

Parsing Taiwanese Public Opinion and Political Debates over the Defense Budget

Russell Hsiao

The 2024 *Han Kuang* Exercise—a Small Step Towards More Decentralized Operations for Taiwan’s Military?

John Dotson

Youth TPP Support Explained: A Shift from China to Domestic Economic Concerns

Lillian Ellis

The Art of “Go”: Taiwan’s Economic Diplomacy

Cathy Fang

Taiwan’s Underworld, Part 1: Gangs, Temples, and Political Influence

Benjamin Sando

Beyond “Chinese Taipei”: How International Allies Can Support Taiwan through Sports Diplomacy

Adrienne Wu

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By: Russell Hsiao

Russell Hsiao is the executive director of the Global Taiwan Institute (GTI) and editor-in-chief of the Global Taiwan Brief.

Amid growing tensions across the Taiwan Strait and increased bipartisan calls from the United States for the island-nation to raise its defense budget, Taiwan has been steadily increasing its defense spending. Since 2016, after the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) regained control of the presidency, Taiwan’s baseline defense budget has steadily grown from USD \$9.6 billion in 2016 to USD \$16.6 billion in 2023. [1] These increases in defense spending have taken place in the face of intensified coercive pressure from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Following the DPP’s unprecedented third consecutive presidential election win, Beijing has described the new DPP president, Lai Ching-te (賴清德), as a “Taiwan separatist” and has ratcheted up its [military and non-military pressure campaigns](#) against the island-democracy since the election.

As the new administration in Taiwan prepares to announce its 2025 budget, reports indicate that increases in defense spending are likely to continue. According to [one report](#), the new Lai Administration is preparing to propose a baseline national defense budget for 2025 of around USD \$15.02 billion (NTD \$490 billion), and including the [special budget](#) and other funds would raise it to USD \$19.32 billion (NTD \$630 billion)—which would represent around a 5 percent increase from the 2024 budget. The planned announcement of next year’s defense budget follows the steady drumbeat of [calls by former senior US government officials and defense experts](#) for Taiwan to increase its defense spending. However, this decision and former President Donald Trump’s statement that “[Taiwan should pay us for defense](#)” have also reignited [heated debates](#) within Taiwan’s political space about the appropriate level of defense spending for the besieged island democracy.

Defense Spending Benchmarks: Three Percent of GDP, Per Capita, or Share of Government Spending

Despite the consistent year-over-year (YOY) increases in Taiwan’s defense spending over the past eight

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Editor-in-Chief

Russell Hsiao

Associate Editor

John Dotson

Staff Editor

Adrienne Wu

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Global Taiwan Institute
1836 Jefferson Place NW,
Washington DC 20036
contact@globaltaiwan.org

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years, the speculated amount for 2025 would still fall short of the 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) that many policymakers and defense analysts in the United States have called on Taiwan to spend on its self-defense. To put these increases into perspective, in 2016, Taiwan's baseline defense spending amounted to 1.82 percent of GDP and, in 2023, 2.17 percent. After another YOY increase in 2024, the net amount still accounted only for [around 2.5 percent of GDP](#)—leading Elbridge Colby, a former senior Trump Administration Pentagon official, to describe the investment as “[wildly inadequate](#).” Recently, the 27th US National Security Advisor Amb. (ret.) Robert O'Brien also [noted](#) that given the threats that Taiwan faces from the PRC, Taipei ought to be spending around 5 percent of its GDP on defense.

In light of the heightened scrutiny over Taiwan's defense spending, it is indeed worth examining whether Taiwan is spending enough on its defense. How does Taiwan's defense spending stack up to other countries of similar economic capacity, or countries that face comparable—if not less urgent—threats? The data from the following charts are drawn from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database, and show Taiwan's defense in actual terms: as percentage of GDP, per capita, and as share of total government spending in comparison to 8 other countries.

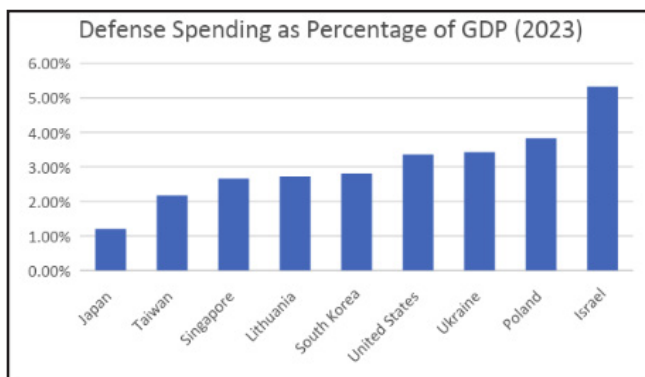


Image: 2023 defense spending as a percentage of GDP for Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Lithuania, South Korea, United States, Ukraine, Poland, Israel. (For a more precise comparison, the percentage for Ukraine was taken from 2021 before the outbreak of war. In 2023, Ukraine's defense spending was 36.65 percent of GDP.) (Image Source: Graph created by the author using data drawn from [SIPRI Military Expenditure Database](#).)

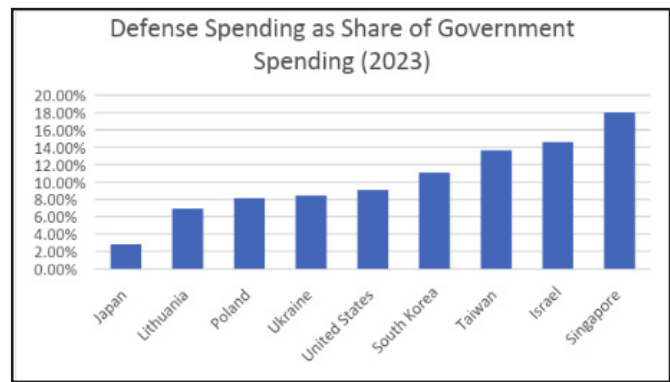


Image: 2023 defense spending as share of government spending for Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Lithuania, South Korea, United States, Ukraine, Poland, Israel. (For a more precise comparison, the percentage for Ukraine was taken from 2021 before the outbreak of war. In 2023, Ukraine's defense spending as a share of government spending was 58.17 percent.) (Image source: Ibid.)

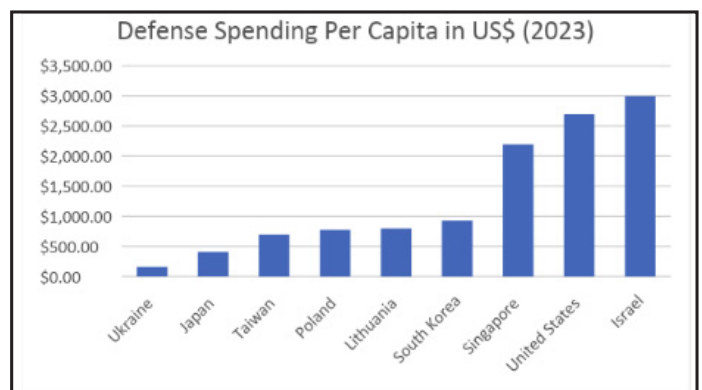


Image: 2023 defense spending per capita for Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Lithuania, South Korea, United States, Ukraine, Poland, Israel. (For a better comparison, the percentage for Ukraine was taken from 2021 before the outbreak of war. In 2023, Ukraine's defense spending per capita was USD \$1,762.) (Image source: Ibid.)

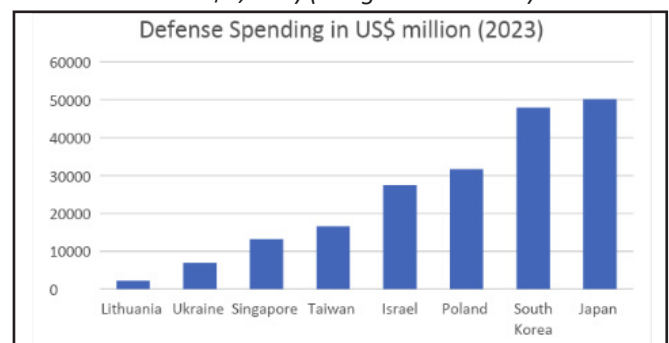


Image: 2023 defense spending in USD million in Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Lithuania, South Korea, Ukraine, Poland, Israel. (For a better comparison, the percentage for Ukraine was taken from 2021 before the outbreak of war. In 2023, Ukraine's defense spending per capita was USD \$64,753. The United States was also removed from this chart since its defense spending significantly dwarfs that of the other countries on the chart.) (Image source: Ibid.)

While a preliminary comparison of Taiwan's defense outlays shows that the percentage of GDP that Taiwan spends is relatively lower than other countries facing a similar level of threat, there are only nearly two dozen countries in the world that currently spend more than 3 percent of GDP on defense. [2] It is also important to note that defense spending measured in terms of a percentage of GDP is not the only metric for understanding the real value of overall defense spending—it can also be measured as a percentage of overall government spending (which would demonstrate its priority in government expenditures), on per capita terms (which would reflect government investment in each citizen individual based on the population size), and, of course, in actual terms.

