limited diplomatic status.<sup>43</sup> This could be used to progress discussions on anything from energy security, space, countering misinformation and cyber threats.

Finally, as Taiwan grapples with its first large-scale outbreak of COVID-19, it would happily accept Australian-produced Astra Zeneca vaccines. While Australia rightly has a range of priorities for its vaccine diplomacy – including the Pacific, Southeast Asia and South Asia – it is worth considering putting Taiwan on the list. Even a relatively small number of vaccines donated could have an outsize symbolic effect.



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<sup>43</sup> Conley Tyler (2021) *How Australia can help Taiwan tackle global issues*, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-australia-can-help-taiwan-tackle-global-issues/>



# Conclusion

War, particularly one that might conceivably raise the spectre of nuclear annihilation, is not a rational option where there are alternatives. Australia's national interests – which at the very least include the security of the nation, the prosperity of its people, the stability of the region and the pursuit of constructive internationalism as a means of maintaining global stability – are not served by clarion calls to war. As the Australia Institute's polling demonstrates, most Australians are not convinced that Australia should go to war to help the Taiwanese people gain their independence. While almost 40 percent of Australians are uncertain about going to war in defence of Taiwan, 40 percent are opposed, with just over 20 percent in favour. This suggests that most Australians do not consider that war is an inevitability and are not stirred to action by the 'drums of war'.

## Method

The Australia Institute surveyed 603 people in Australia and 606 people in Taiwan between 11 and 27 June 2021, online through Dynata polling, with nationally representative samples by gender and region.

The margin of error (95% confidence level) for the national results is 4%.

Voting crosstabs show voting intentions for the House of Representatives, or the Legislative Yuan. Those who were undecided were asked which way they were leaning; these leanings are included in voting intention crosstabs. "Coalition" includes separate responses for Liberal and National. "Other" refers to Independent/Other.

Detailed results are available at [australiainstitute.org.au](http://australiainstitute.org.au).