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The PLA's "Strait Thunder-2025A" Exercise Presents Further Efforts to Isolate Taiwan

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On April 1-2, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a two-day operation it dubbed *Strait Thunder-2025A* (海峽雷霆-2025A). This was the first large-scale PLA exercise of 2025 around Taiwan, and followed the "Joint Sword-2024" (聯合利劍-2024A) exercises conducted in May and October 2024 *(see previous analysis here and here)*, as well as unnamed, large scale naval maneuvers in December 2024. This exercise appeared to continue the *Joint Sword* emphasis on practicing naval blockading maneuvers—while adding the provocative element of conducting simulated strikes against Taiwan's energy infrastructure and port facilities. The exercise was also accompanied by an escalation in the propaganda rhetoric directed against Taiwan's political leadership—and President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) in particular.

Exercise Overview

According to spokesman Senior Colonel Shi Yi (施毅) of the PLA Eastern Theater Command, *Strait Thunder-2025A* mainly focused on joint-force capabilities in "training subjects [such] as identification and verification, warning and expulsion, and interception and detention, in a bid to test the troops' capabilities in regional control, joint blockade, and precision strike." PLA forces operated primarily in the middle and southern portions of the Taiwan Strait but did send some ships, including coast guard vessels, outside the First Island Chain.

The exercises themselves focused on evaluating the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations both inside and outside the First Island Chain. Specifically, the PLA focused on ship-aircraft coordination and establishing regional air superiority—a critical first step in an amphibious invasion. As part of this the PLA simulated strikes on defense infrastructure like command centers, arsenals, air defense command posts, air traffic control centers, special forces headquarters, and specific locations like the Hengshan Wartime Command Post (衡山指揮所). There were also simulated strikes conducted against multiple energy infrastructure targets *(see further below)*. In locations in the middle and southern areas of the Taiwan Strait the PLA-Navy (PLAN) practiced blockading strategic supply routes and energy corridors.

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Operations By Service Branch

PLA Ground Force (PLAGF)

The PLA deployed the 72nd Army Artillery Brigade to undisclosed locations in Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces, where it conducted 50 kilometer strikes on eight simulated targets—including one that modeled Taiwan's Yongan liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal (永安液化天然氣廠) in Kaohsiung. Yongan terminal is the largest LNG terminal in Taiwan and imports over 11 million tons of natural gas annually.

The PLA tested two PHL-191 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MCRS) firing 300 mm rockets that have an effective range of 70 to 150 kilometers. According to defense analysts, the PHL-191 system is capable of firing 750 mm tactical ballistic missiles that can strike targets up to 500 kilometers away—a range that would allow this system to hit any major target in Taiwan.

PLA Rocket Force (PLARF)

The PLA-Rocket Force (PLARF) supported the PLA 72nd Army Artillery Brigade and deployed the 613th Rocket Brigade of the 61st Missile Base to test its *Dong Feng*-15B system. However, no actual missile launches were noted during the exercise.

PLA Air Force (PLAAF)

The PLA-Air Force (PLAAF) coordinated closely with the PLA Navy with many of its J-15 fighter aircraft flying under the command of the *Shandong* carrier group. In exercise sorties they conducted mock air superiority missions and strike operations on both sea and ground targets. PLAAF activity lasted 24 hours beginning at 6:00 AM on April 1 and included 76 aircraft, with 37 sorties crossing the median line. These incursions came from all sides of the island occurring in the northern, central, southwestern, and eastern edges of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ).

According to the PLA's Eastern Theater Command, several PLAAF brigades participated and deployed fighters, bombers, support assets—and, according to Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Specifically, the PLAAF deployed the following platforms:

- Fighters
    - J-15 (carrier-borne)
    - J-10 C/S
    - J-11 B/BG
    - J-16
    - JH-7A
    - Su-30 MKK
- The H-6K strategic bomber
- The KJ-500 early warning aircraft
- Y-2OU aerial refueling tanker
- Z-9 helicopters (carrier-borne)

PLA Navy (PLAN) and China Coast Guard

Similar to the previous *Joint Sword-2024* exercises, the PLAN incorporated the China Coast Guard in its blockade operation. While the *Shandong* carrier group operated to Taiwan's east/southeast, the PLAN also deployed other ships—including coast guard vessels for "law-enforcement patrols"—up and down the Taiwan Strait, reaching outside the First Island Chain. In total, the PLA deployed 15 PLAN ships and four coast guard vessels.

The CNS *Shandong* aircraft carrier strike group included five total vessels: the carrier CNS *Shandong* (17), the cruiser CNS *Yanan* (106), the destroyer CNS *Zhanjiang*, the frigate CNS *Yuncheng* (571), and the fast combat support ship CNS *Chagan Hu* (905). The Shandong carrier is based out of the PLA's Southern Theater Navy, a fact that only underscores the PLA's commitment to interoperability. Meanwhile, on Taiwan's west coast, the PLAN deployed ten ships working closely with four coast guard ships, notably featuring the destroyers CNS *Guilin* (164) CNS *Fuzhou* (137).

Of note, according to some press outlets, ships of the Shandong carrier group maneuvered to within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan's coast—thereby skirting the edge of Taiwan's contiguous zone (the area just beyond territorial waters, extending from 12-24 nautical miles of the coast). This follows from the declared exercise operating areas of *Joint Sword-2025B*, which crossed over into Taiwan's contiguous zone. If such reports are correct, this represents another gradual—but still provocative—move to press PLA forces steadily closer to Taiwan's coastline.

Political and Propaganda Elements of the Exercise

As is usually the case with prominent PLA exercises around Taiwan, the political warfare elements of the exercise were front-and-center in *Strait Thunder-2025A*. In both *Joint Sword-2024A* and *Joint Sword-2024B*, the stated People's Republic of China (PRC) reason for the exercise was to serve as displays of resolve in the face of supposed provocations by President Lai (in the former case, the content of his inaugural speech; in the latter case, his October National Day speech). This particular propaganda element was relatively subdued in the December 2024 naval maneuvers; however, it returned to the fore in *Strait Thunder-2025A.*

The nominal justification for the early April exercise was a March 13 policy speech by Lai, in which he laid out a program of 17 measures to combat CCP espionage and infiltration in Taiwan. PRC outlets seized upon this, as well as an early April trip to Washington, DC by National Security Council Chairman Joseph Wu (吳釗燮), to condemn the "Lai Ching-te authorities' attempts to solicit U.S. support for

'Taiwan independence'." In the lead-up to the exercise, PRC state media released a series of op-eds framing the PLA's actions as the use of force to prevent war (a starkly different message from the PLA's bizarre heart-shaped blockade maneuver with the official message, "[our] patrols take the shape of loving you" last October).