Overall, while Taiwan ranks on the lower side in terms of its defense spending as a percentage of its GDP and per capita, it ranks high for defense spending in terms of overall government spending. Still, in terms of actual spending, it is clear that Taiwan is not spending as much as it could—and arguably [should](#)—in light of the threats it is facing.

Domestic Political Dynamics Affecting Debate over Defense Budget

Multiple factors contribute to Taiwan's restrained defense spending—not least of which are the political dynamics of a relatively young democracy that is not yet 20 years old.

The [DPP's stance](#) on raising defense spending is quite clear given the track record of the previous eight years, especially since the current president also doubles as the chairman of the DPP. Less clear, however, are the views of the opposition parties: the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) and Taiwan's People Party (TPP, 民眾黨), which together now control [a majority in the Legislative Yuan after the January elections](#). Moreover, the defense budget would need to be passed through the 13 members of the Legislative Yuan's [Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee](#) (外交及國防委員會), which is currently comprised of six members each from the KMT and DPP, and one member from the TPP.

While mainstream KMT and TPP officials have [expressed support](#) for increased defense spending, the influence of the pro-China wing within the KMT—represented by the likes of Chang Ya-chung (張亞中), who was the runner-up in the party's chairmanship election in 2020 and is closely aligned with former firebrand KMT Chairwoman Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱)—coupled with the party's current efforts to engage China, raises some doubt as to whether that is politically feasible.

With a decisive eight seats in the Legislative Yuan, the TPP could

cast the consequential swing votes in any critical decision considered by the lawmaking body. With next year's national defense budget expected to hit a new high, TPP legislator Lin Yi-chun (林憶君), the one and only TPP member in the Legislative Yuan's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and therefore the tie-breaker on any votes filtered along party lines, opined that it is normal for the national defense budget to increase year by year as the economy grows. [According to Lin](#), rather than whether or not the spending should increase, the key issue would be how to spend money wisely. Lin divided Taiwan's defense spending into three clusters: personnel, training, and military investments—and pointed out that there would be pressures for trade-offs between the three in a resource-constrained environment. In order to deal with growing threats from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨), Lin [said](#) that Taiwan should increase its defense budget to 3 percent of its overall GDP, and increase domestic procurement to help upgrade Taiwan's defense industrial capacity.

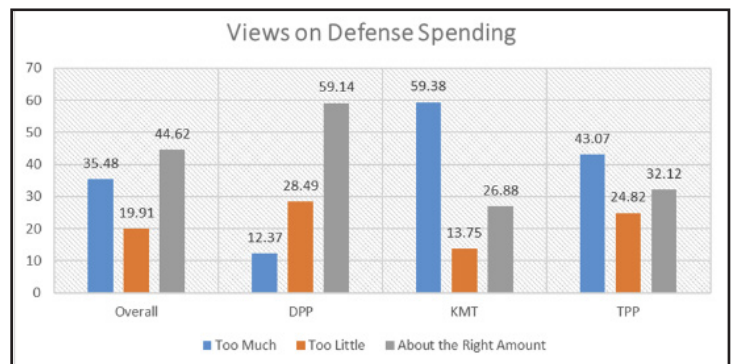


Image: Results of a public opinion survey conducted in 2023 by Timothy S. Rich and Miriam Dawson that asked Taiwanese respondents if the government spends too much, too little, or about the right amount on defense. (Image source: [Taiwan In-sight](#))

Some Taiwan defense analysts, however, are skeptical of the feasibility of increasing the country's defense spending. Chieh Chung (揭仲), a seasoned defense analyst who is currently an associate research fellow with the KMT's official think tank the National Policy Foundation (國家政策研究基金會), poured cold water on the idea that Taiwan can raise its defense spending to 5 percent of the nation's GDP. [According to Chieh](#), if Taiwan were to raise its defense spending to 5 percent of GDP, that would account for 43 percent of the government's total spending for 2024 (or USD \$37.66 billion/NTD \$1.22 trillion), which would be an unrealistic expectation for any democracy during peacetime. He was also [skeptical](#) that 3 percent of GDP would be feasible, as it would amount to 26 percent of all government

spending in 2024. [According to Chieh](#), raising defense spending to 3 percent of GDP may have been more realistic back in 2008 when it would have accounted for 21 percent of all government spending.

Another aspect of the conversation that has been relatively undiscussed is that there are also legal constraints on increasing Taiwan's defense spending. As an exercise of tight fiscal discipline, Taiwan's [Public Debt Act](#) (公共債務法) restricts the central government's total public debt to no more than 40.6 percent of the average gross domestic product for the previous three years. In the early 2000s, Taiwan government nearly crossed this legal red line and it [could potentially approach this threshold](#) if it needed to significantly borrow large sums of money to surge military spending.

Shifting Public Opinion on Defense and Defense Spending

In any democracy, budget allocations reflect the government's priorities but they also require public support. As such, budgetary considerations are always a matter of impassioned political contest, and social spending for public services that are readily visible is preferred over seemingly intangible military spending that ordinary citizens cannot readily see or feel until needed in a time of crisis. This has traditionally been the case in Taiwan, which also had to contend with sensitive civil-military relations during the martial law period—with the military historically viewed as a tool of government repression.

However, public attitudes toward the military and defense spending appear to be changing. According to [a December 2023 survey](#) conducted by the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR, 國防安全研究院), a think tank supported by the Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部), 55 percent of respondents think the current defense budget is insufficient, whereas 45 percent think that it is sufficient; 59 percent support reducing other government expenses to raise the defense budget to 3 percent of GDP, whereas 42 percent oppose; only 41 percent of respondents support raising taxes to raise the defense budget to 3 percent of GDP, whereas 59 percent oppose. By comparison, [surveys conducted in 2020](#) showed that only between 39.1 and 42.1 percent of respondents supported increased defense spending, as manifested in the purchase of arms.

In [another INDSR survey](#) conducted in March, 40 percent of the respondents thought that the defense budget was sufficient and 59 percent supported raising the defense budget to 3 percent of GDP. On other defense-related matters, 83 percent support the decision to extend conscription (to one year), 53.9

percent have confidence in the military, and 64.6 percent of respondents have a positive image of the military.

Conclusion

What do these data points suggest about Taiwan's defense spending and the Taiwanese public view? To be sure, Taiwan's defense spending is relatively low for a country of its economic capacity when compared to other nations facing a similar threat environment. Yet, given the relatively high percentage of defense spending as a matter of overall government expenditure, it would be unfair to characterize these efforts as unserious. Moreover, when one evaluates total defense-related expenditures, it should also consider what it does or does not include. If enhancing critical infrastructure resiliency—as suggested by [a recent Atlantic Council report](#)—and vital to national security is considered as broader defense spending, this would significantly raise Taiwan's defense budget.

In terms of the shift in how the Taiwanese public views defense spending—which has been catalyzed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine—the population may be reaching a tipping point in how they view the necessity of more investments in the military and national defense. One indicator can be found in the groundswell of [public awareness and concerns](#) about the Ukraine war leading to a burgeoning of civil defense groups in Taiwan. President Lai has the opportunity to build on the successes of the Tsai Administration to continue improving the public's image of the military, and to strengthen public support for overall national defense and resiliency.

While the speculated baseline budget for 2025 reflects only a modest increase in Taiwan's defense spending, it is also important to remember that the baseline numbers alone do not illustrate the whole picture and are contingent on a host of other factors. As previously [noted](#) by GTI Deputy Director John Dotson: "It seems clear that special budget supplementals will continue to be a significant part of overall Taiwan defense spending, particularly as it pertains to the acquisition of new hardware."

Overall, Taiwan has the economic capacity to raise defense spending—but there are constraints, and there will be trade-offs. Taiwanese leaders must find the means to raise the country's self-defense capacity, but this is also contingent on addressing legal constraints, and both the capacity and [willingness of foreign powers](#) to provide it with the training and arms that it needs to address the spectrum of threats facing it.

With real constraints on the United States' industrial capacity to provide Taiwan with the defense-related goods and services it

requires, the United States—along with allies and like-minded partners—has to consider innovative concepts and mechanisms to deliver on Taiwan’s defense needs. For instance, a distributed defense industrial base and co-production with Taiwan could be one consideration. For Taipei’s part, although past administrations may have been hesitant to show how much the Taiwanese government was actually spending on defense-related items due to concerns about a backlash from the public concerning unnecessary expenses, public attitudes in Taiwan appear to be shifting. Taiwan’s leaders have the opportunity to seize on this shift to make long overdue reforms—and time is of the essence.

The main point: Criticisms that Taiwan is not increasing its defense spending enough fail to take into account that defense spending can be measured in a variety of different ways—including as a share of government spending, per capita, and in actual terms—and is also contingent on legal constraints as well as what the United States is willing and able to provide it. While defense spending is likely to increase under the Lai Administration, the new government should seize on public support if they want to make long-overdue reforms to Taiwan’s defense spending.

[1] This figure is drawn from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>) and does not include the special budget or funds.

