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## Three Domestic Political Variables to Watch in Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election

By: Russell Hsiao

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On May 17, Taiwan's main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨), [announced](#) that it would be nominating New Taipei City Mayor Hou You-yi (侯友宜) as its presidential candidate for the 2024 presidential election. The long-awaited nomination solidifies a three-way race between the KMT nominee, Lai Ching-te (賴清德) of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨), and Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP, 民眾黨). Based on current polling, political observers expect the election will be one of the most competitive—and potentially consequential—electoral battles in Taiwan's democratic history.

### ***Polling Out of the Gate***

Despite a contested internal selection process between Hou and Terry Gou (郭台銘)—the billionaire founder of tech giant Foxconn (富士康)—most [polls indicated](#) that Hou was the most electable candidate among the nominees being considered by KMT Chairman Eric Chu (朱立倫). While it was an open secret that Chairman Chu had harbored an ambition to be the party's candidate again for the nation's top post after coming up short in the 2016 election, he removed himself from consideration as a candidate in the spring. Given Chu's position as chairman of the ailing party, this decision was ostensibly intended to mitigate potential perceptions of conflict of interest, while also allowing him to shepherd the selection process for the party's "best" nominee to unseat the DPP from power.

While it is still too early to call the race for any candidate or party in the 2024 elections—which will also determine the membership of the national legislature—the latest polling from the KMT, TVBS, and *United Daily News* (all Blue-leaning media) provides some insights into current levels of support within Taiwan, as well as areas in which candidates could potentially gain or lose political ground in the less than eight months left before the elections.

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### KMT Internal Polling

A very interesting poll to reference is the [KMT's internal polling](#), which it conducted in the lead-up to Chairman Chu's final decision to nominate Hou. Presumably, the results of these polls played a significant role in Chu's decision-making. That the KMT had publicized these internal polls after the formal announcement of Hou's nomination appeared to be an attempt to justify his nomination to any doubters that might remain following the contested selection process. Regardless, the results of the internal polls were quite revealing.

In a three-way race between the presidential candidates from the KMT-DPP-TPP, the KMT's internal polls conducted between May 5-14 showed support ratings for Hou at 25.43 percent, Ko at 25.27 percent, and Lai at 30.4 percent. This placed Hou nearly five points (4.97 percent) behind his DPP opponent. However, the poll also found that in a three-way race with Terry Gou as the KMT nominee, Gou would have lagged even further behind Lai by 5.63 percent. In both scenarios, the TPP's Ko polled within striking range at 25.27 percent (with Hou as nominee) and 23.97 percent (with Gou as nominee)—within 2 percent of both KMT presidential nominees.



Graphic: The results of the KMT's internal polling, showing both Hou You-yi and Terry Gou lagging behind the DPP's Lai Ching-te. (Source: [CNA](#))

In addition to its internal polling, the KMT [aggregated and then publicized](#) the results of 13 other public opinion polls (conducted from April 18 to May 14) that had been conducted on the potential three-way race. According to these polls, respondents favored Hou (40.5 percent) over Gou (31.66 percent) as KMT nominee. However, they also found Hou (37 percent) losing to Lai (37.9 percent), slightly better than Gou, who lagged behind Lai 36.6 percent to 38.5 percent. In both scenarios, the TPP's Ko again polled within striking range at 21.93 percent and 20.81 percent, respectively.



Graphic: The results of 13 polls—aggregated by the KMT—showing both Hou You-yi and Terry Gou trailing Lai Ching-te. (Source: [CNA](#))

According to KMT Spokesman [Lin Kuanyu](#) (林寬裕), it is undeniable that public support for Hou and Gou are very close. However, among KMT party members, the story is quite different. In particular, among the county and city chiefs holding party membership, 10 supported Hou, whereas only one supported Gou and the remaining two supported the Party Central Committee in deciding the candidate. Among legislators, 22 KMT lawmakers supported Hou, 13 supported Gou, and 22 supported the decision of the Party Central Committee.

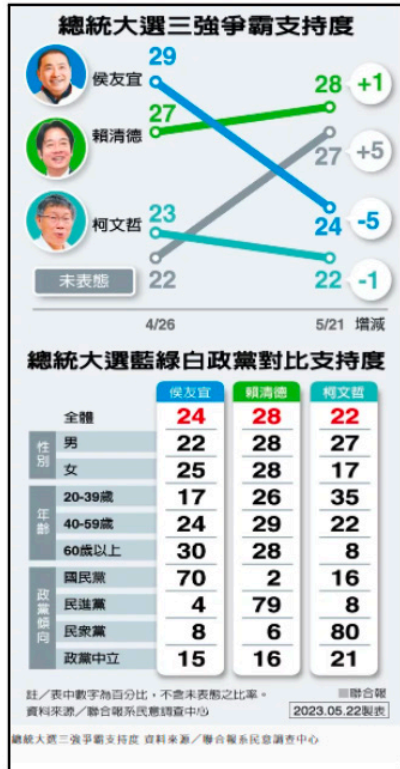
### TVBS Poll

In another poll conducted after Hou was announced as the KMT's presidential candidate, the TVBS Poll Center (TVBS, 民調中心)—a major Blue-leaning television outlet—released its [latest poll results](#) on May 19. Notably, the poll found that 30 percent of respondents indicated their support for Hou to win the presidential election, followed by Lai with 27 percent, Ko with 23 percent, and the remaining 20 percent not expressing an opinion. Interestingly, the poll revealed that among young voters aged 20 to 29, as many as 43 percent supported Ko, with only 26 percent supporting Hou. While the DPP has long relied on the youth vote, Lai only received 22 percent support from this voting segment in the poll.

