

# Taiwan's Politics in Pixels: Analyzing the Democratic Progressive Party's Digital Rhetoric

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**Abstract:** *Over seven decades of political stalemate, Taiwan's sovereign status vis-à-vis Mainland China remains an unresolved and volatile issue. The 21st century has witnessed spiraling cross-strait tensions due to pro-independence endeavors by the Taiwanese Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), challenging the fundamental One China Principle. This delicate equilibrium has experienced further strain by the DPP's employment of digital campaigns to influence Taiwanese citizens' perceptions of Mainland China, while simultaneously bolstering ties with the US in support of autonomy. Amid this complex landscape, media and political propagandas have surfaced as the DPP's prominent instruments to sway its citizenry. However, the potency of digital media in sculpting public opinion and steering political discourse is met with a scarcity of research exploring the DPP's methodologies in advocating for an autonomous Taiwan. To address this gap, this paper offers a preliminary outlook by analyzing the DPP's deployment of digital media and political rhetoric as influential mechanisms to shape its citizens' perceptions of identity.*

**Keywords:** Sino-US relations, cross-strait relations, One China Principle, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), political communication, political propaganda.

## 1. CROSS-STRAIT CONUNDRUM: BALANCING THE SOVEREIGNTY STRUGGLES FROM 1949 TO 2016

The enduring geopolitical tension and the unresolved issue of sovereignty between Mainland China and Taiwan remain stagnant, rendering the impasse more precarious by the day (Yu, 2020). Originating over 80 years ago from contrasting ideologies regarding the future of modern China, the dispute between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT) has yet to broker a truce, despite Mainland China's persistent aspirations for reunification (Tsai & Tsai, 2022).

After the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Japan invaded Taiwan as the war-torn Chinese Qing Dynasty grappled with a fractured semi-colonial upheaval. Several decades later, the establishment of two major political-military parties – the CCP and the KMT – laid the groundwork for the key protagonists in the present cross-strait conflict (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020). Following their collaborative efforts in countering Japanese forces in the 1930s, the eventual signing of the Cairo Declaration stipulated that Japan relinquish all territories seized from China, including the island of Taiwan. The proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by Chairman Mao Zedong in 1949 marked a pivotal point; concurrently, Chiang Kai-Shek, the Generalissimo of the KMT, retreated to Taiwan along with two million loyalists, heralding the onset of the ubiquitous cross-strait tension (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020). As the CCP consolidated control of the Mainland, the KMT-administered Taiwan was in a precarious position. Fearing military incursions from the Mainland, the island sought to establish strategic alliances to bolster its defense capabilities and ensure its survival.

In this context, the US emerged as a crucial ally, perceiving Taiwan as a strategic outpost in the Pacific and recognizing the island's value in containing the spread of communism during the early stages of the Cold War. In 1954, the US and Taiwan signed the Mutual Defense Treaty, formalizing the US's commitment to the island's security in the event of a PRC invasion (Eighty-fourth Congress, first session, 1955). This arrangement cemented the Strait's deadlock (Ai & Zhang, 2021) and at the same time, entailed several political implications:

- **Strategic Leverage:** The treaty enabled Taiwan to leverage its relationship with the US and gain access to advanced military equipment, specialized training, and intelligence sharing. It bolstered Taiwan's defense capabilities and military readiness, something that continues to be cultivated today with US's arms support to the island.

- **International Recognition:** The treaty conferred a degree of international recognition upon Taiwan, as it represented a formal agreement between a major global power and the island. This tacitly hinted at Taiwan's status as a separate entity from the PRC in the eyes of the international community to a limited extent.
- **Diplomatic Isolation:** Despite its benefits, the treaty also contributed to Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. The agreement indirectly reinforced the PRC's claim that Taiwan is part of its 'arc of history' by not explicitly acknowledging Taiwan as a separate sovereign state. This stance complicated Taiwan's participation in various international organizations and hindered its "diplomatic relations" with other nations.
- **Sino-US Relations:** The Mutual Defense Treaty added a layer of complexity to Sino-US relations, becoming a longstanding point of contention between China and the US. The treaty infringed on the PRC's sovereignty over Taiwan, leading to ongoing regional tensions and influencing diplomatic dynamics between the two major powers.