[2] [According to SIPRI](#), in 2023, the following countries for which it had data for spent more than 3 percent of GDP on defense: Algeria, Morocco, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Mali, South Sudan, Togo, United States, Kyrgyz Republic, Poland, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Greece, Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia.

The 2024 *Han Kuang* Exercise—a Small Step Towards More Decentralized Operations for Taiwan’s Military?

By: John Doston

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

On July 22, the Republic of China (ROC) armed forces kicked off the live maneuver phase of the 40th iteration of the *Han Kuang* military exercise (漢光演習), an annual event held since 1984 that is intended to simulate efforts to resist an invasion by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). (Following traditional

practice, the exercise was divided into two phases: an earlier virtual phase, involving computer simulations and tabletop exercises, was [held from April 19-26](#)—and reportedly involved a scenario in which a [Chinese military exercise was used as cover for an actual attack](#) on Taiwan.) The annual *Han Kuang* exercise is the largest training event on the annual calendar for the ROC armed forces, and accordingly provides an opportunity to view evolving trends in Taiwan’s defense posture. However, previous iterations of *Han Kuang* have been the [subject of criticism](#) on grounds that the exercise is overly scripted, characterized by rigid top-down command structures, and conducted largely for public relations value—and that the exercise therefore provides limited training value in terms of preparing military personnel for the chaos of actual battlefield environments. [1]

Prior to this year’s exercise, Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部) officials consistently stressed a message that this year’s *Han Kuang* would be less scripted, and would incorporate increased latitude for decentralized decision-making on the part of lower-echelon units. For example, Major General Tung Chi-hsing (董冀星), Director of the Joint Operations Planning Division at MND, [declared in an early April press conference](#) that: “The *Han Kuang* exercise will practice different scenarios and mission-oriented command... [we will] implement decentralized command mechanisms, and demonstrate [the military’s] capability to conduct its own independent defense operations.”

This message was further reinforced by Defense Minister Wellington Koo (顧立雄) and Chief of the General Staff Admiral Mei Chia-shu (梅家樹) in an [appearance before the Legislative Yuan on June 26](#). In his statements to the legislature, Admiral Mei reiterated the message that this year’s exercise would be less scripted, and would emphasize greater initiative on the part of lower-echelon units. Of note, other [messaging from defense officials](#) further indicated that the live-fire components of the exercise would be shifted to outlying islands and away from the main island of Taiwan, and that this year there would not be designated aggressor units intended to take on the role of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) personnel—both steps likely taken out of caution to reduce the possibility of live fire accidents in more unscripted scenarios.

In addition to the promised less-scripted approach, MND messaging prior to the exercise also emphasized two additional points of interest. First, the MND announced that the exercise would, for the first time, test revised guidelines and rules of engagement for [defensive counter-strikes](#) against an attacking force. Second, Taiwan government sources had indicated that the exercise would emphasize testing the [ability of military and](#)

[civilian agencies to coordinate their efforts](#) in keeping supply lines open and transportation assets functioning in the face of a blockade scenario.

In light of these signaled changes, this year's *Han Kuang* promised to be of particular interest. As events played out, the latter half of this year's *Han Kuang* exercise was canceled due to [Typhoon Gaemi](#)—thereby severely curtailing both the scope of the exercise, and the ability of observers to make judgments about it. However, an abortive schedule of events was held during the first three days, as detailed in the selected highlights below.



Image: Troops of the ROC Army 109th Brigade take part in a simulated operation to suppress enemy fifth column agents during a scenario in New Taipei City during the Han Kuang exercise (July 23, 2024). (Image source: [ROC Ministry of Defense](#))

Highlights of Han Kuang 2024

July 22 (Monday)

Preparatory to the exercise, the [ROC Navy deployed assets](#)—including at least two Kuang Hua VI (光華六號)-class missile boats, and vehicle-mounted anti-ship missile launchers—to the vicinity of Taitung (southeastern Taiwan) for training evolutions during the exercise.

In a common pattern for *Han Kuang* exercises in recent years, the first day of the exercise saw [dispersal drills](#) by naval and air force platforms, simulating movement by these assets to avoid PLA missile attacks on their ports and airfields. Unspecified ROC naval units sortied from port to operating locations off the coast. ROC Air Force aircraft flew from airfields along the western coast of Taiwan (facing the Taiwan Strait) to airfields in Hualien and Taitung (along the east coast), the locations of hardened shelters for fighter aircraft.

ROC Army personnel conducted a drill to [place naval mines and nets in the Tamsui River](#) (淡水河) north of Taipei to guard

against enemy infiltration or landing operations. (The Tamsui River has long been viewed as a potential landing area for an invasion force, and has accordingly been a traditional site for counter-amphibious landing scenarios—as was the case with [drills in New Taipei City's northwestern Bali District \[八里\] during Han Kuang 2023](#).) Personnel of the ROC Army's 53rd Engineering Group also assembled oil tanks, cables, and other materials to [create floating obstacles](#) on the river.

Reservists reported to multiple locations around Taiwan for temporary mobilization and training during the exercise—including [reservists who reported to a training center in Taoyuan](#) for a planned period of 5-7 days of refresher training, and a scenario involving the defense of Taoyuan International Airport. This continues a pattern first started during the [2022 Han Kuang exercise](#) of increased participation by reserve force personnel.

The 47th iteration of the annual [Wan-An civil defense exercise](#) (萬安47號演習)—a concurrent event with *Han Kuang* each year—commenced in central Taiwan. In the drill, air raid sirens sounded from 1:30PM to 2PM local time, with residents required either to remain indoors, or to clear the streets and take refuge in designated shelters.

July 23 (Tuesday)

President Lai Cheng-te (賴清德) and Defense Minister Wellington Koo flew to Hualien Air Force Base to [inspect exercise activities](#) at the base, to include simulated trauma care at a field hospital, and the opening of an emergency runway after the main runway was deemed damaged by missile strikes.

The *Wan-An* air raid drills were conducted in the [northern area of Taiwan](#) (to include Taipei City).

ROC Army personnel conducted a “nighttime counter-infiltration drill” (夜間反滲透演練) in An-ping Harbor, Tainan City (see [image on next page](#)).

July 24 (Wednesday)

Military personnel assigned to the Penghu Islands held [counter-amphibious landing drills](#), featuring live firings of Stinger anti-aircraft and Javelin anti-armor missiles, as well as artillery and mortars. As originally planned, these drills were to include participation by air force and naval units, but this was canceled due to the approach of Typhoon Gaemi. Similar live-fire exercises were also held in Matsuo. Planned live-fire drills in Kinmen were canceled due to the presence of merchant vessels sheltering in Liaoluo Port (料羅港) ahead of the approaching typhoon.

[Typhoon Gaemi swept through Taiwan on July 24](#)—with the



Image: Troops of the ROC Army 137th Brigade conduct a “night-time counter-infiltration drill” in An-ping Harbor (Tainan) during the Han Kuang exercise, July 23. (Image source: [Military News Agency](#))

center of the storm making landfall on the east coast, and crossing through northern Taiwan—causing severe flooding, property damage, and disruptions to travel throughout the island.

The Wan-An drills planned for eastern Taiwan, and Taiwan’s outlying islands, were [canceled due to the weather](#).



Image: Army personnel on Matsu conducting an artillery live-fire drill, July 24. This was the last day of training activities before the Han Kuang exercise was canceled due to Typhoon Gaemi. (Image source: [Matsu Defense Command / OCAC](#))

July 25 (Thursday)

The Wan-An drills planned for southern Taiwan were [canceled due to the weather](#).

As a result of Typhoon Gaemi, all exercise activities were officially [canceled effective at noon on July 25](#), with military personnel shifting to island-wide rescue and relief operations.

Conclusions

This year’s *Han Kuang*, as laid out in MND messaging prior to the

exercise, promised to be a significant event that would test out a number of new practices for the ROC military. Foremost among these was to have been a less-scripted and more spontaneous approach to the annual exercise—and such a move would indeed be a worthwhile and welcome shift in both the training practices and the traditionally rigid, top-down command structure of the ROC armed forces. (The restriction of live-fire exercises to Taiwan’s outlying islands—where better-trained, volunteer forces are located—was likely done in order to reduce the prospect for accidents in less-scripted scenarios involving reservists and other personnel with less rigorous training.)

The promised emphasis on counter-blockade operations to ensure the continued flow of necessary supplies was also intriguing—and reflects a key defense concern for Taiwan in the face of what is arguably the most likely crisis scenario involving major PRC military operations against the island. And, while few details were made available, the issue of simulated counter-strikes against the PRC—a controversial aspect of Taiwan defense policy dating back to the Chen Shui-bian Administration, and a significant component of [defense strategy as laid out in the 2021 Quadrennial Defense Review](#)—would also be a significant element to watch out for in Taiwan’s military exercises.