### UDN Poll

The most detailed polling completed after Hou's formal nomination was conducted by *United Daily News* (UDN, 聯合報)—another major Blue-leaning media outlet. The media company completed [the poll](#) from May 18-21, immediately after the announcement of Hou as the KMT's nominee. In contrast to the TVBS poll, the UDN survey showed Lai slightly ahead of Hou, 28 percent to 24 percent, with Ko coming in a close third at 22 percent. Compared to a poll of the three potential candidates con-

ducted by UDN in late April, the latest results reflected a slight increase of 1 percent for Lai, a decrease of 5 percent for Hou, a decrease of 1 percent for Ko, and an increase of 5 percent (22 percent to 27 percent) among respondents who did not express a preference for any of the candidates.



Graphic: The results of polling conducted by UDN, including changes in support from previous polls conducted in April. (Source: UDN)

According to UDN, KMT and independent voters appear to be adopting a “wait-and-see” attitude about Hou’s candidacy. For instance, the proportion of KMT supporters backing Hou fell by 4 percent (from 74 percent at the end of April, to 70 percent in May), while the proportion of independent voters supporting Hou also decreased by 7 percent (from 22 percent to 15 percent) over the same period.

The UDN poll also revealed interesting generational and party loyalty trends in their preference for president. First, Ko is more favored than the two other candidates by young voters. Among voters under the age of 40, Ko leads Lai and Hou with 35 percent support. Conversely, among voters aged 40 to 59, Lai fares slightly better with 29 percent support, leading Hou and Ko by at least 5 percentage points. As for voters over the age of 60, Hou and Lai are evenly matched, with both enjoying support rates of about 30 percent. Second, both the DPP and the TPP have stronger party cohesion, with about 80 percent of both

parties supporting their respective candidates—a full ten percentage points higher than Hou’s 70 percent. Third, support for Ko (21 percent) exceeds Lai’s (16 percent) and Hou’s (15 percent) among independent voters. [1]

**Three Variables: KMT Party Cohesion, Youth Votes, Ko Wen-je**

*Whether the KMT Can Maintain Party Cohesion*

More so for the KMT than the DPP, the issue of party cohesion going into this election could seriously affect the chances of the former emerging victorious. The KMT’s traditional base of supporters—which tended to support Terry Gou—appears to remain uncertain of Hou, potentially due to his local Taiwanese identity and past affinity with the DPP.

Given that the KMT’s selection process did not require a reconciliation process between the KMT’s major factions—with the decision almost exclusively controlled by Chu—Hou will likely need to personally shore up his support within this flank of the party, or at the very least rely heavily on party central. These dynamics could force Hou to make concessions politically, potentially leading him to take positions on policy issues that favor particular factional preferences. In doing so, he could inadvertently trap himself in policy positions that would make it harder for him to capture more centrist voters, who tend to be more fluid and unpredictable in their voting behavior.

It should be noted that Hou’s strongest selling point leading up to his nomination was his reputation as a centrist, which was mostly the result of his refusal to take positions on controversial issues: for example, the most he has been willing to say on controversial cross-Strait issues is that he opposed “One Country, Two Systems” (一國兩制) and “Taiwan independence.” Since he will rely on party central to determine many of his campaign positions, this could mean a more orthodox approach to cross-Strait relations, which may or may not resonate with voters. Second, the KMT’s nomination process only reflects that the party infrastructure is united behind Hou himself, but not necessarily over his policies. Will the KMT’s determination to win prevail over factional interests and policy preferences? Perhaps tellingly, while Gou has already pledged to support Hou, he has been missing in action in all the key moments thus far and there are already whispers that he could team up with Ko, potentially undermining the party’s solidarity.

By contrast, the DPP seems to be united behind Lai, as exemplified by his uncontested nomination as the party’s candidate and the recent polling results referenced earlier. The electoral challenge for the DPP come 2024 is whether Lai will be able to

capture more centrist voters. With his policy positions on cross-strait issues already well-known, there appears to be a ceiling to Lai's support rate at around 35-40 percent, and it could be difficult for him to break that ceiling. Moreover, his low support rating among the youth could prove challenging for him to overcome, particularly as opposition parties have mobilized to attack President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) records on domestic issues. Ko's apparent appeal to this demographic could also be a threat.

Some Taiwanese political observers were also surprised by the polling results. According to [Wang Ye-li](#) (王業立), a professor of political science at National Taiwan University (NTU, 國立臺灣大學), support for a political candidate typically rises after his or her nomination is confirmed. However, it appears that doubts over Hou have persisted, and it remains to be seen whether the drop of 5 percent in Hou's support rating could represent voters temporarily taking a step back rather than permanently abandoning the KMT candidate in favor of either the DPP or TPP.

According to [Liao Da-chi](#) (廖達琪), a comparative politics professor at the National Sun Yat-sen University (NSYU, 國立中山大學), Gou still hangs heavily over Hou's candidacy. This effect is reflected in Hou's low support ratings among the youth, as well as Hou's 70 percent support rating within the KMT. According to Liao, Gou's base of supporters is primarily composed of young people, the middle class, and traditional Blue-camp voters, making him an important variable who could influence support for Hou.