Upon commencement of the exercise, the state outlet *Global Times* declared that the exercise "demonstrate[d] the PLA's tighter siege on 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces through more stringent measures with thunderous actions." The PLA also released a video titled "Subdue Demons and Vanquish Evils" (降妖除魔), which depicted the mythical Monkey King leading the PLA onwards to victory.

In the most strident propaganda of all, the PLA Eastern Theater Command—which has primary cognizance over the forces deployed in the vicinity of Taiwan—produced social media material that depicted Lai as a verminous insect *(see images below).* This echoes PRC propaganda from 2019 that portrayed Hong Kong pro-democracy protestors as "cockroaches" and other vermin—and represents an escalation in the emotive and dehumanizing propaganda imagery directed at Lai in particular, as the personification of "Taiwan independence forces."

Images: PRC-produced propaganda cartoons, propagated online, which depict Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te as an insect. In the left image, "Misfortune Hollowing Out Taiwan" (空殼禍臺)*, Lai is depicted as a dictator, oppressing local figures (former Taiwan People's Party leader Ke Wen-je and retired general Kao An-kuo, charged respectively with corruption and treason), and instituting "green terror"* (綠色恐怖)*—while further grasping at corrupt sources of wealth. In the right image, "Smashing the Shell, Destroying Taiwan"* (破殼毀臺)*, Lai is roasted over a flaming Taiwan, surrounded by images of PLA military operations. The depiction of Lai as a poisonous insect represents an escalation in the tone of CCP propaganda directed at Taiwan's political leadership. (Image source: PLA Eastern Theater Command /* CCTV*)*

Despite the PRC's official expressions of outrage, PLA forces still waited two and a half weeks after the speech to commence the operation. It is possible that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) waited until CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping concluded his trip to the Boao Forum (博鰲論壇) with international business leaders on March 28. It is also possible that they waited until US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth concluded his first trip to Asia on March 31—a trip during which he promised the US military would increase its regional presence to deter China.

Conclusions

Strait Thunder-2025A demonstrated both continuity and incremental change in comparison with similar exercises conducted around Taiwan by the PLA over the past three years. In terms of continuity, it continued maneuvers and training for a potential future blockade operation—as commenced clearly from the 2022 exercise that followed the visit of then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and continued through the three *Joint Sword* exercises of 2023-2024. As always, for the PLA the political warfare element is central to these exercises: including not only the intent to psychologically intimidate Taiwan's population (and foreign powers that might intervene); but also to place on Taiwan the onus of threatening regional peace, by promoting the narrative that this exercise (almost certainly planned far in advance) represented a necessary reaction to a provocation by "Taiwan independence forces."

The most noteworthy changes to the exercise were the simulated strikes apparently directed against civilian economic infrastructure targets—a likely necessary step if blockade operations were to escalate into limited kinetic operations, and a clear threat that Taiwan's energy and economic infrastructure would be in peril in any conflict. Finally, the continued advancement closer to Taiwan's territory—as evidenced in the reported presence of PLAN ships within the edge of Taiwan's contiguous zone—appears to mark the most provocative moves yet to squeeze Taiwan's territorial sovereignty.

The main point: *Strait Thunder-2025A* appears to be a continuation of last year's *Joint Sword-2024* blockading exercises against Taiwan. However, this iteration focused more heavily on simulating operations against Taiwanese energy infrastructure and ports, particularly LNG terminals, and encroached further into Taiwanese territory than previous exercises. This operation also greatly stepped up its political rhetoric against the Lai administration and other government leaders than previous exercises indicating the PLA will likely continue to increase its aggressive messaging.

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India-Taiwan Relations Under Mod 3.0: What Does the Future Hold

By: Tran My Hai Loc

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As Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarks on his third consecutive term, India-Taiwan relations are poised for further growth, driven by economic, technological, educational, and strategic considerations. Over the past decade, both parties have made notable strides in strengthening ties, particularly in trade, investment, and technology. Despite the diplomatic constraints imposed by India's adherence to its "One-China Policy," pragmatic engagement has enabled both sides to foster deeper cooperation. Looking ahead, the future of India-Taiwan relations appears promising, with opportunities for expansion in key sectors: such as electronics, information technology, renewable energy, semiconductors, and education.

Indo-Taiwan Economic Cooperation

One of the most significant aspects of India-Taiwan relations is economic cooperation. Bilateral trade between the two parties has witnessed steady growth over the years. According to the International Trade Administration of Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA, 經濟部) trade between India and Taiwan increased by over USD $8.2 billion between 2022 and 2023, a substantial increase from USD $4.7 billion in the years 2015-2016. This growth highlights the increasing economic interdependence between the two trading partners.

Taiwan's well-established ecosystem of small and medium-sized enterprises can play a crucial role in complementing India's "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat" ("Self-Reliant India") initiatives. Taiwanese companies such as Foxconn, Pegatron, and Wistron have already set up manufacturing plants in India, primarily focusing on assembling smartphones for global giants like Apple. Foxconn alone has committed USD $1.5 billion in investments for a new production facility in Tamil Nadu, further strengthening India's position as a global manufacturing hub.

Apart from electronics, renewable energy presents another promising avenue for cooperation. Taiwan has emerged as a leader in solar and wind energy, and India—with its ambitious renewable energy targets (500 gigawatts of non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030)— can benefit from Taiwan's technological expertise and investment.

One landmark development in India-Taiwan relations has been progress in the field of semiconductor collaboration. Given the global semiconductor supply chain disruptions caused by geopolitical tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic, India has identified chip manufacturing as a strategic priority. In 2023, Taiwan's Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp (PSMC) signed an agreement with India's Tata Group to set up a semiconductor fabrication facility in Gujarat. This joint venture, backed by India's USD $11 billion incentive scheme for semiconductor manufacturing, marks a crucial step towards reducing India's dependency on semiconductor imports and fostering self-sufficiency in chip production.