Unfortunately, due to the combination of limited public information about specific exercise scenarios, and the abortive nature of this year’s exercise, it is difficult to judge the extent to which these concepts have been incorporated in a meaningful way into the training of the ROC military. As this is now the second consecutive *Han Kuang* impacted by a major storm (portions of the 2023 *Han Kuang* were [canceled due to Typhoon Doksuri](#)), some defense commentators in Taiwan have called for [re-scheduling the annual exercise](#) away from the summer typhoon season.

The 2024 *Han Kuang* exercise had promised—at least in MND publicity messages—to be a significant training event, which would incorporate innovative practices into what had long been criticized as an overly scripted, *pro forma* exercise. On these grounds, it is particularly disappointing that the exercise was canceled due to severe weather—and will make *Han Kuang* all the more worthy of close attention in 2025.

The main point: The live-maneuver portion of Taiwan’s annual *Han Kuang* military exercise was scheduled to take place from July 22-26. Prior to the exercise, defense officials had promised a more decentralized command structure and less-scripted approach for the exercise. However, the early cancellation of this year’s exercise due to Typhoon Gaemi makes it difficult to assess

how meaningful these planned changes actually were.

[1] The author has himself been critical of past iterations of *Han Kuang* on these grounds. See:

1. John Dotson, “The Highlights of Taiwan’s 2022 Han Kuang Military Exercise,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, August 10, 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/08/the-highlights-of-taiwans-2022-han-kuang-military-exercise/>;
2. John Dotson, “An Overview of Taiwan’s 2023 Han Kuang Military Exercise,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, August 9, 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/08/an-overview-of-taiwans-2023-emhan-kuang-em-military-exercise/>.

Youth TPP Support Explained: A Shift from China to Domestic Economic Concerns

By: Lillian Ellis

Lillian Ellis is a Summer 2024 intern at the Global Taiwan Institute.

Following Taiwan’s election this January, scholars focused their analysis on the surprising success of the Taiwan’s People’s Party (TPP, 民眾黨)—the once-fringe, third party in Taiwan that managed to secure an impressive [eight seats in the legislature](#). TPP presidential candidate Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) received [26.5 percent of the vote](#). “It looks like over 20 percent of Taiwanese support the TPP,” GTI Advisor Shelley Rigger said [in a post-election analysis piece](#) for Brookings. “They voted for its presidential candidate, and they voted for its party list.”

The impressive success of the TPP within this election cycle can largely be attributed to the party’s strong youth support. Youth support of the TPP primarily stems from the party’s strong messaging surrounding Taiwan’s domestic economic conditions—conditions that young voters feel establishment leaders have failed to address. While the TPP’s economic platform does not differ significantly from that of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) or the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) and despite the fact that Taiwan’s economy remains in healthy ranges at domestic and international levels, youth are increasingly frustrated with rising costs, inflation, and wage stagnation. These domestic economic issues have taken the forefront of TPP messaging, as relations with China are viewed as less of a priority.

Taiwan’s youth make up a large portion of eligible voters in Taiwan, making their voter base an increasingly important one. [At](#)

[least a fourth of Taiwan’s eligible voters are between the ages of 20 and 40](#)—including one million first time voters in the recent elections who are aged 20 to 23. Furthermore, [several analyses](#) leading up to January’s election described the youth vote as having the potential to swing the presidential election. Taiwan’s youth, and their growing disapproval of traditional DPP and KMT politics, should therefore be carefully considered by analysts, leaders, and future candidates as they remain a crucial voter base in Taiwan—and as they increasingly value economic concerns over cross-strait issues.

Taiwan’s Global and Domestic Economic Overview

While Taiwan’s inflation and unemployment rates at the macro level remain in healthy ranges for the country’s growth, young voters increasingly view the domestic economic situation as a top concern. Within the global context, Taiwan’s economic outlook remains strong. Due to a global increase in exports during the pandemic, Taiwan’s gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2021 reached an impressive [6.6 percent](#). While GDP growth has slowed in recent years, dropping as low as 1.4 percent in 2023, growth has generally followed global trends—which makes sense given Taiwan’s economic reliance on trade. Analysis of Taiwan’s economy globally is generally hopeful for 2024, with [consumer price index \(CPI\) growth—a common measure of inflation—projected to decrease](#). While Taiwan’s GDP growth mirrors global trends, domestic economic trends have stirred up frustration among Taiwan’s voters—particularly among young workers and students in Taipei.

At the micro level, increased prices, unemployment, and wage stagnation are seen as persistent issues. Most recently, Taiwan’s Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics (DG-BAS, 行政院主計總處) announced a [CPI growth forecast of 2.03 percent for 2024](#)—a significant increase from its original [1.6 percent growth prediction](#)—due to an [11 percent increase in electricity rates](#). This February, prices of goods in Taiwan grew by their [highest rates since August 2022](#). [Over a third of low-wage workers are younger than 30 years old](#), and analysts pointed out that [wage growth in 2023 failed to keep up with the pace of inflation](#).

Despite Taiwan’s relative success on the global economic stage, Taiwan’s youth remain frustrated with domestic economic conditions—and these are frustrations that the TPP continues to successfully leverage.



Image: TPP supporters at a rally prior to Taiwan's January presidential and legislative elections (January 12, 2024). Enthusiasm among younger voters has been a key element of the emerging party's base of support. (Image source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Youth Frustrations and the TPP Platform

Frustration with how establishment leaders have handled these issues, combined with the TPP's strong messaging on economic concerns—especially on social media—continues to leverage youth support. “There’s this anger against the DPP for failing to address these long standing economic issues that face Taiwan,” Brian Hioe, a Taiwanese political commentator for *New Bloom Magazine*, [told the BBC](#). The TPP as a party benefits from their anti-establishment messaging and their lack of a political record. The TPP, able to recognize its unique position as an alternative option, has focused its messaging on anti-establishment rhetoric. Having a third party “can be exciting for young people who want a more anti-establishment platform,” Liu Wen, a researcher at Academia Sinica, [told AP News in January](#).

TPP messaging throughout last year's election was extremely successful. Soochow University in Taipei conducted [a December 2023 poll](#) in which 33.9 percent of undergraduate students reported favoring Ko, while 22.1 percent preferred the DPP's Lai Ching-te (賴清德). The DPP's Formosa Faction (美麗島系) released [a December 2023 survey](#) that reported that 40 percent of respondents aged 20-29 supported Ko, while 31.6 percent supported Lai and 19.7 percent backed the KMT's Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜).

The TPP's economic platform itself is not wildly different from DPP and KMT policies. For instance, the [TPP's “housing justice” policies](#), including increasing the number of social housing units especially for youth and elderly populations, [mirrors almost entirely the language of DPP and KMT housing platforms](#). The TPP's housing platform, [as written online](#), describes economic issues of low wages and increased inflation—but does not ex-

plicitly summarize a clear solution to these conditions. [During presidential debates](#), candidates from all three parties primarily spent time debating the progress of social housing goals—as opposed to the existence of the policies themselves.

Still, the content of specific TPP policies appears to be independent from the success of the party's messaging. As long as the TPP's social media platforms continue to vocalize frustrations about Taiwan's economy, youth will remain connected to Ko and his party's platform. Ko has emphasized economic priorities as a large part of his campaign, frequently posting videos on Instagram of him visiting supporters struggling to pay rent, find work, and get food on the table. “When you eat ice cream, you must lick the lid, when you eat pudding, you must lick the seal completely clean (你吃冰淇淋，一定要舔上蓋，你吃布丁，封膜舔得乾乾淨淨),” he wrote in a [September Instagram post](#) before emphasizing his commitment to alleviating economic anxieties. Ko has 1.2 million Instagram followers and hundreds of thousands of followers on TikTok, both platforms where he continues to publish political messages to his young audience. “It's really nice to see that Taiwan still has level-minded politicians (看到台灣還有頭腦清醒的政治人物實在覺得 欣慰),” read a popular comment on [a recent Ko post](#) about DPP political and economic failures.

A Dwindling China Priority

Although the TPP ultimately lost the presidential race, the party's lasting ability to successfully connect with Taiwan's youth and acquire eight seats in the legislature represents a growing prioritization of domestic economic concerns over cross-strait issues from Taiwan's youth. Young people in Taiwan, while not forgetful of China's threat, have chosen—through their support of the TPP—to prioritize economic concerns. Ahead of the 2024 election, a [Commonwealth Magazine survey](#) that included 15,000 Taiwanese respondents found that economic development was the most important issue among voters, over national security and cross-strait relations. This answer was especially prominent among respondents aged between 20 and 39.

This is not to say that the China issue is completely disregarded by Taiwan's youth. Youth in Taiwan between the ages of 20 and 44 continue to overwhelmingly support an independent Taiwan, [according to a September 2023 Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation \(TPOF, 財團法人台灣民意基金會\) poll](#). However, increasingly, young voters in Taiwan have emphasized that domestic economic conditions should be prioritized. Henry Su, a 19-year-old student at National Taiwan University (NTU, 國立台灣大學), [told AP News in January](#) that he was “disappointed”

with the DPP's prioritization of the China threat over concerns surrounding high costs of living.

