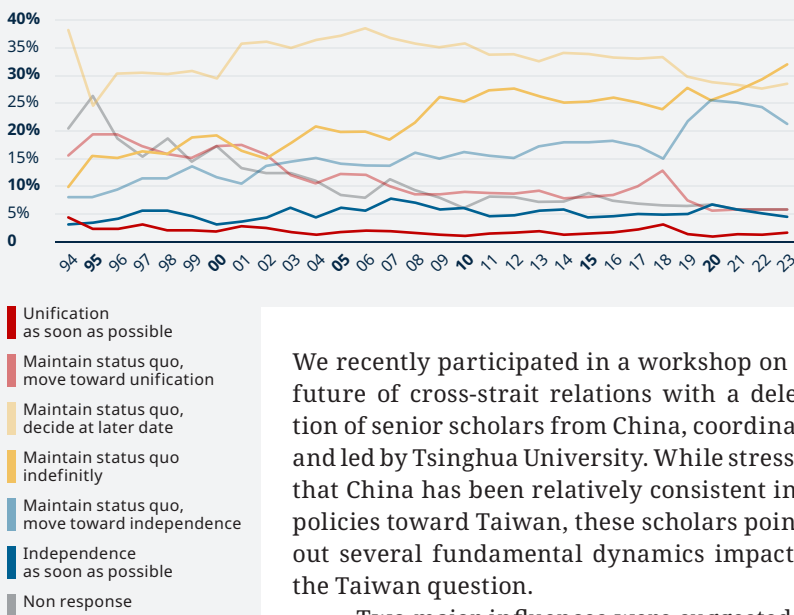


RESEARCH NOTE

Status Quo on the Taiwan Question Under Pressure: Perspectives from Beijing and Washington

JULY 21, 2023

Changes in the Unification/Independence Stances of Taiwanese¹



We recently participated in a workshop on the future of cross-strait relations with a delegation of senior scholars from China, coordinated and led by Tsinghua University. While stressing that China has been relatively consistent in its policies toward Taiwan, these scholars pointed out several fundamental dynamics impacting the Taiwan question.

Two major influences were suggested regarding social changes in Taiwan and their implications for relations with mainland China: **separatism** and **democratization**. According to one speaker, policies enacted by the island’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party have driven these shifts, as evidenced by the Sunflower student movement in 2014. Another attendee highlighted the significance of the passing of the “mainland generation”—those born on the mainland who relocated to Taiwan after the civil war, known as *waishengren* (外省人), or Mainlanders. According to this argument, the connection between the mainland generation and mainland China has been severed, with the values of liberty and freedom becoming a given for the younger generation, who are thus more inclined toward separatism.

The consensus view was that Taiwanese people now “really think differently” from those on the mainland. Given Taiwan’s unique political system and the forces of globalization, both publics continue to diverge on several fronts. The high unemployment rate in Taiwan, currently at 15%, was identified as a major issue, but its influence on the political views of younger residents remains uncertain. As for Taiwanese capitalists (工商界), they continue to

generally oppose Taiwanese independence as it conflicts with their interests.

The discussion provided a valuable window into how developments in Taiwan are perceived in China. Our dominant impression was that policy elites in China feel that Taiwan is drifting away. Recent statements by Xi Jinping emphasize that, while there is no concrete timeline for reunification, it should be gradually approached. Any backward movement away from reunification is deemed unacceptable. Thus, the perception that such a reversal may be happening increases the risks of a more forceful policy being implemented by Beijing.

These risks are also escalating on the American side. In the same week of our meeting last month with the Tsinghua scholars, we had access to a briefing from the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence. Though the document, marked as unclassified, does not necessarily represent an official policy position, its discussion of Taiwan provided one of the clearest examples yet of the shifts happening in Washington. The United States’ One-China policy, established in 1972, has never ruled out a peaceful reunification between mainland China and Taiwan. The intelligence briefing from June takes a contrary view. It is no secret, of course, that U.S. policymakers now view the question with a different lens. Our interlocutors from Tsinghua conveyed it bluntly: “While China was weak, America accepted reunification. Now that China is strong, reunification is a threat.”

The ONI document spelled this out, arguing that it would be “disastrous” for American power if Beijing gained control over Taiwan, “even if China did not use military force.” China would extend its reach in the Pacific, beyond the first island chain, and absorb a technologically advanced economy. The move would also likely fortify the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimacy and audacity. While no statement from American policymakers has gone as far as this intelligence report, it is bound to reinforce the conviction in Beijing that the U.S. has moved away from the delicate 1972 balance. And, as described above, China also faces new pressures to abandon the status quo.

¹ As tracked in surveys by Election Study Center, NCCU between 1994 and 2023 (June).