In addition to semiconductor manufacturing, there is immense potential for further collaboration in artificial intelligence (AI), 5G technology, and biotechnology. Taiwan is home to some of the world's leading semiconductor companies, including TSMC, which produces over 60 percent of the world's advanced chips. Closer ties between Indian and Taiwanese tech firms can facilitate knowledge transfer, skill development, and innovation in critical industries.

Educational and Cultural Exchanges

Beyond economic and technological cooperation, India and Taiwan have been actively working to enhance educational and cultural exchanges. Taiwan's Ministry of Education has launched various scholarship programs for Indian students, attracting talent in the science, engineering, and technology fields. As of 2023, more than 3,000 Indian students are pursuing higher education in Taiwan, a significant increase from the few hundred Indian students a decade ago.

Language courses and cultural festivals have also played a role in fostering mutual understanding. The establishment of Mandarin language centers in India and the growing interest in learning Mandarin among Indian students indicate a rising curiosity about Taiwan's culture and language. By the end of 2024, Taiwan has established 39 language centers in India to promote educational and linguistic cooperation. Similarly, India's rich cultural heritage—yoga, Bollywood, and traditional arts—has found a growing audience in Taiwan, strengthening informal diplomatic ties between the two parties.

India-Taiwan Diplomatic Relations under Modi

Taiwan's role in India's foreign policy under Modi 3.0 will remain pragmatic, balancing economic opportunities with geopolitical realities. While India is unlikely to formally alter its One-China Policy, increased economic, technological, and strategic engagement with Taiwan is expected. These developments will contribute to a more nuanced and flexible approach, ensuring that India's interests in the Indo-Pacific are safeguarded without provoking unnecessary confrontation with China.

Despite growing bilateral cooperation, diplomatic constraints continue to pose a challenge. India does not officially recognize Taiwan as an independent nation due

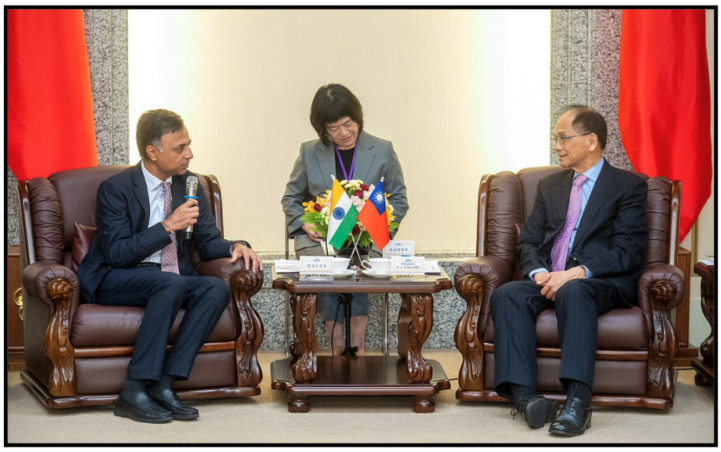

Image: Then-President of the Legislative Yuan You Si-kun (游錫堃) (right) *meets with Manharsinh Laxmanbhai Yadav* (left)*, Director General of India Taipei Association (September 12, 2023). With the lack of official diplomatic ties, diplomatic relations between India and Taiwan are handled through such unofficial exchanges. (Image source: Legislative Yuan / Wikimedia Commons)*

to its adherence to the One-China Policy. This limits the scope of engagement in certain areas, particularly in defense cooperation and formal diplomatic relations. However, both parties have found innovative ways to enhance their partnership within existing diplomatic frameworks. The Taipei Economic and Cultural Center (TECC) in India and the India-Taipei Association (ITA) in Taiwan serve as de facto embassies, facilitating trade, cultural exchanges, and policy dialogues. There has also been an increase in high-level visits, with parliamentary delegations from both parties engaging in informal diplomacy to strengthen ties.

The evolving geopolitical landscape offers new opportunities for India and Taiwan to align their strategies. Both parties share democratic values and a commitment to a rules-based international order, positioning them as natural partners in regional security and economic frameworks.

One of the key areas of convergence is supply chain resilience. The global supply chain disruptions caused by the US-China trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the need for diversification. India and Taiwan, along with like-minded partners such as Japan, Australia, and the United States, have been exploring mechanisms to reduce dependence on China-centric supply chains. Taiwan's participation in India's Production-Linked Incentive Schemes for electronics and manufacturing is a step in this direction.

Maritime security is another area where India and Taiwan can collaborate. While India has traditionally refrained from military engagement with Taiwan due to its strategic partnership with China, increased naval cooperation in freedom of navigation and counter-piracy operations in the Indo-Pacific could be explored under informal mechanisms. Given China's increasing assertiveness in the Taiwan Strait and the broader Indo-Pacific, there is growing alignment between India's Act East Policy and Taiwan's New Southbound Policy.

Prospects for Deepening India-Taiwan Ties

In the coming years, India and Taiwan will have the potential to significantly enhance their relationship through various collaborative avenues. One key area is strengthening economic and trade agreements. Despite the impressive growth in bilateral trade, the introduction of a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement or a bilateral investment agreement could serve as a catalyst for increased trade and investment, benefiting both economies. Another promising sector is that of semiconductors and high-tech industries. India can attract more Taiwanese semiconductor companies to establish fabrication units, R&D centers, and training institutes, capitalizing on Taiwan's cutting-edge technology to build a thriving semiconductor ecosystem in India.

In the realm of education and research, fostering deeper collaborations between India and Taiwan in education, research, and supply chain resilience will be crucial for strengthening their ties. Expanding joint research programs, student exchanges, and academic partnerships can promote robust knowledge exchange, while strategic cooperation in supply chains will enhance resilience under global frameworks like the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. The Quad—with its shared interests in maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific and responding to China's growing influence—provides a platform for such collaboration, without naming China as the explicit object of focus. It also facilitates cooperation in critical sectors like technology, semiconductors, and supply chains—areas where both India and Taiwan excel. This aligns with India's strategy to deepen regional economic ties, including with Taiwan, while maintaining diplomatic balance through multilateral engagement. The Quad thus serves as an effective mechanism to promote closer India-Taiwan cooperation, advancing economic and security goals while respecting the "One China" policy and regional stability.