The Mutual Defense Treaty (1955-1980) provided a crucial security umbrella for the island during a tumultuous period (Huang, 2020). It also contributed to Taiwan's diplomatic isolation and complicated Sino-US relations, making the cross-Strait issue a susceptible and enduring aspect of regional geopolitics. The cross-Strait standstill glimpsed détente in 1971-1972 following the UN General Assembly's formal recognition of the PRC as the sole legitimate representation of China in the UN (Lin, 2022). This development, coupled with the historic visit of US President Richard Nixon to China, revitalized Sino-US relations, culminating in the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué. This seminal diplomatic document reaffirmed the PRC as China's sole legal government, with the US acknowledging that "all Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of that China." (Foreign Relations of the United States, p. 815) Over the years, a growing number of nations have forged official diplomatic ties with the PRC while maintaining unofficial relationships with Taiwan without recognizing its statehood (Liao & Lin, 2015). Chairman Deng Xiaoping's 1979 landmark visit to the US formalized diplomatic relations between China and the US, demarcating the parameters of US engagement with Taiwan. This included terminating the bilateral defense treaty (Mutual Defense Treaty) in 1980, withdrawing US military personnel stationed in Taiwan, and ceasing official diplomatic recognition (Liao & Lin, 2015). Nevertheless, despite suspending formal ties with the island, the US reaffirmed its commitment to Taiwan's security by passing the Taiwan Relations Act. While not entail a formal defense commitment like the Mutual Defense Treaty, the TRA ensures continued economic, cultural, and security cooperation to Taiwan over the long term. This event intensified tension in the already delicate Sino-US relations (H.R.2479 – 96th Congress, 1979).

The efforts of Beijing and Washington to reconcile their differences over Taiwan encountered a significant setback following a visit by the former Taiwanese leader Lee Teng-hui to his alma-mater Cornell University's commencement ceremonies in 1995 (Liao & Lin, 2015). Lee Teng-hui was the first Taiwanese in high governmental position to visit the US after the breaking of official diplomatic ties. Condemning the US for its decision to grant Lee a visa—which resulted in Lee delivering a potentially incendiary speech on the cross-Strait relationship—Mainland China expressed its displeasure through a series of war games in proximity to Taiwan (Liao & Lin, 2015). In response apprehension over potential PRC military action against Taiwan, the US deployed two carrier battle groups to the South China Sea. The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait missile crisis was a culmination of these events. The PRC's saber-rattling and the US's military response underscored the volatile nature of the cross-Strait situation and the prospects for escalation. The crisis further solidified the PRC's determination to modernize its military, seeing the necessity to assert its military capabilities in the face of perceived challenges to sovereignty over Taiwan. In conjunction with Mainland China's shift towards a market economy and its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the series of events has fueled concerns in Taiwan that the Mainland's expanding international presence may increasingly marginalize the island on the diplomatic and political front (Brundidge, 2010). Adding further complexity to the situation was the 1992 Consensus, a semi-official agreement reached between representatives of the CCP and KMT-led Taiwan (Chen, 2017). The consensus acknowledged the principle of one unified China while allowing both sides to interpret the meaning of "One China" differently. While this consensus contributed to a degree of stability in cross-Strait relations, it also instigated debates and disagreements within Taiwan's domestic political ideologies regarding the island's status and relationship with the Mainland.

While the PRC's economic, political, and military transformation ostensibly tilted the balance in favor of the Mainland and reinforced the One China Principle—the assertion that the Mainland and Taiwan are indivisible components of China—reality has proved more complex (Lin, 2022). The PRC's unification strategy, embodied in the "One Country, Two Systems" model, has been repudiated by the island, which has undergone progression towards democratization and societal pluralism (Liao & Lin, 2015). The Mainland was enraged by then-Taiwanese

leader Lee Teng-hui's political guidelines for forming a new Taiwanese political identity and proposing a "special state-to-state" cross-Strait relationship (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020). This incident further provoked Mainland China's tenacity to raise military expenditure in preparation for a possible non-peaceful resolution in the future. Then, in the early 2000s, the advent of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) under the leadership of Chen Shui-bian propelled the cross-Strait quandary to a new pinnacle (Hsiao, 2017). Under Chen's stewardship, the DPP emphasized a "one country on each side" stance, seeking to augment Taiwan's cultural and political independence from the PRC. In the wake of the Mainland's rejection of Chen's overture, the cross-Strait relations found a somewhat tentative balance with the proposal of the subsequent Taiwanese leader. Between 2008 and 2016, Ma Ying-jeou's novel approach, anchored in a "One China, Different Interpretations" principle, managed to defuse the tension of the Strait to a certain extent (Huang & Soong, 2016).

