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China-Taiwan Rift and Cheng Li-wun's 'Journey of Peace'

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization.

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The Visit

Behind the scenes of the US-Iran conflict, China has silently moved further in its goal for re-unification. From April 7-12, 2026, Cheng Li-wun, chairwoman of Taiwan's main opposition party, Kuomintang (KMT) conducted a 6-day visit to mainland China what she termed as a 'journey of peace'. The visit was the first by any Taiwanese office holder in a decade and included a high-profile meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the April 10, 2026. Since the severing of official contact between the two, Beijing has maintained backchannel relations in Taiwan through the KMT which serves as a stark contrast to President Lai's administration that has refused all dialogue and labelled any form of dialogue as separatist. The visit has proven to be severely divisive within Taiwan and deepened the internal political fault lines. President Lai publicly stated that "compromising with authoritarian regimes only sacrifices sovereignty and democracy." Surveys on national identity show that 62% of respondents now identify as Taiwanese, up from 17.6% in 1992.² The statistic bodes poorly for the popularity of the KMT visit however the political implications remain unclear, as the scheduled May summit between Presidents Trump and Xi may redefine Washington's posture on Taiwan. Since Chairwoman Li-wun's visit, China has set forth a 10-point incentive plan which includes major changes such as the resumption of direct flights, easing of tourism sanctions, and agricultural trade concessions aiming to compensate the constituencies which have been disadvantaged by the deterioration of cross-strait tensions since 2016. This reiterates the Lai administration's position on compromising with China for economic concessions.

Background

The Taiwan Strait has been in a precarious situation as China pushes its agenda to unite neighbouring islands with the mainland under its plan of 'national rejuvenation by 2049'. Taiwan's political landscape has been majorly dominated by the Democratic Progressive Party which advocates a distinct Taiwanese Identity since the KMT lost power in 2016. This has presented a stark contrast as the KMT's position accepted the '1992 consensus which acknowledged the 'One China' framework. Tension in Taiwan has intensified as China previously attempted to assert dominance through testing nautical and airborne capabilities by deploying aircrafts and coast guard vessels on disputed territories such as the Senkaku Islands, Beijing has conducted an estimated 6 rounds of large-scale military exercises in the strait since 2022. US intelligence notes that China could militarily enable itself to seize the land by 2027³ as President Xi Jinping has explicitly directed the People's Liberation Army to achieve full military capability to seize Taiwan by the given time. this target was first disclosed publicly by former INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Phil Davidson in 2021 and then subsequently confirmed by CIA Director William Burns, who stated that 'as a matter of intelligence, Xi has instructed the

² [https://theasanforum.org/analyzing-the-relationship-between-identity-and-democratization-in-taiwan-and-hong-kong-in-the-shadow-of-china/#:~:text=In%20a%20June%202018%20poll,%2DIentification%20\(1992%2D2018\)](https://theasanforum.org/analyzing-the-relationship-between-identity-and-democratization-in-taiwan-and-hong-kong-in-the-shadow-of-china/#:~:text=In%20a%20June%202018%20poll,%2DIentification%20(1992%2D2018))

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/1/chinas-xi-says-reunification-with-taiwan-unstoppable#:~:text=The%20reunification%20of%20our%20motherland,safer%20and%20more%20resilient>.
https://ipdefenseforum.com/iPDF_v45n1_eNG.pdf

PLA to be ready by 2027 to conduct a successful invasion⁴. Critically, this represents a directive to achieve capability, not a declaration of intent; the U.S. Intelligence Community's most recent annual threat assessment affirms that Beijing does not currently operate on a fixed invasion timeline⁵. Nevertheless, such capability, regardless of whether force is exercised, would fundamentally shift the cross-strait balance of power, rendering Taiwan's position weaker with each year the PLA advances towards the set benchmark. Beijing has also been laying the legal framework to create its casus belli for reunification by highlighting heavily contested documents such as the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation if intentions shift towards action.

U.S-Taiwan Uncertainty

Taipei also remains engulfed in political strife as the US, its longstanding ally, has been sending mixed signals in regards to their continuing support, this is not only considering President Trump's general transactional approach but also his remarks dismissing Taiwanese independence in the past year, which included questioning what kind of military support the USA would be willing to provide in its future with Taiwan⁶.

This question became especially prevalent since President Trump has signalled openness to discussing the arms sales with President Xi Jinping ahead of the May summit and U.S officials confirmed a phone call between Presidents Trump and Xi where the former noted that the arms sale deal needs to be 'carefully handled'⁷. After this the Trump administration has portrayed an air of uncertainty around the Taiwan defence package. A bipartisan group of U.S. senators also visited Taiwan to encourage an increase in military spending asserting this may change POTUS's calculus. Their visit appeared to effectively pressure the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) into initiating the submission of a USD 40 billion special defence budget for legislative approval. This visit was met with formal disapproval from Beijing, Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Mao Ning warned that such visits send 'wrong signals' which reiterates the Lai administration's push for international recognition of an independent Taiwan.⁸

The Cheng's visit coincides with the KMT's legislative blocking of the government's \$40 billion special defence budget alongside its coalition partner the Taiwan People's Party (TPP). Cheng has publicly signalled willingness to slow Taiwan's military buildup as part of a de-escalatory approach. Critics within Taiwan argue that this weakens deterrence at a moment when China's military activity is increasing. The KMT's dual role as Beijing's preferred interlocutor and as the party barring defence investment raises concerns about whether economic and diplomatic concessions are sacrificing defence and sovereignty. Simultaneously, if the tensions continue analysts note, there could potentially be a risk of 'well over two trillion dollars' of global economic activity

⁴ <https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/116960/witnesses/HHRG-118-AS00-Wstate-AquilinoJ-20240320.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2026-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/cmt/asia-pacific/taiwan-strait-china-united-states/three-body-problem-taiwan-strait>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/31/world/asia/senators-taiwan-military.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>

⁸ [https://theasanforum.org/analyzing-the-relationship-between-identity-and-democratization-in-taiwan-and-hong-kong-in-the-shadow-of-%20%20china/#:~:text=In%20a%20June%202018%20poll,%20Identification%20\(1992%202018\)](https://theasanforum.org/analyzing-the-relationship-between-identity-and-democratization-in-taiwan-and-hong-kong-in-the-shadow-of-%20%20china/#:~:text=In%20a%20June%202018%20poll,%20Identification%20(1992%202018))

caused by a blockade in the Taiwan strait.^{9 10}

Timing

Taiwan's willingness to explore political accommodation with Beijing through the KMT may be attributed to the response to growing uncertainty about American commitment. Trump's transactional framing of Taiwan's defence including suggestions that Taiwan should pay more for U.S. "protection" and that arms sales might be discussed with Xi has created the space for political figures such as Cheng to argue that Taiwan does not need to choose between Washington and Beijing. By hedging its position, the KMT is appealing to domestic risk-averse constituencies, which will likely negatively impact seemingly weakening U.S and Taiwanese relations. Cheng's visit occurred weeks before a scheduled summit between President Trump and President Xi in Beijing, at which Taiwan is expected to feature prominently on the agenda. The proximity is unlikely to be coincidental.

⁹ https://rhg.com/research/taiwan-economic-disruptions/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁰ [https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Bloomberg+Economics.+.\(2022\).+World+Economy+at+Risk+from+%242.3+Trillion+Taiwan+Conflict.+Bloomberg%2C+24+October+2022.&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Bloomberg+Economics.+.(2022).+World+Economy+at+Risk+from+%242.3+Trillion+Taiwan+Conflict.+Bloomberg%2C+24+October+2022.&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8)



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