Finally, leveraging cultural diplomacy will play a key role in strengthening soft power and building people-to-people connections. Initiatives such as film festivals, art exhibitions, and language training programs can deepen mutual understanding and appreciation, bridging the cultural gap between the two societies. By focusing on these diverse areas of cooperation, India and Taiwan can unlock their full potential and build a multifaceted and sustainable partnership for the future.

The main point: Taiwan's importance in the Indo-Pacific is growing, driven by its semiconductor industry and security challenges from China. Under Modi's leadership, India's Act East Policy fosters cooperation, especially in trade and technology. While a formal security alliance is unlikely, multilateral platforms like the Quad may deepen Indo-Taiwan ties.

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Beyond Pig Guts: Behind-the-Scenes Bipartanship in Taiwan Politics

By: Hope Ngo

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Mention the Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院) and even the staunchest fans of Taiwan will admit to feeling a bit of mortification over the antics that regularly play out between lawmakers. There appears to be no shortage of issues that could trigger chaos during a session: lawmakers have been known to brawl over everything from tax reviews and budgets, to legislative procedure and parliamentary reform. And even though one writer claimed that, in 2024, nearly all parliamentary clashes were started by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨), there is no hard and fast rule regarding which political group starts brawls—indeed, conflicts are almost always instigated by whomever sits in the minority. When they were in the minority in 2020, Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) lawmakers famously resorted to pitching bags of pig organs at then Premier Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) to protest a decision to import US pork from pigs that had been raised with the feed additive ractopamine, a leanness-enhancing drug.

That lawmakers resort to displays of violence, from shoving each other to throwing punches and launching projectiles, is not new—they've been doing it for decades. One lawmaker from Taiwan's martial law era, the late Ju Gaw-jeng (朱高正)—one of the DPP's founders—was even nicknamed "Rambo" for his antics. During the 1980s, Ju regularly pitched over furniture and jumped on tables to make his feelings known on different issues in response to decisions made by a near-absolute KMT majority. In my days as a young reporter, I remember seeing lawmakers stashing oranges served up as part of late-night meal boxes ("biantang," 便當), only to use them as projectiles hours later to bring the late session to a halt.

Hidden Cooperation

With such a legacy, it might be difficult to imagine Taiwan's warring parties ever reaching across the aisle to support one another's actions, bills, and resolutions. Yet, they have done so in the past, and have the ability to continue doing so today. Past sessions have seen lawmakers jointly pass resolutions condemning Chinese military exercises held around Taiwan in 2023. In 2022, the Legislative Yuan cleared amendments to its body of laws that govern the relationship between Taiwan and China, in a move the Mainland Affairs Council (大陸委員會) said was "passed thanks to the bipartisan support at the Legislative Yuan." Those amendments sought to clarify rules involving travel to mainland China, and to raise penalties for Chinese persons and companies who illegally invest in Taiwan.

Image: Lawmakers in Taiwan's Legislative Yuan scuffle over controversial draft legislation intended to increase the legislature's oversight authority over the executive branch (May 17, 2024). Despite such dramatic public displays of conflict between parliamentary factions, there is often quieter cooperation between the parties conducted behind the scenes. (Image source: TaiwanPlus)

Cooperation has not ended there. In 2019, representatives from Taiwan's four largest political parties signed off on a statement condemning the use of force against Hong Kong demonstrators during the former British colony's extradition protests. The parties also got together to sign off and support the Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) government's moves to join the World Health Assembly at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, KMT legislators Lin Wei-chou (林為洲), Jason Hsu (許毓仁), Chiang Wan-an (蔣萬安)—who currently serves as Taipei mayor—and Hsu Shu-hua (許淑華) even broke ranks with their party to vote in favor of same-sex marriage, a law rejected by the DPP's more conservative members. Unfortunately, many of these events are under-reported and don't get the same level of attention, if they are discussed at all.

Getting bipartisan support for bills and resolutions may be a tough sell, but there are issues that are still likely to win over lawmakers—especially those that sit in the center. Musician-turned-politician Freddy Lim (林昶佐), who served in parliament for 8 years (first as a member of the New Power Party from 2016-2019, and then as an independent until 2024), says two broad issues that have picked up bipartisan support during his time in office are tech development and social welfare—areas that also see considerable external support from both business and civil society. Lim says members of these non-governmental groups have connections with lawmakers from different parties. As a result, they are able to get things done through intense lobbying and negotiation. He says the groups approach lawmakers before they "split the work" of identifying who would be most receptive

to specific legislation, regardless of party affiliation. This process can take anywhere from several weeks to years, depending on the issue. As an example, Lim recalls working towards—and getting bipartisan support for—granting same-sex couples the right to legally adopt children. The law came four years after same sex marriage was legalized; the motion was eventually passed on the LY floor with lawmakers raising no objections. Lim said that the legislation took about three years to negotiate. [1]

Moves to reach across the aisle aren't dominated by lawmakers from any one party. Former Taiwan People Party (TPP, 民眾黨) lawmaker Cynthia Wu (吳欣盈) described an effort she undertook in an 2024 interview with this author for International Community Radio Taipei (ICRT). Wu shared that "in the LY, we have 113 members. My party only has five legislators, including myself. I managed to get 67 signatures in parliament. And this was in April, when I had just come back from maternity leave for two months, and I hadn't been in parliament for a long time." She vouched that the process works: "If you have a good idea, and you're willing to share that and exchange ideas with others […] I got over half of [the] KMT, and over half of [the] DPP support for this, this initiative." [2]

Reaching across the aisle can also be less cumbersome when many of these lawmakers know each other outside of work. Lim says parliamentarians elected by constituencies often have a chance to meet up at different events, from voter meet-and-greets to social functions. He says: "We always will meet other legislators [from neighboring constituencies]… it might be the chief in [one of] the temples or [a] priest from [a] church. It might be the [pastor] of [a] church. I [even] met legislators through my parents [or] grandparents." That rapport comes in handy when less contentious bills are up for discussion. Lim says: "Sometimes I [would] just directly call the legislators that I can joke with and say, 'At least don't block my bill. It's nothing controversial.'" [3]

But Lim, who eventually joined the DPP in November 2023, believes there is less congeniality between parties since the KMT took control of the Legislative Yuan in 2024. This is because the legislative agenda is less flexible under KMT caucus whip Fu Kun-chi (傅崐萁). As a result, brawls and violence have become negotiating tactics. Still, both sides have been known to get together to support common issues that matter to Taiwan. For instance, a bipartisan delegation made up of three KMT, one TPP, and three DPP representatives travelled to the US for the inauguration of US President Donald Trump in a show of bipartisanship.