## 2. 2016 – PRESENT, A NEW APEX OF CROSS-STRAIT INSTABILITY

The PRC's aspiration for reunification has purportedly emerged as the Mainland's top national security goal and a prominent bone of contention in the cross-Strait relationship (Ai & Zhang, 2021). With the ascension of Tsai Ing-wen, the latest leader of the DPP in 2016, cross-Strait relations plummeted into a state of deep freeze following her categorical repudiation of the 1992 Consensus (Ho et al., 2014). While alluding to the Consensus as "existing realities and political foundations" in her 2016 campaign, Tsai vigorously opposed President Xi Jinping's 2019 speech urging Taiwanese compatriots to adhere to the 1992 Consensus and reject Taiwan's independence. By asserting that "the Beijing authorities' definition of the '1992 Consensus' is 'One China' and 'One Country, Two Systems', and that we never accepted the '1992 Consensus'", Tsai further stirred the pot, challenging the Mainland to negotiate with Taiwan over its political status. In 2020, Tsai instigated a further deterioration in cross-Strait ties by proclaiming that Taiwan was already an independent country and calling on the Mainland to "recognize the situation" (Hsiao, 2017; Cheung, 2022). Cross-Strait dialogues have been mainly in political and social limbo since Tsai assumed office, visibly degrading the relationship with the Mainland and the island's own economy in a few ways:

- **Limited High-Level Dialogues:** Before Tsai assumed office, there were semi-official dialogues and communications channels between the CCP and the island. For instance, representatives from semi-official organizations, such as the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) (1990) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) (1991), held talks and negotiations on various issues. However, Track II dialogues have primarily been restricted or suspended after Tsai's election. The lack of high-profile dialogue between the two sides has contributed to a significant decline in cross-Strait engagement.
- **Suspension of Cross-Strait Communication Mechanisms:** Under previous administrations, certain communication mechanisms were established to facilitate cross-Strait exchanges and manage sensitive issues. For example, the Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed in 2010 promoted economic negotiations and cooperation while reducing trade barriers. However, during Tsai's tenure, these communication mechanisms have been frozen or inactive due to the impasse on the political front. There have been no significant follow-up agreements or progress in negotiations to deepen economic integration since.
- **Reduced Exchanges:** One visible aspect of the decline in cross-Strait exchanges is the decrease in Mainland tourist groups visiting Taiwan. Before Tsai came to power, there was a substantial influx of Mainland tourists to Taiwan. In 2015, a record 4.18 million Mainland tourists visited the island, significantly boosting Taiwan's tourism industry and economy. However, in response to Tsai's refusal to endorse the One China principle and her firm stance on Taiwan's autonomy, Beijing imposed restrictions on Mainland tourists traveling to the island. This included limiting the issuance of travel permits to individual travelers and discouraging group tours. As a result, the number of Mainland tourist arrivals to Taiwan significantly decreased, impacting the island's tourism sector and the overall economy.

Since Tsai Ing-wen assumed office in 2016, there has been a noticeable escalation of hostility toward the Mainland from Taiwanese citizens (Newman et al., 2021). Tsai's firm stance on Taiwan's sovereignty and rejection of the One China principle have resonated with segments of the Taiwanese population who prioritize Taiwan's democratic identity and distinct status. This adversarial sentiment towards the Mainland was further exacerbated in 2021 when the Taiwanese "Ministry of Defense" issued a report cautioning Taiwanese citizens about the Mainland's military capabilities. The report highlighted that the PRC had acquired the capability to "encircle and blockade Taiwan's harbors, airports, and outbound flight routes, thereby posing potential threats to the island's

security" (Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), 2021). This issuance contributed to the erosion of benevolence and trust in the Mainland among the Taiwanese public. It reinforced concerns and anxieties about PRC's military build-up and concerns for Taiwan's security and territorial integrity.