While the TPP has not disregarded cross-Straits relations either, TPP messaging surrounding relations with China is extremely neutral—appealing to youth favoring a prioritization of domestic issues. Frequently using analogies from his experience as a surgeon [and describing China as a “tumor”](#) that Taiwan should learn to live with, Ko describes China as an issue to be managed but not removed. “There’s no point in even talking about unification or independence right now because you can’t achieve either,” he said in a [September interview with Bloomberg TV](#). The TPP's relatively neutral stance on the China issue appeals to youth frustrated with a perceived over-prioritization of cross-Straits relations.

Youth Legislative Reform Protests

Even though young people in Taiwan remain connected with the TPP online, TPP youth support has yet to be entirely solidified as evidenced by recent legislative reform protests. [Tens of thousands of Taiwanese citizens protested outside the Legislative Yuan](#) multiple times in late May, opposing TPP and KMT legislative expansion bills that passed on May 28. [Many of these protests included high school and college students](#), some even carrying sunflowers in homage to the 2014 Sunflower Movement. “No dialogue, no democracy” was one of the chants repeated by the young crowd on May 21 as they opposed the KMT and TPP's fast tracking of the legislation.

This recent push against TPP legislative actions demonstrates that youth support of the TPP is contingent on the TPP's ability to vocalize their economic concerns, and born out of frustrations with how DPP and KMT leaders have handled issues related to the economy. The TPP itself, as recent protests have shown, has not completely won over Taiwan's youth. Instead, it is more likely that the TPP enjoyed youth popularity through the circumstances of its rise and its successful messaging surrounding economic concerns.

Conclusion

As young people in Taiwan continue to experience high costs of living, low wages, and frustrations with the DPP and KMT establishment, young voters have echoed disapproval of what they perceive to be an over-prioritization of the China issue in Taiwanese politics. Although Taiwan's youth have already become critical of the TPP's actions in the Legislative Yuan, their overwhelming support of the party this January due to the TPP's successful messaging on economic issues is crucial to consider.

Additionally, the TPP has continued to build a strong social media presence online. As Ko wrote in a [May Instagram post](#): “You can not let the Democratic Progressive Party become the democratic regressive party, you can not continue to use an arrogant attitude to create division, intensify confrontation, and worsen Taiwan's problems such as low wages, inflation, high rent and housing prices, and power shortages (你不可以讓民主進步黨變成民主退步黨、不可以繼續用傲慢的態度製造分裂、激化對立,惡化台灣的低薪、通膨、高房租高房價、缺電等種種問題).”



Image: A caption of one of Ko's Instagram posts warns followers of DPP policies amid protests outside of the Legislative Yuan this May (May 16, 2024). The TPP frequently uses social media as a way to connect with its youthful base. (Image source: [Instagram](#)).

The TPP maintains a strong connection with their young followers online, discouraging support of DPP and KMT policies while emphasizing the need to prioritize domestic economic issues over the China threat. The TPP's success in harnessing the concerns of young Taiwanese should be closely watched by scholars and politicians as the party continues to inspire the youth vote—especially as Taiwan's parties have [already begun strategizing](#) for their 2026 local campaigns.

The main point: The TPP continues to harness youth support as frustration with economic conditions and DPP and KMT leadership grows. As a result, within TPP messaging, relations with China have been put on the back burner in order to emphasize rhetoric intended to appeal to Taiwanese youth: The perceived failure of DPP and KMT leaders to combat low wages, high costs, and increased inflation.

The Art of “Go”: Taiwan’s Economic Diplomacy

By: Cathy Fang

Cathy Fang is a policy analyst at the Project 2049 Institute, and also serves as an associate at Armitage International, L.C. Prior to this, she worked as a legislative assistant at the Legislative Yuan in Taiwan.

While both semiconductors and pressure from China have brought Taiwan into the international spotlight, its [official diplomatic relations](#) remain overshadowed by the chips it makes. However, these two aspects of Taiwan’s international position are not mutually exclusive, and they can complement each other—this synergy is the essence of economic diplomacy.

Economic Diplomacy: Traditional Tools, New Perspectives

Although economic diplomacy is a cornerstone of Taiwan’s gateway to the international community, it often resembles a one-way rather than a two-way street. Even though Taiwan has provided aid and shared technology to help other countries prosper, this approach has brought relatively limited financial and diplomatic returns to Taiwan itself. This has led to domestic criticisms of Taiwan’s outreach policies, with some viewing these efforts as merely [playing a dollar-for-dollar game](#) with China to secure more diplomatic ties. However, as Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung (林佳龍) aptly put it, Taiwan’s diplomatic approach has evolved from “[stabilized-ties \(固邦\)](#)” to “[prospered-ties \(榮邦\)](#).” In this vein, economic diplomacy is not about handing out benefits, but about sharing them. This philosophy also aligns with the definition of economic diplomacy: [economic diplomacy leverages diplomatic skills and economic tools to advance a nation’s economic, political, and strategic goals](#). Its dual nature involves using economic strategies to achieve foreign policy objectives, while employing diplomatic efforts to meet economic goals.

Four Strands of Strategic Thinking

In the game of “go,” victory is about strategically encircling an area rather than capturing the king. This strategy mirrors Taiwan’s approach in areas such as the development of industrial parks, shifting the focus from standalone company investments. The broader concept is to export Taiwan’s proven “[industrial-cluster model](#)” to target nations—establishing supply chains from raw materials to finished products, and building ecosys-

tems from service support to mechanical maintenance, akin to the successful “[Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company \(TSMC, 台灣積體電路製造股份有限公司\)-Kumamoto model](#).” Instead of promoting flagship investments by individual countries, Taiwan is now sharing its experience in creating an indispensable niche in the global chip supply chain, while expanding this model to be applicable both on the island and abroad. If more successful industrial clusters can be established and their effects become evident, it can dispel the rumor that Taiwan’s business expansion dilutes its tech importance. Instead, it will serve as proof of Taiwan’s success in embedding itself into international supply networks.

On the financial front, Foreign Minister Lin has discussed the creation of a “[prosper-ties fund \(榮邦基金\)](#),” which would be significant in that it would be an investment fund rather than aid—thereby shifting the dynamic between Taiwan and its beneficiaries from grantor-grantee to win-win relationships. The fund aims to include not only countries with official diplomatic ties, but also non-diplomatic allies and like-minded countries, whether geographically near or far. Special focus is given to Central and Eastern European nations and “[New Southbound countries](#)”—areas where Minister Lin has dedicated significant diplomatic efforts. This fund is envisioned as filling the gap left by the less flexible National Development Fund (NDF, 國家發展基金), and the currently unfeasible Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF, 主權基金). The NDF is constrained by [legal requirements](#) for returns and investment targets, while the SWF remains a contentious issue in Taiwan.

Additionally, with precedents like the NTD \$6.56 billion (USD \$200 million) “[Central and Eastern Europe Investment Fund \(中東歐投資基金\)](#)” and the NTD \$32.8 billion (USD \$1 billion) “[Central and Eastern Europe Financing Fund \(中東歐融資基金\)](#)”—which both support Taiwan’s initiatives to strengthen regional ties—the expansion of this “prosper-ties fund” or other financial tools could be a vital political instrument. In essence, establishing the fund to bolster economic diplomacy not only provides a financial pillar for Taiwan’s foreign policy, but also offers a more adaptable approach to steering Taiwan’s industrial transformation toward a more digitalized and sustainability-focused future.

Energy concerns are pivotal in this strategic equation. Taiwan’s energy landscape is dominated by thermal power generation, which made up an impressive 83.14 percent of Taiwan’s total power generation in 2023. Specifically, coal-fired power accounted for 42.24 percent, gas-fired power for 39.57 percent, and oil-fired power for 1.34 percent, with all of these sources



Image: A government promotional graphic for the “Central and Eastern Europe Investment Fund,” created to promote investments by Taiwan entrepreneurs in Europe (December 2022).

(Image source: [Taiwan National Development Council](#))

being primarily imported. [1] Swelling energy demand, driven by a surge of pending high-energy-consuming semiconductor companies, has intensified this challenge. To balance the energy supply-demand equation while promoting industrial growth, Taiwanese companies, regardless of their size, must explore international avenues that can reliably supply essential resources such as water, electricity, land, and talent. That said, this outward-looking economic diplomacy, which motivates companies to seek new opportunities abroad, skillfully balances business and energy needs, alleviating domestic energy challenges without hindering industrial growth.

When Taiwan seeks to deepen its partnerships, the irreplaceable bond Taiwan has with its primary security provider—the United States—remains paramount. Due to the Biden Administration’s focus on securing supply chains, Washington has initiated a [100-day review](#) covering semiconductors, batteries, critical materials, and pharmaceuticals. This led to the establishment of a [supply chain task force](#), employing a whole-of-government approach to securing key supply chains through on-shoring, near-shoring, and friend-shoring. As [TSMC founder Morris Chang \(張忠謀\)](#) noted, future globalization will be anchored by security as a fundamental prerequisite, emphasizing the growing consensus that technology and economic security are intertwined, and that cybersecurity is synonymous with national security.