When Brawling has Function

So is all the fighting performative? In some cases it can be, because public brawling is one way to show the electorate that their chosen representative is willing to resort to fisticuffs to advance their agenda. When a party is only represented by a handful of members, "then you might need that performative [element] to show your supporters that you have [made] some efforts," Lim says. Research by Nathan Batto and Emily Beaulieu and published in *Making Punches Count: The Individual Logic of Legislative Brawls* supports Lim's observations: the authors posit that fights are started by those who have already weighed up the pros and cons of their actions. [4]

But in other cases, the conflicts are real. Lim also pointed out that disrupting a proceeding can be the only way to buy time for opposing sides to sit down and negotiate their way to a solution that has the potential to benefit all. Nonetheless, flexibility depends on who is in charge and what a political party wants to achieve. According to Lim, "bipartisan negotiation is very difficult right now, [because] the KMT has a very strong direction, and it's very difficult to change the whole agenda set by the KMT." Lim added that "If you can at least win a battle a day… then you buy time to negotiate." This stems from the fact that once a session has been suspended, it can take weeks before the issue re-appears for discussion. [5]

Still, there is no denying the upside of having members of the Legislative Yuan working together to get things done. During a 2022 interview for ICRT, former KMT legislator Jason Hsu explained that during his time in office, he was motivated by the belief that "If we [want] to move society forward [...] the two parties must work together. And sometimes there are issues that are not so much about ideology, it's about the future, and also about social progressiveness. And I think we could work together in passing laws that are direct [and] can set examples for the future generations."

There is no denying that resorting to fistfights may be a relatively easy task for lawmakers, just as covering squabbles and fistfights can be an exciting and straightforward exercise for many journalists. In an age where media outlets both in Taiwan and abroad fight for attention, parliamentary violence sells. It is also easier for journalists to cover the Legislative Yuan by reporting on fighting than it is to explain bills in greater detail, or to cover deliberations on the precise placement of words, phrases, and punctuation marks. (I should know, as I was guilty of that myself as a young reporter.) Unfortunately, focusing on disruptive parliamentary brawls can result in a failure to give the Legislative Yuan the type of reporting it is due. It can also keep lawmakers from getting the attention they deserve, particularly when performing the duties they were actually elected to carry out.

The main point: The public conflicts between members of the Legislative Yuan, which sometimes include physical fights on the floor of the legislature, attract great public attention and highlight the partisan frictions between the parties. However, behind the scenes, legislators have often engaged in more constructive and cooperative efforts to advance legislation beneficial to Taiwan society.

[1] Author's interview with Freddy Lim, March 6, 2025.

[2] Author's interview with Cynthia Wu, January 25, 2024.

[3] Author's interview with Freddy Lim, March 6, 2025.

[4] Nathan F. Batto and Emily Beaulieu, *Making Punches Count: The Individual Logic of Legislative Brawls* (Oxford University Press, May 2024).

[5] Author's interview with Freddy Lim, March 6, 2025.

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What Does South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's Impeachment Mean for Taiwan?

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The Republic of Korea (ROK) President Yoon Suk Yeol's attempted self-coup in December 2024 sent shockwaves through the Indo-Pacific region. On April 4, the Constitutional Court of Korea unanimously upheld Yoon's subsequent impeachment by the ROK National Assembly. As a result, South Korea will now hold an early presidential election to replace Yoon within 60 days.

Yoon drew attention for his intrepid attempts to forge deeper security partnerships with the United States and Japan. His anticipated removal has unnerved Tokyo, which benefited from a rapprochement with Seoul after the tumultuous years under former ROK President Moon Jae-in. Meanwhile, Taiwan is concerned that the next ROK president may not emulate Yoon's forward-leaning approach to countering the People's Republic of China's (PRC) expansionist ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

There is no certainty regarding the winner of the ROK's early election. While the opposition Democratic Party (DP) remains roughly as popular as the ruling People's Power Party (PPP), the DP leader Lee Jae-myung far surpasses any PPP challenger in preliminary head-to-head presidential polling. A third-party candidate could possibly emerge to steal the election away from the two main parties, but it is more likely that this candidate would split the conservative vote and hand Lee Jae-myung an easy victory. Therefore, it is worthwhile for stakeholders in Taiwan policy to plan for victory by Lee and the Democratic Party.

A Zenith of Multilateral Security Cooperation under Yoon

Taiwanese people will remember Yoon's presidency as a time when the ROK unabashedly embraced partnerships with Japan and the United States to counter rising threats from China, Russia, and North Korea. The Yoon Administration adopted a rhetorical stance that was more assertive than its predecessors, calling the North Korean regime an "anti-nation, anti-historical group" and threatening to send ROK-manufactured weapons to Ukraine in its fight against Russia's invasion. Most exhilarating to Taipei was Yoon's April 2023 statement that the "Taiwan issue is not simply an issue between China and Taiwan but, like the issue of North Korea, [is] a global issue." This was the first time an ROK president framed cross-Strait issues in global terms, and his words drew condemnation from the PRC Foreign Ministry. Yoon's presidency also saw prominent ROK National Assembly lawmakers–including National Assembly Deputy Speaker Chung Woo-taik–visit Taiwan and hold meetings with prominent Taiwanese political figures, such as then-President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文).

Image: Lee Jae-myung, the leader of the ROK's Democratic Party (Image source: Wikimedia Commons)

From a strategic perspective, no ROK policy was more consequential to Taiwan's security than Yoon's pursuit of trilateral defense cooperation with the United States and Japan. Under the trilateral framework, Seoul engaged in an unprecedented set of defense and economic security activities with Tokyo and Washington, most prominently in the maritime field. The three countries' armed forces conducted multiple naval exercises, including two "Freedom Edge" exercises in the East China Sea aimed at protecting "freedom for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific." Trilateral cooperation encouraged the sharing of intelligence as well as critical emerging technology.

Most notably, the framework aligned the ROK towards collaboration with two nations that have been historically more proactive on the subject of cross-Strait relations. Secondly, it accelerated trilateral cooperation on maritime security in East Asia, which is indelibly linked to the defense of the island nation of Taiwan.