#### *Who Will the Youth Vote For?*

Another key variable in this election will be the more than [2.9 million youths](#) in their 20s—a demographic that was critical to President Tsai's 2020 re-election—who will be eligible to vote in the 2024 elections. While younger voters have been turning away from the DPP, they are not turning to the KMT, but rather to the TPP.

On May 19, the KMT-affiliated [Foundation for the People](#) (啟思民本基金會) released a set of polls that it conducted related to domestic affairs, in particular relating to youths. KMT Legislator Johnny Chiang (江啟臣), who serves as the organization's chairman, stated that in the 2016 presidential election, President Tsai and the DPP won overwhelming support from young people, contributing to the total of 6.89 million votes (56.12 percent) they received.

According to the results of a Foundation poll that graded the Tsai Administration's record on a scale of 1-10, respondents

gave a score of 3.72 in the section "building a better country for young people." Meanwhile, Tsai's score among voters under 40 was a meager 4.03, highlighting the disappointment of Taiwan's youth with the administration's performance.

This souring of younger voters toward the DPP does not seem to reflect broader distaste for the party. Instead, it seems to be individual-driven, as Lai is seen as part of the older generation of the party. By contrast, the Foundation poll shows support for Ko above 40 percent. And while both the KMT and TPP would be expected to attack the DPP and Tsai's record on domestic issues—including youth unemployment, stagnant wages, and high housing costs—Hou's appeal to youth voters could be sapped by his reliance on the Party's old guards to define his campaign policy positions.

In response to results showing high youth support for the TPP, Legislator Chiang called it a warning signal for the KMT. [Chiang also noted](#) that the Tsai Administration has been in power for seven years, but the youth unemployment rate has not improved, wage growth has been offset by inflation, and housing prices are unaffordable for many young people. These governance difficulties should dampen the electability of Lai.

#### *TPP's Political Leverage is Growing*

While most political observers view Ko's chances to win the presidency as low due to his relative lack of political organization nationwide and the absence of a core support base, multiple political trends will enhance his—and his party's—political leverage over the two major political parties. First, many voters are [seeking political change](#). Second, Ko enjoys strong and enduring support among youth and independent voters. Finally, the close contest between the KMT and DPP could make Ko the kingmaker in terms of how he could lead his supporters on election day.

Other factors could increase Ko and the TPP's leverage in bargaining for favorable political posts and conditions in the 2024 elections. These include the apparent ceiling on Lai's support and the KMT's lack of party cohesion.

Ko is aware of the fact that the DPP and KMT may be trying to marginalize him, but their efforts to do so could prove increasingly difficult in an election where attracting independent voters could be paramount. Some observers believe that Ko could be angling for the position of premier in a future administration, or even Legislative Yuan president, if it could get Ko on the at-large ticket of the party. Nevertheless, doubts remain within both the KMT and the DPP about the wisdom of working with

Ko due to his unpredictability and tendency to lean either way when it suits his political interests. However, in the case of the KMT, teaming up with the TPP could become the only path to victory, as most polls indicate that KMT support alone may be insufficient.

Although the three polls show varying results, one thing is clear: the 2024 presidential election has no clear front-runner, and will be highly competitive. The three candidates also share relatively similar characteristics compared to recent contests, such as in the 2016 and 2020 elections. Also, in an unprecedented first in Taiwan's democratic history, all the candidates are native Taiwanese. While cross-strait relations will certainly weigh on voters' considerations, in light of the tightness of the race, the results could boil down to three key determining factors: KMT's party cohesion, youth voting behavior, and how Ko plays his cards.

**The main point:** Based on several recent polls conducted by the KMT and Blue-leaning media outlets, the 2024 election promises to be exceptionally competitive. While much remains uncertain, it is clear that all three parties will need to overcome considerable challenges to win the presidency.

[1] Another poll conducted by the [Normal Country Promotion Foundation](#) (正常國家文化基金會) from May 20-22 following Hou's nomination showed Lai leading in his support rating in the three-way race—beating the two other candidates by 11 percent. The poll from the DPP-aligned foundation showed that if Gou was Hou's running mate they could pull within three percent of Lai's support with Lai still winning (30:33). The poll also presented respondents with a hypothetical pairing of Ko serving as Gou's running mate, in which case they could pull within seven percent of Lai's support with Lai still winning (27:34).

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## The CCP Convenes Its Annual Taiwan Work Conference for 2023—and Signals a Possible Ideological Shift in Taiwan Policy

By: John Dotson

*John Dotson is the deputy director of the Global Taiwan Institute and associate editor of the Global Taiwan Brief.*

On May 9-10, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) hosted the [2023 Taiwan Work Conference](#) (2023年對台工作會議) (hereafter "TWC") in Beijing, an annual event that is nominally held to review and formulate the party's comprehen-

sive policies towards Taiwan. [Last year's conference](#), a caretaker event in the lead-up to the CCP 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, offered no new or noteworthy policy formations, and appeared to signal continuity for the CCP's overall approach to Taiwan. Since the 2022 TWC, however, a number of significant developments have taken place in the cross-strait environment—including the provocative military exercises that followed then-US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island (see [here](#) and [here](#)), and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's (習近平) appointment to a third term (and likely lifetime tenure) at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. As a significant event on the CCP's annual policy calendar, it is worth examining the messages emerging from this year's TWC in order to look for indications regarding the future direction of People's Republic of China (PRC) state policy towards Taiwan.