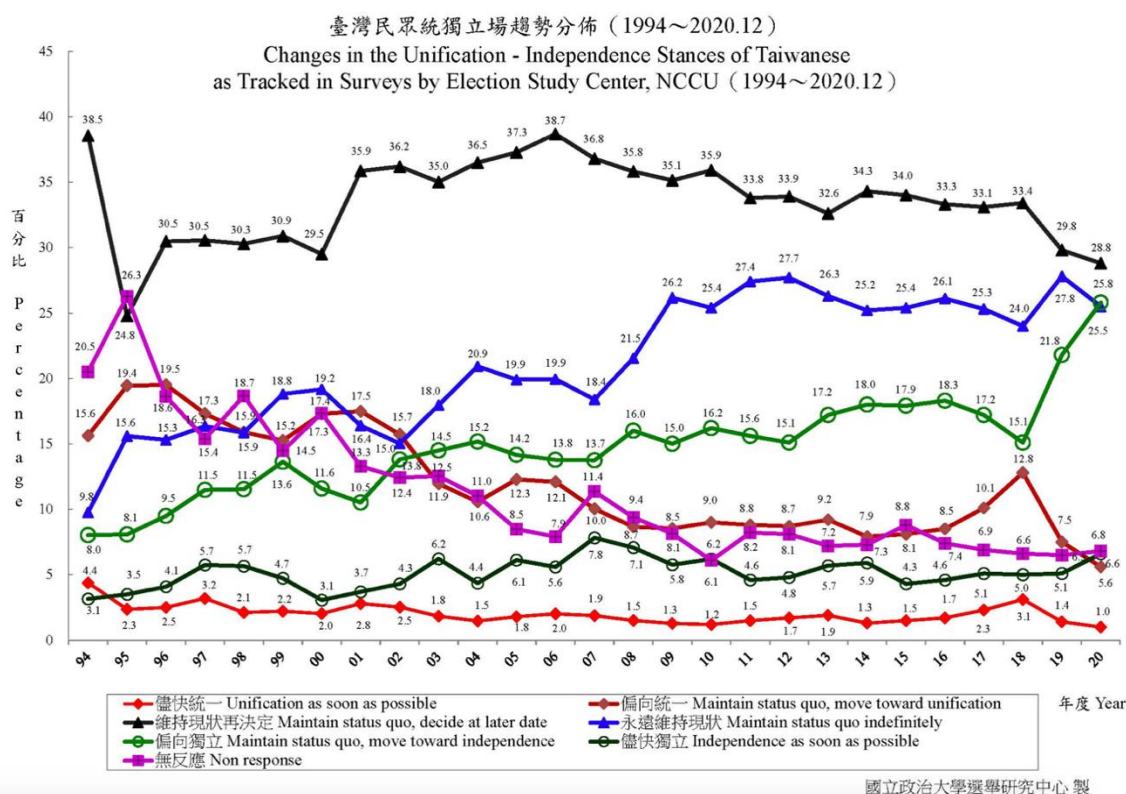
### **3. DIGITAL MEDIA ECHO CHAMBERS: AMPLIFYING IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES**

Prior to the turn of the century, a sizable segment of the Taiwanese population was pragmatically receptive to both independence and reunification (Greenwood, 2020). The flourishing of local culture and the evolution of the island's political identity has witnessed a remarkable process of democratization, exemplified by a series of shifting stances among Taiwan's leaders over time.

From Lee Teng-hui's tenure from 1988 to 2000, during which he proposed a "special state-to-state relationship," to Chen Shui-bian's tenure from 2000 to 2008, marked by his vision of a "future one China," and later Tsai Ing-wen's time in office since 2016, characterized by her deliberate rejection of the 1992 Consensus and the One China Principle (Hsiao, 2017; Greenwood, 2020), Taiwan's political landscape experienced profound transformations. A notable change in Taiwan's modern political economy that led to hopes of self-governing autonomy transpired in 2000, when the island's long-standing ruling party, the KMT, was ousted from power, and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) took control of Taiwan under the leadership of Chen Shui-bian, the island's first non-KMT leader. The DPP, predominantly representing Taiwanese who wish for political change and younger citizens' interests, repudiated the One China Principle and advocated for dialogue with the Mainland without preconditions (Liao & Lin, 2015).

When President Hu Jintao assumed leadership of the PRC in 2002, a declination in dialogue between the Mainland and a more autonomous Taiwan became more apparent (Lin, 2022). Hu's adoption of a no-contact policy towards Chen Shui-bian was showcased in the PRC's endeavors to escalate military missile deployments across the Strait and exert diplomatic pressure on other nations to isolate Taiwan's diplomacy. The passage of the PRC's Anti-Secession Law in 2005 codified the potential use of non-peaceful measures in response to a potential formal declaration of independence by Taiwan (Liao & Lin, 2015). Over the past two decades, there has been a notable rise in pro-independence sentiment among Taiwanese residents, even during the tenure of the pro-reunification KMT leader Ma Ying-jeou between 2008 and 2016. Ma's tenure saw some improvements in cross-Strait relations due to his pursuit of closer economic ties and cooperation with China (Lin, 2022). However, while the cross-Strait stagnation rebounded during Ma's term, Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP retaking victories in the 2016 Taiwan general elections degraded the ease of the cross-Strait relationship achieved during Ma's time (Hsiao, 2017; Lin, 2022).