Lee Jae-myung and the Democratic Party

The ROK's left-leaning Democratic Party has never been as enthusiastic as Yoon's PPP regarding the US-ROK alliance, ROK-Japan relations, and security cooperation against China. The DP's leadership and voter base is dominated by the so-called "386 Generation"—that is, Koreans that were college-age during the late 1980s and participated in the protests calling for South Korea's democratic transition. This generation is particularly aware of Washington's historical

support for South Korean dictators and is sympathetic towards the socialist ideals undergirding the ROK labor rights movement—another key force in the ROK's democratization. The 386 Generation has been relatively supportive of reunification initiatives with North Korea—a policy for which Seoul has long relied upon the PRC for cooperation. For these reasons, the DP has advocated for a more balanced, or "independent," position between the great powers of the PRC, Russia, and the United States.

Lee Jae-myung, however, is somewhat of an anomaly within the DP leadership. Unlike his counterparts—and previous DP presidents such as Moon Jae-in—Lee did not take part in the democracy protests of the 1980s. Lee was born to a poor working-class family and was forced to take factory jobs to support himself through his education—work that precluded participation in the heady student movements of the 1980s. Lee is regarded as a transactional politician with a populist bent, and lacks the socialist ideological convictions of his contemporaries in the Democratic Party. Indeed, Lee reportedly ordered provisions criticizing Yoon for "antagonizing" Russia and China stripped out of the December 2024 impeachment bill, undermining the views of the more progressive factions among the Korean left.

However, Lee has made several comments regarding ROK-Taiwan relations that indicate he would adopt more PRC-friendly policies than Yoon. In a 2024 campaign event in Chungcheong Province, he remarked that "Whatever happens in the Taiwan Strait, whatever happens in the domestic affairs of China and Taiwan, what does it matter to us?" His statement stood in stark contrast to Yoon's position regarding the "global importance" of cross-Strait relations. Most striking was Lee's decision to sit down alongside then-PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming at the Chinese Embassy in Seoul, while the latter publicly castigated Yoon's security cooperation with Japan and the United States.

As a political figure with a reputation for populist policies over ideological fervor, it is difficult to judge whether Lee's PRC-friendly rhetoric is intended to stir up the DP's progressive base and differentiate himself from an unpopular incumbent, or whether they reflect Lee's true intentions. In a February 2025 interview, Lee stated that on "the security front, [the ROK] needs US-ROK-Japan cooperation" and that the "US-ROK alliance is an extremely useful foundation for our economic development. We can't throw out or interfere with that." In the same interview, Lee promised to "place the national interest at the forefront and do what must be done." With over 80 percent of South Koreans holding negative views of the PRC, it is entirely possible that, if elected president, Lee will react with policies more confrontational to the PRC than prior DP leaders.

However, given the constraints associated with his status as a DP politician, it is still worth considering what Taiwan and the United States can reasonably expect from Lee's cross-Strait policies on the rhetorical and military fronts.

Rhetorical Support for Taiwan under Lee

When it comes to relations with great powers such as China, Democratic Party leaders—and indeed non-DP ROK presidents before Yoon–have tended to focus on practical outcomes over rhetorical positioning. For example, months after she had agreed to deploy the US-made Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system on South Korean soil despite relentless opposition from Beijing, former ROK conservative President Park Geun-hye met with Xi Jinping (習近平) in China and expressed a desire to "make bilateral relations even firmer through sincere communication." Moon Jae-in, the last DP president, made his strongest statement on cross-Strait issues when a joint ROK-US declaration mentioned the importance of "preserving peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait." Moon's foreign minister Chung Eui-yong later clarified that the ROK's position on cross-Strait issues had "not changed" and acknowledged the "unique relations between China and Taiwan."

Though his weaker ideological convictions may not act as a check on Lee Jae-myung's approach to ROK-Taiwan relations as president, his more transactional approach to policy making may encourage him to question what gains the ROK would make from pro-Taiwan rhetoric. Though Taipei has long relied upon cooperative statements from foreign countries as it seeks to promote a unified opposition to PRC aggression, words may not be the ROK's wellspring of support for Taiwan under a presumed Lee Jae-myung Administration.

Defense Contributions to Taiwan under Lee

Trilateral Framework

Under a President Lee Jae-myung, a decline in trilateral cooperation between the ROK, the United States, and Japan may be the most consequential development for Taiwan's security. Deeply aware of Japan's colonial history in Korea, the ROK left wing holds on to net negative views of Tokyo. This is despite the fact that views regarding Japan among the general ROK public have trended positive since Yoon began his provocative pivot towards trilateral cooperation with Japan and the United States. Yoon's unilateral overtures to Tokyo have caused consternation within the ideological wing of the Democratic Party. When the DP-led coalition of political parties first moved to impeach Yoon, progressive lawmakers included language criticizing Yoon's "bizarre pro-Japan policies" and his "nomination of Japan-loving personnel to key government positions." Again, Lee Jae-myung moved to strike this language out of the second impeachment bill, which ultimately passed.

Stuck between ROK citizens' majority support for trilateral cooperation and the traditional opposition to Japan cooperation held by DP progressives, Lee is likely to take a middle ground. As Lee previously acknowledged, Seoul "needs US-ROK-Japan cooperation" and a Lee Administration would likely continue less-visible forms of trilateral engagement,

such as intelligence sharing regarding North Korean missile launches. However, a Lee Administration is unlikely to immediately authorize joint naval exercises with the United States and Japan—measures that were so encouraging for Taipei's fragile maritime security. Japan's Maritime Self Defense Force is particularly provocative to the ROK left, in that it still flies a near-identical version of the Rising Sun Flag of the Empire of Japan. It may take years, and a drastically heightened threat from either the PRC or North Korea, for Lee to agree to joint naval exercises with Japan—if at all.

ROK-US Bilateral Cooperation

In contrast to their relationships with Japan, DP leaders have historically shown more willingness to collaborate on defense with Washington (even as some ROK progressives harbor resentment towards the United States' cooperation with South Korean dictators). Even the most progressive DP presidents—such as Roh Moo-hyun—have deferred to US defense priorities. In 2003, former President Roh sent ROK troops to Iraq to support the US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom, eventually making South Korea the third-largest coalition partner behind the United States and the United Kingdom. Despite robust opposition from his base of support, Roh implemented the policy so as to enhance his administration's relationship with the US government.