Although the TWC is, in theory, a coordination event for the CCP's Taiwan policy-making process, the limited information made public about the event suggests that it has shared the fate of so many other party-state events under Xi's tenure: rather than serving as a vehicle for contact and coordination across the multiple bureaucratic xitong (系統, "systems") responsible for implementing cross-strait policy, it appears to have become yet another venue for the top-down dissemination of propaganda for the purposes of internal party indoctrination. [1] Despite this, there were some subtle thematic indications to emerge from this year's TWC, which could provide some clues as to the future direction of PRC policy.

### **Official Messaging from the CCP's 2023 Taiwan Work Conference**

The [official CCP media reporting on the conference](#) was very light (nonexistent, really) in terms of providing any detailed breakdown of the agenda or specific events. Such reporting did note that attendees consisted of "central party-government military, civil, and mass [organization] departments, and various concerned responsible comrades." ([Video of the event](#) showed a large auditorium of civilian officials, with a scattered handful of military officers, furiously scribbling notes in ritualized displays of party loyalty.) While the breakdown of organizational representation is unknown, it may be reasonably assumed that most attendees were representatives of various branches of the CCP's sprawling bureaucracy for united front work (UFW, 統一戰線工作), which bears primary responsibility for implementing Taiwan policy.

Three CCP officials associated with Taiwan policy [appeared on stage](#) as the senior party members presiding over the conference. These were: [Song Tao](#) (宋濤), the director of the Central

CCP Taiwan Office (中共中央台灣工作辦公室) (which also operates under a dual identity as the PRC State Council Taiwan Office); [Wang Yi](#) (王毅), a Politburo member and director of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission (中央外事工作委員會); and [Wang Huning](#) (王滬寧), a member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC, 中央政治局常委會). The latter Wang was the most senior of the three officials: he holds the [fourth-ranked position in the Politburo hierarchy](#), which carries with it chairmanship of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中國人民政治協商會議)—and in turn, attendant responsibilities for managing the party's overall united front policy portfolio.



Image: CCP Taiwan Office Director Song Tao (left), PBSC Member Wang Huning (center), and CCP Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Wang Yi (right) at the CCP's annual Taiwan work conference, held in Beijing on May 9-10. (Image source: [China Nationalities and Religion Net](#))

Official CCP media coverage of the conference was striking in terms of how little it actually said about Taiwan in substantive terms—and by contrast, how much it said in terms of banging the drum for Xi's cult of personality. The [official CCP media summary](#) of the event emphasized Wang Huning's speech before the conference, in which Wang opened with a [laundry-list recitation](#) of slogans associated with the need for absolute loyalty to Xi Jinping, and for complete adherence to "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era" (習近平新時代中國特色社會主義思想). Wang also praised Xi for developing "a series of important discussions" (一系列重要論述) and "a series of new concepts, new thoughts, new strategies" (一系列新理念新思想新戰略) for Taiwan policy. These in turn had led to the "Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era" (see further discussion below), which all party members must "completely, precisely, and comprehensively carry out" (完整, 準確, 全面貫徹落).

Wang's comments also spoke of the importance of "the two sides of the Strait as one family" (兩岸一家親), and of maintaining the "system of welfare for Taiwan compatriots" (台灣同胞福祉的制度)—thereby alluding to the CCP's touted economic benefits for Taiwan's people under "deepening cross-strait integrated development" (深化兩岸融合發展). Wang also included the *de rigueur* denunciations of "Taiwan independence separatist activities" ("台獨"分裂活動) and "interference by foreign forces" (外部勢力干涉), and asserted the need to maintain the "92 Consensus" ("九二共識") as the basis for any cross-strait dialogue.

What does any of this mean? While the official summary of Wang's comments was light on substance and heavy on tiresome repetition of official slogans (提法), there are a few interesting points to tease out.

### ***Speculation Regarding Wang Huning and a New Ideological Formula for Taiwan***

Early this year, there was [media speculation](#) that Wang Huning, acting in his long-standing role as the CCP's lead ideologist, had been given responsibility for developing a new ideological framework for unification with Taiwan. Theoretically, this new model would supersede the venerable "One Country, Two Systems" (OCTS, 一國兩制) framework first promulgated under Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) in the late 1970s. For over four decades, OCTS has served as the CCP's official formula for incorporating Taiwan (and Macao and Hong Kong). However, OCTS enjoys [negligible support in Taiwan](#), and has been rejected by virtually every leading political figure on the island (including recent comments by [Hou You-yi](#) [侯友宜], the Kuomintang's [KMT, 中國國民黨] newly designated presidential candidate). Despite the moribund nature of OCTS, it has continued to be invoked as a pillar of CCP policy towards Taiwan, as recently as the leadership speeches presented at the annual "[Two Sessions](#)" (兩會) held in March of this year.

Despite this, mentions of OCTS were notably absent from the official summary of Wang's comments. Instead, the summary included three mentions of the "Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era" (新時代黨解決台灣問題總體方略) (*hereafter*, "Comprehensive Plan"), which was directly connected with the purported "thought" of Xi Jinping himself. The "Comprehensive Plan" is vague in its content (*a more detailed analysis of the "Plan" is available in a [previous Global Taiwan Brief article](#)*), but broadly re-asserts the current direction of CCP policy: rejecting engagement with Taiwan's current "separatist" government, building united front social and

cultural connections, and offering economic inducements to persons and groups in Taiwan who do not challenge PRC claims of sovereignty over the island and its people.