The United States is restructuring its supply chains with technology security at the forefront. Taiwan, as a complete, reliable, and trustworthy technology-solution provider, has ac-

knowledgeed Washington’s concerns about “[overconcentration in Taiwan](#).” The Taiwanese government has demonstrated its commitment to aligning with US industrial strategies through deliberate, incremental efforts. In May, [President Lai Ching-te \(賴清德\)](#) identified [five trusted industries](#) (semiconductors, AI, defense, security and surveillance, and next-generation communications) during his inauguration, resonating with Morris Chang’s insights. Now, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA, 外交部) is actively offering supply chain solutions to align with US interests. Additionally, this strategic move prioritizes Southeast Asia, a region of keen interest for the United States as it aims to diversify its supply chain away from China.

Uncertainties and Challenges Ahead

While this rosy outlook paints one half of the picture, uncertainties make up the other. The success of economic diplomacy hinges on the active participation of Taiwanese businessmen. To clarify, this initiative is rooted in business-to-business interactions rather than government-to-government negotiations, a reality with which MOFA has had to contend. Thus, the collaboration should not only feature directing the government’s messaging to boardrooms, but also consider how the companies’ respond through their intentions. Without the willingness of businesses to invest, this diplomatic endeavor cannot steer future policy. For this diplomatic project to succeed, greater communication between the government and Taiwanese businesses is necessary.

Furthermore, Taiwan’s MOFA should redouble its efforts to promote greater understanding as to why Taiwan’s investments could surpass those of other countries (not just China). Highlighting Taiwan’s relatively lower return expectations, the robustness and reliability of Taiwan’s IT industry, and the critical role of technology security in national security will provide compelling talking points for effective storytelling. Listening, rather than directing, forms the foundation of successful private-public collaboration. Presenting an attractive alternative, rather than warning others about “debt traps,” is key to winning the hearts and minds of nations, irrespective of diplomatic ties.

Taiwan has neither the resources to compete head-to-head with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, formerly known as “One Belt, One Road,” 一帶一路), nor the desire to pursue such a politically-charged strategy. However, by refining its diplomatic stance and harmonizing it with robust economic and trade policies, Taiwan can fortify its economic security. MOFA has outlined a plan for “[integrated diplomacy \(總合外交\)](#),” which encompasses value diplomacy (價值外交), alliance diplomacy (同

盟外交), and economic diplomacy (經貿外交), and aligns with the island's image as a nation committed to [“democracy, peace, and prosperity.”](#) Channeling the island's technological strengths to prioritize economic diplomacy is a wise move. Yet, as the game of “go” teaches us, strategic foresight is more crucial than immediate victories.

The main point: Taiwan's new flagship campaign of economic diplomacy may not be entirely novel, but it embodies a revamped philosophy—shifting from mere transactional exchanges to mutually beneficial relationships. Taiwan is deftly navigating the global arena like a player of “go,” leveraging its technological prowess to embed itself firmly within the global supply chain, rather than passively awaiting exclusion from international affairs.

[1] “2023 Energy Generation (112年發電概況),” *Energy Administration, Ministry of Economic Affairs*. July 2024.

Taiwan's Underworld, Part 1: Gangs, Temples, and Political Influence

By: Benjamin Sando

Ben Sando is a research fellow at the Global Taiwan Institute.

When a Taiwanese temple sends its idol onto the streets for a procession, a band of devotees will lay on facepaint and flank the deity as bodyguards. The facepaint twists their features into the scowls of divine beasts, and they can utter no words during the procession. If they do, the ghosts that run scared from their advance will immediately turn back and possess them, no longer fooled that they are deities. Though these devotees cannot communicate with words, the large tattoos adorning their arms and shoulders suggest another affiliation—many are members of Taiwan's local gangs, or “brothers” (兄弟).

Gangs are a tenacious influence on Taiwan's society and politics. This often surprises foreigners, accustomed more to Taiwan's efficient governance and [lauded democratic system](#). What makes Taiwan's criminal organizations even more unique is their intimate connection to temples and Daoist (道教) folk religion. When gangs, temples, and local politics combine into splendid religious festivals—such as the [Dajia Mazu pilgrimage](#) in central Taiwan—every layer of Taiwanese society is visible to see.

From the early days of Han Taiwanese society, through the period of Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) martial law and on to the era of democratization, the influence of Taiwan's gangs has evolved.

The activity of some gangs (but not all) has [spread beyond](#) extracting profit from local territory—through extortion, prostitution, and gambling—to international transactions involving drug, arms, and human trafficking. This has sowed connections between [certain Taiwanese gangs](#) and foreign actors, such as Chinese triads and government officials engaging in united front work for the People's Republic of China (PRC). As elections become more competitive in Taiwan, gangs have leveraged their control of prominent Taiwanese temples to influence politicians seeking support from religious communities. Such deep-rooted connections between gangs and local communities obstruct democratic development based on transparency and open debate, especially in [Taiwan's rural areas](#).

This article will unpack the history of gangs in Taiwan and their marriage into Taiwan's temples and politics. A forthcoming second article in this series will explore gangs' relationships with the government and triads in the PRC, and how PRC actors may use gangs to exert CCP (中國共產黨) united front political influence on Taiwan society.

The Origin of Taiwan's Gangs

Taiwan's gangs originate in the immigrant Han society of the Qing Dynasty. Disparate groups from coastal Chinese provinces landed in Taiwan and, in the absence of effective Qing government authority, were [forced to spar over territory](#) ceded by indigenous populations. These Han groups were divided by home region, language, and the gods they worshiped. Temples, and the idols of their chosen deities within, were the focal points of each ethnic community. When these communities formed militias to establish order or struggle over land and taxation rights, temples and idols served as the banners demarcating territorial control.

In 1853, the [Quanzhou “Three Counties” people](#) waged war on the Tongan people for access to the wharves in Monga (Wanhua District in modern-day Taipei). The Three Counties people targeted the Qingshui Zushi Temple, burning it to the ground, before reaching the Tongan base in Bajia Village. The Tongan people beat a retreat to Dadaocheng, carrying the effigy of their protector god, Xiahai Chenghuang. These skirmishes in early Han Taiwanese society prompted the fusion of temples with the militias charged with protecting their devoted communities.

The [strict Hoko system](#) of social control under the Japanese colonization of Taiwan (1895-1945) limited opportunities for local gangs to amass power. Though some local gangs opted to engage in criminal enterprise through [opium or gambling dens](#), the Japanese colonial administration [sought to de-Sinicize](#)

Daoist folk religion and infuse it with Shintoist tradition. These policies constrained temples' roles as the rally points for local militias.

Organized crime began to achieve its modern character during the period of KMT martial law in Taiwan (1949-1987). A flood of immigrants arrived in Taiwan under the banner of the KMT, triggering yet another episode of gang violence based on regionalist divides. This time, the children of [KMT immigrants formed gangs](#) of mainlanders (外省人) to protect themselves from local Han Taiwanese (本省人). Several gangs emerged during this time, including the Four Seas Gang (四海幫) and the Bamboo Union (竹聯幫), arguably the most notorious criminal organization in present-day Taiwan. At this time, the gangs of Taiwan were still engaged in criminal activity of a quintessentially "local" character, such as prostitution, gambling, bid-rigging, and extortion. In other words, these activities were grounded in domination of a particular swathe of territory rather than cross-border transactions with foreign criminal organizations.

As the KMT dictatorship faced mounting political challenges, exacerbated by the United States' diplomatic pivot from the Republic of China to the PRC in 1978, the Taipei government increasingly turned towards local gang leaders to [shore up support](#) for the regime. Gang leaders, inextricably linked to local communities, were willing to marshal support for the KMT regime in exchange for relaxed police oversight. As Jacob Tischer has [written](#), this also raised the incentives for gang leaders to dominate Daoist temples, as control of the religious institutions enhanced the gangsters' social capital in local communities. Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國), the son and presidential successor of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), [made more than ten trips](#) to the storied Chaotian Temple (朝天宮) in the 1980s in a bid to shore up weakening support for the KMT. Chiang's connections to gangs, in particular the mainland Bamboo Union, are evidenced in a tragic historical saga: In 1984, Chiang's intelligence service [arranged for two Bamboo Union hitmen](#) to travel to San Francisco, USA, and kill a Taiwanese-American dissident named Henry Liu (劉宜良). This assassination triggered a diplomatic uproar and [triggered US congressional hearings](#) that pressured Chiang into democratic reforms.

Gangland after Democratization

As is [all-too-common](#) during democratic transitions, the end of the KMT dictatorship in the late 1980s precipitated a dramatic growth in organized criminal activity in Taiwan. One consequence of the end of martial law was a decline in maritime patrols off the coast of the main island of Taiwan. As one former

chief of police of a southern Taiwanese city relayed to Ko-Lin Chin (陳國霖) in *Heijin*, the most complete account of gangs in Taiwan: "After martial law was lifted in 1986... patrols of the coast became almost non-existent, and as a result, it was easy to smuggle guns and drugs into Taiwan. That completely changed the crime scene here."