A President Lee Jae-myung could participate in US-led bilateral naval exercises aimed indirectly at the PRC, if Lee believes the cooperation will enhance his bargaining power in other bilateral negotiations with Washington–such as those related to diplomacy with North Korea. US President Donald Trump has revealed his desire to re-establish summit diplomacy with North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un. As a result, Lee may seek to barter bilateral defense cooperation on PRC issues for influence over the negotiations. However, the direction of US-ROK defense cooperation is more likely to be decided by emerging conflicts over bilateral trade deficits and South Korea's expenditure on the US-ROK alliance. If Trump uses all his leverage on his objectives related to more equitable trade balances and greater ROK alliance spending, he might not have any cards left to pressure Lee into maritime cooperation against Beijing.

ROK Unilateral Maritime Security Contributions

Instead of pressuring Seoul into maritime defense groupings vulnerable to domestic political headwinds, the United States—and its partner Taiwan—may find more success in backing the Democratic Party's intrinsic interest in building a strong blue-water ROK navy. Partly as a consequence of historical trauma related to Korea's powerlessness against invasions by the Japanese Empire and Qing Dynasty-era China, DP politicians have long advocated for a powerful blue-water navy to achieve a sense of security and autonomy. Perhaps surprisingly, DP administrations have raised defense spending by more than their conservative counterparts, and the party has approved expensive and controversial naval shipbuilding projects such as the CVX aircraft carrier. Indeed, among the few concrete military assets slated for acquisition in the DP's manifesto for the 2022 presidential election (when Lee Jae-myung lost to Yoon Suk Yeol) were nuclear-powered submarines.

Image: Republic of Korea Navy vessels sail in a 2015 ceremony. (Image source: Wikimedia Commons)

The ROK is deeply reliant on sea lines of communication (SLOCs) around Taiwan for its maritime trade, and is engaged in a maritime dispute with the PRC over control of Ieodo (also known as Socotra Rock) in the East China Sea. A DP-led construction of a larger ROK Navy is therefore likely to produce significant positive security externalities for Taiwan, in that the PRC may be forced to divert its navy away from incessant exercises around Taiwan in order to jockey with Seoul for control over the Yellow Sea. In so far as is politically possible, the United States should aid a potential Lee Jae-myung Administration's advancement of a blue-water navy through measures such as technology transfer for nuclear-powered submarines. In doing so, Washington could support the growth of a new maritime counterbalance to the PRC in Northeast Asia, and a powerful force that could collaborate with democratic partners should ROK political winds turn again towards bilateral and trilateral cooperation.

The main point: An early ROK presidential election is forecasted to produce a victory for candidate Lee Jae-myung and his Democratic Party. Therefore, the United States and Taiwan should prepare for a Lee Administration that will likely be more reluctant to engage in overtly pro-Taiwan rhetoric. While Washington and Taipei should expect a Lee Administration to shy away from conspicuous trilateral defense cooperation with Japan and the United States, the Trump Administration can back the DP's desire to establish the ROK's own powerful blue-water navy that could distract the PRC navy from Taiwan, and allow Seoul to take greater responsibility for its sea lines of communication through the East China Sea.

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Tough Trade Negotiations Ahead for Taiwan

By: Riley Walters

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2025 has so far been a whirlwind for US trade policy. On March 26, President Trump announced a new 25 percent tariff on auto, auto parts, and computer imports. On April 2, deemed "Liberation Day" by the administration, Trump announced a separate 32 percent tariff on all other imports from Taiwan. A week later, that 32 percent tariff was lowered to 10 percent for 90 days, to allow for trade negotiations.

Even as this article is being published there are new updates to US trade policy, like a recent exemption for computers, cell phones, and semiconductors from certain tariffs.

These actions have brought great uncertainty to global markets. Global markets have lost trillions of dollars since April 2, including significant losses for Taiwan's stock exchanges. There are hopes that America's trading partners, including Taiwan, can secure new "tailored" deals with the Trump Administration to avoid more tariffs. Taiwan President William Lai (賴清德) recently published an op-ed in *Bloomberg Opinion* that outlined his roadmap for deeper trade ties between Taiwan and the United States. It's been reported that Taiwan may be one of the first countries with which the Trump Administration negotiates.

Unfortunately, trade negotiators from Taipei are looking at an uphill battle for dealing with the Trump Administration. Despite President Lai's interest in negotiating a fairer Taiwan-US trade relationship, it's still unclear what President Trump ultimately wants from other countries. In fact, Trump's goals may be to have an unfair trade relationship that disproportionately favors the United States—a trade relationship that puts "America first."

Taiwan and Trade

Trade is very important for Taiwan. Total trade (imports and exports) is valued well-over 100 percent of Taiwan's gross domestic product (GDP). This contrasts with the United States: only 25 percent of US GDP is total trade. Taiwan also runs annual trade surpluses, meaning that it exports more than it imports.

Trade with the United States is also very important for Taiwan, as the United States is the largest single destination for Taiwan exports. In 2024, Taiwan exported over USD $111 billion worth of goods to the United States, accounting for 23 percent of Taiwan's total exports. The majority of these goods were computers, computer accessories, and semiconductors.

Unfortunately, the United States runs a trade in goods deficit with Taiwan. The goods deficit in 2024 was valued at USD $73.7 billion, a 56 percent increase from the 2023 trade deficit of USD $47.3 billion. This has more to do with high demand for products made in Taiwan, and less to do with the differences in trade barriers between the United States and Taiwan.

Figure 1: Taiwan's Major Export Markets

2024 exports from Taiwan (destination)	Total value (billions)	Percent of total
United States	$111.4	23.4%
China	$97.0	20.4%
Hong Kong	$53.6	11.3%
Singapore	$33.7	7.1%
Japan	$25.8	5.4%
Republic of Korea	$20.8	4.4%
Malaysia	$19.9	4.2%
Viet Nam	$14.3	3.0%
Thailand	$11.8	2.5%
Netherlands	$9.7	2.0%
Mexico	$7.9	1.7%
India	$7.9	1.7%
Rest of world	$61.2	12.9%
Total	**$475.0**	**100%**

Source: Customs Administration, Ministry of Finance, ROC

Like most other developed economies, Taiwan has very few tariffs on imports. Its average tariff rate is 4 percent for industrial products and 15 percent for agricultural products, with a total average tariff rate of 6.4 percent. Still, it should have come as no surprise when President Trump—who has long articulated his dislike for trade deficits—took action against Taiwan and other countries with which the United States has persistent trade deficits. And so, on April 2 he announced a 32 percent tariff on all imports from Taiwan, based largely on the trade deficit in goods.