Wang Huning's comments were also noteworthy in terms of their continued insistence on maintaining the "92 Consensus" as a foundation of PRC policy and as a precondition for any official cross-Strait dialogue. Since at least summer 2022, the CCP propaganda system has been more forcefully [reasserting the concept](#), albeit with a significant shift in interpretation: namely, that the "92 Consensus" carries with it acceptance of the PRC's own "[One-China Principle](#)" (一個中國原則)—which in turn holds that the PRC is the one and only China, of which "Taiwan island" is a province. This goes beyond what nearly any public figure in Taiwan would agree to, except for marginalized voices on the extreme pro-unification fringe of Taiwan politics.

### Conclusions

Too much could easily be made of any single CCP forum or leadership speech, and outside observers attempting Kremlinology on the CCP's opaque policymaking processes should be cautious about inferring too much from any one event. Still, the limited information reported about Wang Huning's speech at this year's CCP Taiwan Work Conference offers some tantalizing clues as to what the CCP propaganda system might be signaling about the direction of CCP policy—or, at a minimum, how the CCP articulates and promotes that policy.

It is unusual that "One Country, Two Systems"—usually, a boilerplate staple of CCP narratives about Taiwan—was omitted from the coverage of Wang's speech. This could indicate a possible de-emphasis of the OCTS framework in CCP messaging, even though OCTS has not been explicitly rejected. Furthermore, the subtly increased emphasis on the "Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era"—especially in terms of it being linked with Xi Jinping's "new concepts, new strategies" *et al.*—suggests that the "Comprehensive Plan" could be emerging as the favored ideological framework for Taiwan as Xi enters his third term.

If this is indeed what is happening, such a step would allow Xi to quietly replace a framework associated with past CCP leaders with one that he could more exclusively claim for himself. In light of the megalomaniacal qualities that Xi has clearly demonstrated and the pervasive cult of personality that he has built around himself, this would align with a larger trend to characterize any major policy initiative as the product of Xi's own personal genius. Furthermore, fundamental aspects of OCTS—namely, the promise that Taiwan could maintain its own system of govern-

ment, social institutions, etc. under a future unification arrangement—appear to run counter to Xi's obsession with absolute party control. Furthermore, such promises were dropped from the PRC's updated 2022 white paper [The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era](#) (台灣問題與新時代中國統一事業). Xi, in all likelihood, does not wish to entertain any discussion of the future survival of "two systems" in any territory claimed by the PRC.

It is too early to say with confidence whether or not the "Party's Comprehensive Plan" will be elbowing aside "One Country, Two Systems" as the guiding framework for the CCP's "reunification" with Taiwan. However, it is possible that the new formula that some have expected to emerge from Wang Huning may already be before us—and that it may gradually move towards a more prominent place in the CCP's ideological discourse on Taiwan.

**The main point:** The Chinese Communist Party conducted its annual "Taiwan Work Conference" from May 9-10. While information regarding the conference is limited, Chinese state media sources provided summary accounts of the keynote speech given by Wang Huning, the senior-most official responsible for CCP united front policy. Wang's speech appeared to deemphasize "One Country, Two Systems" in favor of another formula titled "The Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era"—thereby signaling a potential shift in the CCP's prioritized ideological framework for Taiwan policy.

[1] Under Xi's tenure, the CCP has placed a [significantly increased](#) focus on internal ideological "education" for its own cadres.

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## Yoon Suk-yeol Dips a Toe in the Taiwan Strait

By: Sean King

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Despite their shared status as US-aligned democracies facing nominally communist invasion threats, South Korea has for decades kept Taiwan at [arm's length](#). But as second-year South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol moves his country even closer to the United States and adopts a wider Indo-Pacific approach than his predecessors, he has made forward-leaning remarks regarding Taiwan that have drawn the ire of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Yoon's comments track with a South Korean public that has grown increasingly sympathetic toward the island and

more sharply critical of Beijing. Beyond the rhetoric, however, do not expect Seoul to get directly involved in any potential Taiwan contingency. Nevertheless, the shift in attitude is a plus for Taiwan and indicative of South Korea's evolving position in the region.

### **Early Bonds**

After the United States, Chiang Kai-shek's (蔣介石) Republic of China (ROC) was the first country to recognize the newly formed Republic of Korea (ROK, otherwise known as South Korea) in 1948. As tragic as it was, the Korean War (1950-53) benefited Chiang's displaced government on Taiwan perhaps more than it did any other. At the time, Taipei held the China seat in the United Nations and voted for the UN resolutions that authorized the use of force in Korea.

However, Washington declined Chiang's offer of [33,000 troops](#) for the effort out of concerns that the conflict could morph into a proxy Chinese civil war, as Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) "volunteers" were fighting on North Korea's side. Chiang was, however, able to provide meaningful aid and interpreters, who interrogated captured Chinese troops. This was a huge public relations coup for his island regime, especially when [14,077](#) of these prisoners of war eventually chose to relocate to Taiwan instead of returning to the mainland.

For the United States, the war clarified Taiwan's strategic value as a frontline shield against communism, which ultimately led Washington to sign the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty with Taipei in 1954. In short, the Korean War ended up [guaranteeing Taiwan's security](#). Despite these events, Seoul and Taipei themselves were never formal defense treaty allies, merely signing a "[treaty of amity](#)" in 1964.

### **Coolness after the Cold War**

Imperfectly modeled on former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* ("Eastern Policy") of the 1970s, ahead of the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics then-South Korean President Roh Tae-woo began reaching out to the communist world through his own initiative of *Nordpolitik* ("Northern Policy"), designed to indirectly engage North Korea and ensure Soviet Bloc participation in the Games. [1] Roh could not then have known the Cold War would end the very next year with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nevertheless, he made the most of his opportunity, [establishing formal diplomatic relations](#) with Moscow in 1990.