The ingress of guns and drugs changed the business activity of Taiwanese gangs and the manner in which gangs fought over control. The increased firepower of imported weapons allowed smaller gangs to rival bigger ones for eminence. Meanwhile, the onset of smuggling permitted certain gangs to enter more lucrative international trades such as the trafficking of heroin or amphetamines. Violence and homicides [surged](#) in Taiwan in the 1990s. It was at this time that a significant number of gang leaders established legitimate businesses so as to launder their money and invest their excess capital. Some gang leaders also entered politics directly, or else supported the campaigns of gang-affiliated politicians. In 1994, the Taiwanese political scientist Chao Yung-mao (趙永茂) [estimated](#) that over 50 percent of Taiwanese city and country councilors had gang affiliations. This was especially pronounced in rural Taiwan, with one [1993 magazine survey](#) suggesting that Yunlin County, Chiayi City, and Changhua County had the highest incidences of gang participation in politics.

As some gangs engaged in more lucrative or violent strands of criminal activity, a distinction began to emerge between members of gangs engaging in traditional, "local" crime and groups involved in international crime. Members of gangs who engage in purely local crime face more incentives to maintain positive public relations with local communities. These actors are more likely to [prefer the title "brothers"](#) (兄弟) over *heidao* ("gangsters," 黑道). Brothers may refrain from overtly engaging in egregious crimes like robbery, rape, or drug-dealing for the sake of public relations. As one brother shared with Ko-lin Chin in *Heijin*: "Being a brother means we are extremely concerned for our reputation. We are generous with people." Such local groups are more inclined to delegate darker crimes to teenage recruits whose gang affiliations are more obscure. In an interview with the author of this article, a former teenage "brother" in Taichung, Chang Hung-Chi (張弘佶), explained that gang leaders recruit disaffected or rebellious middle schoolers who will face more lenient punishments for criminal convictions. Chang shared a second, more spiritual reason for the recruitment of teenagers: gang-affiliated temples need a supply of bodies that can dance for gods during religious ceremonies.



Image: Then-President Tsai Ing-wen making a public appearance at the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage in Taichung County (April 4, 2019). The speaker holding the microphone is Yen Ching-piao, chairman of the Jenn Lann Temple board and a prominent local gang figure. (Image source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The Sacred Act of Voting

Though brothers have long donned the costumes of the “[Eight Generals](#)” (八家將) and danced before processions of Daoist deities, the stature of prominent gang-affiliated temples has only grown in the years since Taiwan’s democratization. By no means are all Taiwanese temples and their devotees gang-affiliated. Ordinary devotees [tolerate](#), rather than celebrate, the connections between certain temples and gangs. However, the democratization of Taiwan has enabled certain gang-affiliated temples to gain unprecedented media exposure and clout among national politicians. The advent of meaningful elections in the 1990s forced politicians—whether [DPP or KMT](#)—to compete over exposure in Taiwan’s most important cultural events. In many local communities, these events are temple ceremonies such as the [Yanshui Beehive Festival](#) or the [Qing Shan King Sacrificial Ceremony](#). Politicians are consequently [compelled to associate](#) with the gang leaders who often control parts of these events. In a 1995 interview with *China Times Weekly*, an underworld figure [remarked](#) that “If not for elections, I can’t imagine any other resources *heidao* people have to attract *baidao* (politicians, 白道) people.”

Jenn Lann Temple (鎮瀾宮) in Dajia, Taichung County, is one prominent gang-affiliated temple. Jenn Lann Temple organizes the Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage, the largest religious event in Taiwan. Each year, [millions](#) of devotees of Mazu—the Daoist sea goddess and most celebrated deity in Taiwan—process alongside her idol through a [340 km route](#) in central Taiwan. The Dajia Mazu idol stops at more than 100 temples during its course and dev-

otees jostle to pass beneath her palanquin—to do so is to come within feet of the Heavenly Mother herself, and to receive more than enough good fortune for the year.

The chairman of the Jenn Lann Temple board that manages the pilgrimage is [Yen Ching-piao](#) (顏清標), reputedly the most prominent gangster of the Taichung area. Yen’s stewardship of the Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage and his involvement in national politics has made him a household name in Taiwan. In 1999, Yen was a local politician and gang leader in Taichung County when he capitalized on a violent local feud to ascend to the chairmanship of the Jenn Lann Temple board. As a result of Yen’s savvy media engagement and alliances with other Mazu temples, the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage has surged in size and popularity. Yen has used this platform to gain a considerable level of influence over the politics of central Taiwan. Indeed, as Tischer writes, no aspiring Taichung politician can avoid appearing in Zhenlan Temple’s “[performance space](#).”

Yen’s influence extends to presidential politics. In the 2000 presidential election, a [divination from Jenn Lann Temple](#) revealed that independent presidential candidate James Soong (宋楚瑜) was the candidate most favored by Dajia Mazu. Soong [performed well](#) in Taichung but narrowly lost the nationwide election, in part because of his [perceived connections](#) to Taiwan’s underworld. Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), Soong’s rival and the winner of the 2000 presidential election, later met with Yen Ching-piao and earned Yen’s promise of neutrality in the 2004 election. In the 2008 election, Yen [threw his weight](#) behind the eventual winner Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九)—the KMT candidate favoring friendly relations with the PRC. Ma carried the palanquin of the Dajia Mazu idol during the pilgrimage that preceded the election, and again in April 2008 to thank Mazu for his victory. In the 2020 presidential campaign, Yen was a fervent supporter of the KMT candidate Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), although he welcomed incumbent president and [DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen](#) (蔡英文) in stumping at the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage. Yen also employed the platform of Jenn Lann Temple for his own career in national politics, during which time he was once elected as a member in the Legislative Yuan [while serving a prison sentence](#) for graft and attempted murder.

Conclusion

The stubborn connections between gangs, temples, and politics are an impediment to the continued democratic development of Taiwan. Even as gang violence has lessened since the 1990s and [reforms have made it harder](#) for gang leaders to take office, surging interest in certain religious events has perpetuated the

informal influence of temple-affiliated gang leaders. While the primary effects of this are seen in Taiwan's domestic politics, the second article in this series will explore how temples and gangs are networked into the PRC—such as through Jenn Lann Temple's [Taiwan Mazu Fellowship](#) in Fujian Province, and the Bamboo Union's vast footprint across China and Southeast Asia.

The main point: Taiwanese gangs retain deep historical connections to the island's Daoist temples. This relationship offers gangs legitimacy and local political power. In the era of Taiwan's democratization, a few entrepreneurial gang leaders have captured control over major religious events and employ these platforms for political influence over Taiwan's politicians.

Beyond “Chinese Taipei”: How International Allies Can Support Taiwan through Sports Diplomacy

By: Adrienne Wu

Adrienne Wu is a program manager at Global Taiwan Institute and the host of Taiwan Salon, GTI's cultural policy and soft power podcast.

For a country like Taiwan that constantly struggles with how to project its narrative of national identity and brand on an international stage, the Olympics are a missed opportunity. [As many have noted](#), using “Chinese Taipei” (中華台北) to refer to the Taiwanese Olympic team creates confusion about Taiwan's current status and national identity. Moreover, the English translation of the name creates further confusion among international audiences by obscuring whether the usage of “Chinese” refers to an ethnic or national/sovereign connection between China and Taiwan. Although many supporters of Taiwan advocated for updating the team name, past experiences have shown that this is [unlikely to be allowed](#) by China or the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The IOC's unforgiving stance has been further emphasized during the Paris Olympics by the decision to bodily remove spectators carrying Taiwan banners, including [one spectator](#) who was referencing [a meme from the Tokyo 2020 Olympics](#). Still, in the absence of a name change, there are still other ways that Taiwan can use the Olympics specifically, and sports diplomacy more generally, to further its international ties and to be identified under the name of “Taiwan.”

Taiwanese Representation at the Olympics

Like many of Taiwan's current problems related to participa-

tion in international organizations, the name “Chinese Taipei” came about [after Taiwan's exit from the United Nations](#). After the United Nations recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the sole representative of China, Taiwan was barred from competing as the Republic of China (ROC) by Canada, and the ROC government [decided to withdraw](#) from the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics. Although the IOC suggested that the ROC team compete under the name of Taiwan at that time, the Kuomintang-led (KMT, 國民黨) government [refused](#) to accept the name of Taiwan. Tasked with reaching a compromise, the IOC [brokered the Nagoya Resolution](#), which allowed Taiwan to compete in the Olympics under the name of “Chinese Taipei.”

As [Taiwanese identity solidifies in Taiwan](#), many people in Taiwan have become dissatisfied with their country's athletes competing under the name of “Chinese Taipei” and in 2018 the Taiwanese government [held a referendum](#) to decide if they should change the name. Still, the referendum was doomed to fail before the vote even began—ahead of the vote, the IOC stated that a name change could [“threaten Taiwan's participation in future Olympic Games”](#) and that the Nagoya Resolution [“remains unchanged and fully applicable.”](#) Predictably, Taiwanese voters decided that participation in the Olympics under the name of “Chinese Taipei” was better than not participating at all, and the referendum failed with a slim majority of [54.8 percent](#) deciding against the name change.