Thankfully, either because of market backlash or because more than 75 countries came forward to express willingness to negotiate, Trump announced a week later his plan to pause this new round of higher tariffs—while keeping in place a 10 percent tariff for the next 90 days. 10 percent would still be much higher than the roughly 3 percent average tariff the United States has applied to imports for the last decade.

The new 10 percent tariff will also exclude pre-existing tariffs, such as the 25 percent tariffs on aluminum, automobiles, automobile parts, computers, steel, and any other future national security-related tariffs. Meanwhile, the tariff on goods from China has increased to over 100 percent.

In the hopes of striking a deal for Taiwan, President Lai recently published an opinion piece outlining his five core principles for trade negotiations with the Trump Administration:

- Removing all tariffs on Taiwan-US trade;
- Offsetting the trade imbalance by purchasing more US agriculture, defense, energy, and industrial goods;
- Establishing a "US Investment Team" to support new investment in the United States;
- Removing non-tariff barriers to trade;
- And, addressing US concerns regarding export control and transshipment.

The Challenges of Negotiations

Despite their willingness to negotiate a deal with the Trump administration, the Lai Administration is going to face some serious challenges. Many of these challenges are political, but some of them are simply bureaucratic. The first challenge is that no one truly knows what Trump wants from each country. A good assumption is that not only does Trump want to decrease the trade deficits the United States has with many countries, but he may also want the United States to run trade surpluses. On this point, Lai's recent article is at least going in the right direction.

The second challenge is whether such a deal is even possible within the next 90 days. Yes, Trump could extend the 90-day period, but that is not guaranteed. It is also unclear how long these negotiations will last. The Trump team may demand an expediency that Lai and his team cannot deliver, given political constraints at home. It is a little easier for countries like Japan and South Korea to negotiate, as Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba or South Korean acting-President Han Duck-soo can call Trump directly to talk about negotiations. But for President Lai, who cannot call Trump, he has to rely on his team and hope that any deal they negotiate is good enough for Trump.

Third, it's uncertain what the terms of any agreement will look like. Leaders like Lai will want guarantees that tariffs will not come back in six or 12 months; however, Trump is unlikely to make such a commitment. From the start, any agreement may simply be a memorandum of understanding between the two governments. But American officials may look to ensure their terms persist, and will want legislative action in both the United States and abroad to formalize any agreement. Again, this is a challenge for Lai, whose party does not hold the majority in Taiwan's legislative body.

It will be interesting to compare any agreement between the US and Taiwan in the near future with the US-Taiwan 21st Century Trade Initiative. The "21st Initiative" has essentially been slow progress towards a US-Taiwan bilateral trade agreement. These negotiations slowed last year, most likely due to the approaching US presidential election.

Image: The logo for the "21st Century Trade Initiative"—a project to negotiate terms of a potential US-Taiwan bilateral trade agreement—as presented by Taiwan's government. (Image source: Office of Trade Negotiations, Executive Yuan)

Unlike the current situation in US trade policy—where much of the US Congress is allowing the Trump Administration to act without Congressional consultation—over the preceding year Congress demanded to play a role in US-Taiwan trade negotiations. However, there is now a different administration in the White House and a different Congress. Accordingly, Congress may be less interested in weighing in on US-Taiwan trade negotiations than before.

A final, and possibly bigger, challenge for Taiwan is the national security (Section 232 specific) tariffs. This includes 25 percent tariffs on automobiles. Currently, Taiwan is not a large source for America's automobile and automobile part imports: in 2024, the United States imported roughly USD $3.7 billion worth of these goods from Taiwan, most of which were various parts and accessories.

However, the Section 232 notice also includes HS8471, which is a general code for all computers and data processing machines. Last year, HS8471 imports from Taiwan were valued at USD $26 billion, or 22 percent of all imports from Taiwan, according to US government statistics. It is unclear what the fate of these tariffs may be. The Trump Administration has also threatened tariffs on semiconductor imports. Imports of semiconductors were over USD $15 billion, or 13 percent of all imports from Taiwan.

As we have seen with other Section 232 tariffs, there have not been any exemptions from these tariffs for trade partners and allies. These tariffs also operate separately from

the reciprocal 10 percent tariff. This means that, even if Taiwan can negotiate to keep the reciprocal tariff rate at 10 percent and not 32 percent, they might not be able to negotiate the 25 percent Section 232 tariff.

Trade Uncertainties Beyond Taiwan

Whether Taiwan is successful in negotiating a deal with the Trump Administration or not, Taiwan still sends many of its exports to other countries in Asia. This means that unless other countries are also successful negotiating with the Trump Administration, there may be increased costs for Taiwan's exporters.

China is the second largest destination for Taiwan's exports. Many of these exports (like semiconductors) continue on to America after being put in new cell phones, computers and laptops, or other technologies. As the US-China trade war increases in severity, this will become more of a challenge for Taiwan's multinational companies.

We have seen Taiwanese manufacturing leave China over the last eight years in part because of Trump's first tariffs on China. Some of that manufacturing has returned to Taiwan, but a lot of it has also gone to emerging markets like southeast Asia. However, many Taiwanese firms still have a significant reliance on China for manufacturing, meaning that Taiwan will not go unharmed from the uncertainties of the new US-China trade war.

The main point: US-Taiwan trade negotiations are going to be difficult: not just because of the diplomatic restrictions on Washington-Taipei communications, but also because of the nature of the tariffs the Trump Administration is applying. A 10 percent tariff rate is better than a 32 percent tariff, but both are still higher than the average 3 percent the US applied up until recently. Hopefully, a deal can be made to avoid large reciprocal tariffs. However, there are also 25 percent tariffs on auto and computer imports from Taiwan which may not be negotiable. There could also be tariffs on semiconductor imports soon. This will result in large costs: not just for Taiwanese exporters, but also for American consumers reliant on Taiwan's manufacturing in information technologies.

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