After the PRC agreed not to block South Korea's accession to the UN in 1991 (in tandem with North Korea's joining the body), Seoul—without informing Taipei—chose to recognize Beijing in

1992. Taipei's then-ambassador in Korea, [Charles Shu-chi King](#), said of the abrupt move: "It was like killing somebody and explaining the reason later." Just as it did more recently in [Nicaragua](#), Beijing assumed ownership of Taipei's USD \$200 million embassy in Korea. Seoul had only the previous year [urged Taipei](#) not to sell the property, assuring then-President Lee Teng-hui's (李登輝) government that it had no intention of recognizing Beijing. Outraged Taiwanese subsequently burned South Korean flags, and no Taiwan or South Korean airline serviced either market for [the next 12 years](#), with third-market carriers picking up the slack. (As a result, the author first flew Hong Kong-based Cathay Pacific between Seoul and Taipei in 1998.)

Other perceived insults and slights followed. In 2010, Taiwanese again [burned South Korean flags](#) and boycotted Korean products when Taiwan's Yang Shu-chun (楊淑君) was disqualified from that year's Asian Games taekwondo tournament in Guangzhou, China. (Yang was accused of having extra sensors in her socks.) Taiwanese directed their anger at South Korea because they saw Koreans, both at the match and in positions of power in the Asian Taekwondo Union, as complicit in the disqualification. This unfortunate public reaction to a taekwondo match spoke to anti-Korean sentiment lurking just beneath the surface in Taiwan. By contrast, were a Japanese umpire to rule against Taiwan in their shared and cherished sport of baseball, Taiwanese would likely never think to turn on Japan or its people.

The issue of Japan itself has long provided another disconnect between South Koreans and Taiwanese, as many Koreans struggle to understand why Taiwanese have such strong affinities for anything associated with their common former imperial master. While Taiwanese regularly label Japan their [favorite foreign country](#), Jeong Han-wool of South Korean polling firm Hankook Research told the [New York Times](#) in 2021, "You know you're a real Korean when you feel hatred toward Japan for no particular reason."

### **A Shift, Courtesy of Beijing**

[Times change](#), however—and Beijing's actions in recent years are a major reason why. In 2016, South Korea decided to host a deployment of America's Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) system, meant to defend ROK territory and US forces based there from incoming North Korean missiles. [Beijing's reaction](#) was furious, seeing THAAD's radar capabilities as a threat to Chinese security. China mercilessly punished ROK interests, harassing South Korean companies in the PRC, blocking [K-Pop](#) entertainment, and stopping Chinese tourists from going to



South Korea.

South Korean views of mainland China plunged as a result. In 2016, before the effects of Beijing's THAAD retribution took hold, the [Asan Institute for Policy Studies](#) found that 56 percent of South Koreans viewed the PRC as the most important country for their country's economy, with only 32 percent saying the same about the United States. But by 2018, the results were reversed, with only 34 percent stating that the PRC was the most important and 53 percent saying so about the United States.

Since then, anti-PRC feelings among South Koreans have only grown, especially among Korean youth. This growing distrust has been linked to issues such as [cross-border air pollution](#), Beijing's [crackdown in Xinjiang](#), and even charges of [cultural appropriation](#). Simultaneously, Japan's relative standing has risen in their eyes as a result. In fact, more South Koreans now [view China more negatively than they do Japan](#) (unthinkable only last decade).

This turn against the PRC creates an opening for Taiwan, allowing South Koreans to see the island anew on its own merits, without concern for Beijing's admonishments and distortions. [Academics suggest](#) that South Koreans increasingly value Taiwan as a bastion of free speech and assembly, and worry for its fate after what has happened in Hong Kong. These warm feelings are having a positive bottom-line impact, as [Korean travelers](#) have been Taiwan's biggest source of tourists so far this year.

### ***Elections have Consequences***

Blunt—and [sometimes profane](#)—former prosecutor Yoon tapped into South Koreans' changing world views when he [won the presidency](#) by less than one percentage point last year. Housing and jobs were the biggest issues during the election, but Yoon's tough talk on North Korea and Beijing did nothing to hurt his cause. Yoon promised he would not engage in what he labeled his predecessor's "[equidistant diplomacy](#)" between Washington and Beijing. Instead, he vowed to clearly stand with Joseph Biden over Xi Jinping (习近平). South Korea has since taken part in [trilateral military exercises](#) and [intelligence sharing](#) with the United States and Japan, while Yoon himself has trumpeted universal values and called out North Korea on human rights.

Yoon's first major Taiwan-related move was regrettable, however, as he [refused to meet](#) then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in Seoul last summer (presumably out of fear of upsetting Beijing) after her much-covered Taiwan visit. (For his part, North Korea's Kim Jong Un sent Xi Jinping a [letter of solidarity](#) in re-

sponse to Pelosi's Taiwan stop.) Yoon's [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) also leaves more room than expected for cooperation with Beijing, and he still has not indicated whether South Korea will formally join the "[Chip 4](#)" technology alliance with the United States, Japan, and Taiwan.