Cultural Olympiad

Despite the IOC's firm stance on the name of Chinese Taipei, Taiwan has been able to use the name of Taiwan in other Olympic-related events, such as the Cultural Olympiad. After first participating in the Cultural Olympiad [at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics](#), Taiwan is now participating in Paris' 2024 Cultural Olympiad by holding the [Taiwan Pavilion](#) from July 27 to August 10.

While the Olympic Games are famous for its many sporting events, the accompanying events of the Cultural Olympiad are not as well-known. One reason for this might be that the Cultural Olympiad [has changed](#) throughout the history of the Olympics. From 1896 to 1908, the Cultural Olympiad was not enforced as part of the Olympics. Then, from 1912 to 1948, it took the form of an art competition, and from 1952 to 1988, it was an art exhibition. The Cultural Olympiad's current form—which exists as a [“multidisciplinary artistic and cultural programme”](#)—started from the [1992 Barcelona Olympics](#). The 2024 Paris Olympics website describes its Cultural Olympiad as a [“people's festival featuring thousands of events \(mostly free and open to the public\) at the crossroads of art, sport and Olympic values.”](#)

Free and open to the public, Taiwan's 2024 Taiwan Pavilion features [22 performance groups](#), including a performance by recent *RuPaul's Drag Race* winner [Nymphia Wind \(妮妃雅瘋\)](#), and highlights [four main themes](#): "Voice of Freedom," "Island Elegance," "Cultural Exchanges Between," and "Taiwan and France." According to the Taiwan Pavilion website, [roughly 4,000 spectators](#) attended the opening of the event, and attendees were given gift bags of Taiwanese snacks and souvenirs. Compared to the millions of people who watch the Olympics worldwide—even just the opening ceremony of the Olympics was watched by [29 million people](#)—an audience of thousands can seem like a poor consolation prize. However, Taiwan's participation at the Paris' 2024 Cultural Olympiad still serves as an important platform to promote some of Taiwan's most important soft power resources to international attendees, including its commitment to democratic values, "[identity tolerance](#)," and "[desire to work hand-in-hand with the other nations of the world](#)." Moreover, Taiwan's participation in an Olympic-related event using the name "Taiwan" seems to contradict the IOC's strict rules enforcing the use of "Chinese Taipei." This demonstrates the extent to which hosting countries can support Taiwan's participation in events that are held alongside the Olympics despite the IOC's firm stance against a potential name change.



Image: Participants at Taiwan's 2024 Taiwan Pavilion watch Taiwanese indigenous singer Abao (阿爆) perform on the first day of the event. (Image Source: [Taiwan Pavilion Website](#))

Support from US Government Officials

Just as hosting countries can help support Taiwan's participation, other allies can also help by putting pressure on the IOC to accept any future Taiwanese decisions regarding a name change. Ahead of this year's Olympic Games, three US congressmen—Tom Tiffany (R-WI), Andy Ogles (R-TN), and Chris Smith (R-NJ)—[sent a letter](#) to IOC President Thomas Bach criticizing the IOC's

enforcement of the name "Chinese Taipei," stating that it "[violates the core tenets of the Olympic Charter, which declares that '\[e\]very individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination' and that 'the Olympic Movement shall apply political neutrality.'](#)" While a decision regarding the name of Taiwan's Olympic team should be made by Taiwanese voters, this decision should also be made without threats by the IOC. If the current situation is due to the PRC exerting pressure on the IOC, then the United States could tip the scales in the other direction by taking a strong stance against such tactics, and this would be in line with the 2019 [Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative \(TAIPEI\) Act](#). Additionally, there are other supportive actions that the United States can take on Taiwan's behalf that are less drastic—such as using the [Taiwan Allies Fund Act](#) to support media coverage of the Olympics that refers to the Taiwanese Olympic team as "Taiwan," as Sasha Chhabra has recommended in a [recent op-ed](#).

Alternate Sports Diplomacy Opportunities

Hosting International Sporting Events

While the Olympic Games are undoubtedly the biggest international sporting event, there are still other opportunities outside of the Olympics for Taiwan to engage in sports diplomacy. For instance, hosting an international sporting event allows host countries/cities to "[project a positive image of themselves in order to increase credibility and status on the world's stage](#)." Since 2000, Taiwan has hosted eight international multi-sport events (IMSE) including the [29th Summer Universiade](#) in 2017. While many of these sporting events run into problems similar to those of the Olympics, with Taiwan still being referred to as "[Chinese Taipei](#)," Taiwan's role as the host country still allows international athletes to visit and learn about Taiwan from Taiwan itself.

The next IMSE that Taiwan plans on hosting is the [2025 World Masters Games](#). Brokered by then-Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) and then-New Taipei City Mayor Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜), the 2025 event marks the [first World Masters Game in Asia](#), with Taipei beating out [both Paris and Perth](#) for the hosting rights. Taiwan's ability to be chosen as a hosting country demonstrates that the International Masters Games Association (IMGA) considers Taipei and New Taipei City to have the necessary infrastructure and be attractive tourism destinations; moreover, the IMGA is [a non-profit organization recognized by the IOC](#). Beyond this recognition, the event itself is also an opportunity for Taiwan to become known by thousands of World Masters Games athletes and family members. Throughout the 14-day

event, roughly [48,000 athletes from 110 countries](#) are expected to visit Taipei and New Taipei City to participate in the games. Additionally, the games are expected to bring in [NTD \\$10 billion](#) (USD \$305 million) in tourism revenue. Like the Taiwan Pavilion event at the 2024 Paris Olympics, the number of participants is far fewer than viewers of the Olympics, but the event is still an important opportunity for Taiwan to promote itself on its own terms [while using the name Taiwan](#).

Taiwan Day

In addition to hosting opportunities, allies of Taiwan can also provide opportunities for Taiwan to promote itself during sporting events by supporting events within their own countries that use the name of “Taiwan.” One example of this is the New York Mets’ Taiwan Day, which has taken place annually since 2005 and is the [“longest-running and largest Taiwan-themed event in any of the four major professional sports leagues”](#) in the United States. Originally born out of the desire to involve different communities in the New York Mets’ games, some other theme nights have [included](#): Black Legacy, Filipino Heritage, Women’s Equality and Chinese Heritage. Moreover, Taiwan Day has spread to other teams, with [the Oakland Athletics, the Los Angeles Angels, and the Los Angeles Dodgers](#) also holding Taiwanese heritage days. With the aim of establishing an annual Taiwan Day in Washington, DC, a [Pre-Taiwan Day](#) was also held this year in Nationals Park for the first time. Beyond being events that bring Taiwanese American communities together, these Taiwan Day events are also opportunities for US citizens to learn about Taiwan.



Image: Taiwanese Americans wearing Taiwan jerseys at Pre-Taiwan Day, held in Washington, DC. (Image source: [Overseas Community Affairs Council](#) [中華民國僑務委員會])

US-Taiwan Sports Diplomacy

Another opportunity for the United States and Taiwan to strengthen people-to-people ties through sports are [sports diplomacy programs](#) under the US Department of State’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. On May 5-6, 2023, the [Taiwan Sport Forward Association](#) (TSFA, 社團法人台灣運動好事協會) partnered with the [American Institute in Taiwan \(AIT\)](#), and the US [Global Sports Mentoring Program \(GSMP\)](#), jointly held a [forum](#) discussing sports diplomacy, gender in sports, sports education, and sports media and gender equality. When [then-President Tsai Ing-wen \(蔡英文\)](#) attended the forum, she praised Taiwan’s advancements in gender equality and acknowledged that Taiwan still needs to make progress in women’s sports broadcasting and the representation of women in sports media. Continuing to deepen cooperation between the United States and Taiwan on sports diplomacy programs can push forward mutual goals—such as [empowering women in sports](#)—and also provides opportunities for influential US figures in sports to visit Taiwan and better understand the challenges that Taiwanese athletes face when it comes to international representation.

Recommendations

The United States and other allies of Taiwan should:

- Take a firm stance against any actions taken by the IOC to influence Taiwanese voters, and reassert that the IOC should respect any decisions that Taiwan makes regarding the name of its Olympic team.
- Continue to support Taiwan’s participation using the name “Taiwan” in Olympic-related events such as the Cultural Olympiad.
- Support Taiwan in making bids to host international sporting events under the name of “Taiwan.”
- Support sporting events that take place within their own country that use the term “Taiwan,” such as the Taiwan Day and Pre-Taiwan Day events held in the United States.
- Continue to deepen cooperation with Taiwan through sports diplomacy programs.

The main point: The current name of “Chinese Taipei” continues to cause confusion over Taiwan’s national identity and sovereign status. However, in lieu of changing the name, other opportunities can be pursued as “Taiwan”. These include leveraging cultural events at the Olympics, allowing Taiwan to host sporting events using the name Taiwan, holding local heritage

days, and bolstering US-Taiwan collaboration on sport diplomacy programs.

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