Just before his state visit to the White House in April, Yoon told [Reuters](#) the increase in Taiwan tensions was due to attempts to change the status quo by force, and that he opposes any such change. He most pointedly said, "the Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, it is a global issue." In response, Beijing accused Yoon of "[third party meddling](#)," but he did not back down. And, just like when former South Korean President Moon Jae-in visited Washington in [2021](#), Yoon's [joint statement](#) with Biden called for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

### ***But What Does It All Mean?***

Sympathies and statements aside—and Yoon's more regional outlook notwithstanding—Seoul continues to prioritize peninsular affairs, and will always hope against hope that Beijing will one day help bring around North Korea. Koreans have historically seen their nation as a "[shrimp among whales](#)," wary of getting dragged into larger nations' squabbles. While South Korea assisted the United States in Vietnam and Iraq, Seoul still refuses to even [send weapons to Ukraine](#), citing legal concerns—and would likely seek to [avoid directly intervening](#) in any conflict over Taiwan.

Insofar as they would help at all, ROK forces might limit themselves to supporting logistics operations at existing US bases in South Korea. In an August 2022 [Jong-Ang Ilbo and East Asia Institute poll](#), 42 percent of South Korean respondents favored such a rear-area role, while only 23 percent favored actual joint military operations with the United States over Taiwan. With this in mind, Washington should seek to avoid re-purposing Korea-based US troops for use in Taiwan, as many South Koreans already [worry](#) about Washington's long-term commitment to their security. If the most the ROK ever does in the event of a hypothetical Taiwan contingency is to help keep North Korea at bay, so as to prevent any conflict from growing into a wider regional war, that would be contribution enough.

Either way, Kim Jong Un may not see a Taiwan contingency as the right time for an attack on the South, wanting to be sure the Chinese leader of the day would be ready to bail him out if necessary, just as Mao Zedong (毛澤東) did for his grandfather in 1950. And so long as the PLA is at war over Taiwan, it would be hard to imagine Beijing having much appetite for anything else.

After all, the first Korean War arguably cost Mao the island. No Chinese leader would ever let that happen again.

### **Good Enough for Now**

South Korea's approach to Taiwan is not nearly as defined as that of [Japan](#). But South Korean public sentiment and some official statements are moving in Taiwan's direction. (And for what it is worth, President Yoon suffered enormous [backlash at home](#) for not meeting Speaker Pelosi.) Taipei should make the most of these improving ties, encourage Seoul to speak up for it in various [international fora](#), and do whatever it can to foster even more frequent and closer people-to-people contacts. In the meantime, thousands of Korean tourists are returning home with new Taiwan friends and positive impressions of *Ilha Formosa*. That is not insignificant.

**The main point:** While South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol has proven more willing to speak out against China than his predecessor, Seoul is likely to remain focused on its own security concerns on the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, Taiwan has a unique opportunity to improve its relationship with its fellow East Asian democracy.

[1] [Ostpolitik](#), or "Eastern Policy," was then-West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's policy of recognizing Germany's postwar borders, expanded commercial ties with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies, and effective normalized relations with East Germany.

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## **The United States and Taiwan Announce a Partial Trade Deal**

By: Riley Walters

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On May 18, American and Taiwanese officials [announced](#) a conclusion to the first round of negotiations for the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Trade (USTI). These negotiations represent the first significant effort between the United States and Taiwan on trade since Taiwan joined the World Trade Organization in 2002. Negotiations for the trade initiative were announced just last [August](#), with negotiators having met only a couple of times within these nine months. It's unclear how many more rounds of partial deals there will be as a part of this trade initiative, but it's encouraging to see progress as American

officials have avoided trade negotiations with Taiwan for years.

The last two US administrations have looked at ways of expanding the US-Taiwan economic relationship. For decades, trade and investment issues were handled through the US-Taiwan [Trade and Investment Framework Agreement \(TIFA\)](#). But three new initiatives have emerged within the last three years. In 2020, the Trump Administration announced the launch of the Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue (EPPD), led by the State Department. In 2021, the Biden Administration announced the launch of the Technology Trade and Investment Collaboration (TTIC) framework, led by the Commerce Department. And last year, USTR announced the USTI. Each of these initiatives approaches economic issues like investment, technology, and trade a bit differently.

When the USTI trade negotiations were announced [last year](#), officials laid out 11 areas for negotiations – with the option to include other areas as negotiations progressed. The partial deal just announced covers four of those areas: (1) customs administration and trade facilitation; (2) regulatory practices; (3) anti-corruption; and (4) small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). There is also a chapter on services. Those areas that still remain to be negotiated are: agriculture, standards, digital trade, labor, environment, state-owned enterprises, and non-market policies and practices.



*Image: US and Taiwan trade negotiators in a publicity photo taken during a four-day round of talks in Taipei (January 17, 2023).*

*(Image source: [Focus Taiwan](#))*

### **Excerpts from the Agreement**

The agreement that was announced is still fresh off the press, meaning it still needs to be signed and enforced. But the text offers some valuable insight into how negotiators think about the US-Taiwan economic relationship. The preamble of the agreement text starts by highlighting that both the United States and Taiwan seek to "strengthen the economic and trade relationship

between the US and Taiwan.” Last year the United States was Taiwan’s second-largest trading partner for goods. Meanwhile, Taiwan was the 10<sup>th</sup>-largest trading partner of the United States. Despite the already large amount of trade between the United States and Taiwan, it’s clear that both sides would prefer to increase trade with each other—while reducing trade dependencies on countries like China.

The first chapter of substance in the agreement focuses on customs administration and trade facilitation. This chapter has the most noteworthy content of the whole agreement. Customs and trade facilitation is essentially the process of looking at ways to make the bureaucracy pertaining to importing and exporting goods more efficient. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is not just to make the forms that importers/exporters need to fill out easier to understand; but instead, to adopt paperless practices through the creation of digital filing practices. This includes the use of electronic invoicing (e-invoicing), electronic payments, and the digital exchange of certain information with customs officers. American and Taiwanese officials also agreed to establish a Committee on Trade Facilitation that will seek to encourage more cooperation between US and Taiwan trade authorities on these matters.

The second chapter of substance focuses on good regulatory practices. Generally, both sides agree good regulatory practices include “greater transparency, objective analysis, accountability, and predictability” when crafting new domestic regulations. Ways in which the agreement looks to increase transparency include: sharing a list of regulations expected to be adopted soon; making sure that the text of regulations soon to be adopted is easily accessible; and making sure that language used in new regulations is easy to understand. To help facilitate this, both sides agreed to also establish a Committee on Good Regulatory Practices.

The third chapter of substance is on “development and administration of services authorization measures (services domestic regulation).” Much of this chapter is similar to the chapter on good regulatory practices, in that is an attempt to make sure that non-regulatory measures taken by American and Taiwanese authorities are transparent and non-discriminating. As USTR [highlights](#) on its website, “the negotiated text ensures service suppliers are treated fairly when they apply for permission to operate, and that there is a smooth flow of information between the applicant for a license and the regulator.”

The next chapter of substance focuses on anticorruption. The goal of this chapter is to align with language used in the [US-Can-](#)

[ada-Mexico](#) trade agreement that ensures that public officials can’t use their positions of power for anti-competitive behavior or behaviors linked to corruption. Things that can be considered corruption include financial and non-financial bribery, and solicitation. It also includes the aiding or abetting of, or conspiracy to commit, corruptive practices. Other criminal offenses include embezzlement, keeping false records, or destruction of records.

Finally, the last chapter of substance focuses on small and medium-sized enterprises. Most jobs in the United States and Taiwan are created by SMEs. But the size of SMEs limits their ability to scale up, find import/export opportunities, and prepare for supply chain disruptions. The chapter on SMEs hopes to encourage more trade and investment between American and Taiwanese SMEs, while providing training, finance, and trade missions. Mostly, this means providing SMEs with the information they need to deal with the regulatory environment in both the United States and Taiwan, while also providing opportunities for greater Trans-Pacific engagement. The agreement also includes the option for both the United States and Taiwan to periodically convene an SME dialogue.

Like most trade agreements, there is language in the text of the agreement intended to ensure that nothing in the agreement runs contradictory to the national security interests of either the United States or Taiwan. The agreement also allows for amendments, which may be how other significant economic concerns—agriculture, digital trade, and the environment, for example—could be added in later. The agreement will go into force once both American and Taiwanese officials confirm the agreement is allowable within their respective domestic regulations. And just in case, the agreement can be terminated six months after either the United States or Taiwan decide to leave.

One thing that’s clarified throughout the document is legal authority for the United States and Taiwan to negotiate this agreement. It’s often Beijing’s argument that Taiwan is a part of the People’s Republic of China and therefore unable to have certain rights. This is untrue given that Taiwan is its own member at the World Trade Organization and administers its own customs territory. Taiwan already has nine free trade [agreements](#)—agreements which are much more substantial than this one.

### ***A Digital Trade Issue***

This first USTI agreement is what some may call an “early harvest.” This means that negotiators have picked several of the areas that were easiest to agree upon in order to secure an early agreement. This also means that the areas left for negotiators are much harder. There are two areas from the seven remaining

that stick out as particularly worrisome. The first is on agricultural issues: the United States and Taiwan have a long [history](#) of back and forth on agricultural issues, such as the trade in pork and beef. The second could be on digital trade.

As the United States and Taiwan continue negotiating the USTI, the United States is also in negotiations with 13 other countries towards the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) initiative. A focus on the digital economy was a part of IPEF's [inception](#). It just happens, however, that most parties to the IPEF negotiations are members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which has a specific chapter on electronic commerce. The United States is not a member of CPTPP, but does have existing precedent language on digital trade through both the US-Canada-Mexico (USMCA) trade agreement and the US-Japan Digital Trade Agreement. This means that the United States would likely have to square its interests between the digital chapters it has already agreed to with those of the CPTPP—and it would have to do so without involving Congress.

The bigger issue is whether American negotiators of IPEF are looking to negotiate a digital trade agreement that goes beyond what may be found in either the USMCA or CPTPP. Towards the end of May, IPEF partners announced an update to IPEF negotiations—including an [agreement](#) on supply chains. Before IPEF negotiations started, policy watchers in Washington saw a regional digital trade agreement as another early harvest possibility—however, there has been no update on whether the United States has been successful or not in negotiating such a deal through IPEF. Meanwhile, Taiwan has already committed to trying to join the CPTPP. It is one thing for Taiwanese officials to make sure their digital trade policies are aligned with the rules of the CPTPP; but it is another if American negotiations of USTI ask Taiwan to go above and beyond what is important for the US-Taiwan economic partnership.

**The main point:** The United States and Taiwan were able to secure their first trade agreement —the first of what could hopefully be several agreements. However, the initial success they have achieved with less contentious issues means that negotiations going forward will only become more difficult. At some point, Taiwan's desire to join the CPTPP may come in conflict with some of the efforts that US trade negotiators may try to achieve through the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Trade.