A key observation of Taiwan's political ideologies is a discernible trend towards increasing autonomy even when pro-reunification KMT authorities held power. The KMT maintained the stance that a growing Taiwanese identity did not necessarily imply a pursuit of Taiwanese independence (Huang & Soong, 2016). Prior to the year 2000, the issue of "de-Sinicization" attempts by Taiwan's government was a less prominent and contentious topic among its citizens, and the political stalemate between the Mainland and Taiwan was relatively stable. However, a noteworthy phenomenon unfolded at the turn of the century, as the cross-Strait climate worsened not only at the governmental and geopolitical levels but also at a social level. During this period, there was a significant shift in the attitudes of Taiwanese citizens toward their identity and cross-Strait relations. According to data from the National Chengchi University, the percentage of Taiwanese citizens supporting a move towards independence rose from 10.5% in 2001 to nearly 26% in 2020 (Lin, 2022). In contrast, the number of Taiwanese citizens who favored cross-Strait reunification declined from 17.5% in 2001 to 6.6% in 2020 (Lin, 2022). Notably, the proportion of Taiwanese citizens advocating immediate reunification with the Mainland dwindled to less than 1% by 2020 (Lin, 2022).

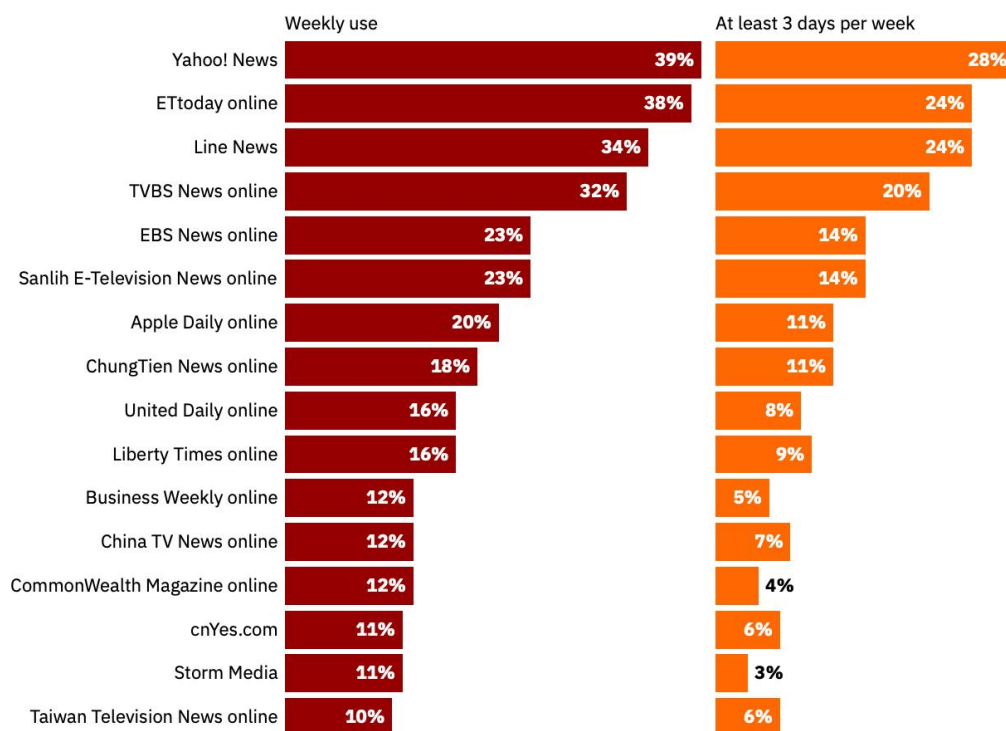


Further corroborating this trend, Duke University's 2022 Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS) revealed that a significant majority of respondents, approximately 62%, expressed support for Taiwan's independence as long as it could be accomplished without provoking the PRC to resort to the use of force for reunification (Lin, 2022). Moreover, even if the Mainland's political, economic, and social conditions were on par with Taiwan's, 67% of respondents still opposed reunification. Such findings illustrate these Taiwanese citizens' clear and consistent inclination towards asserting a distinct national identity and seeking greater autonomy. The shifting attitudes over the last few decades indicate a growing desire for self-governance and independence, even in the face of geopolitical challenges and pressure from the Mainland (TNSS Survey Data, 2002-2022, Duke University).

The significant shift in political power in 2000, with the pro-independence DPP assuming control from the pro-reunification KMT, marked a momentous turning point for Taiwan's political landscape. This transition paved the way for Taiwanese citizens to gradually develop more democratic and autonomous views regarding Taiwan's political status. Moreover, the year 2000 coincided with the advent of the information era, which fundamentally transformed how people worldwide accessed and perceived digital information (Guenduez et al., 2016; Hsu, 2021). As the internet became an integral part of daily life, digital media gained widespread popularity and captured the attention of global residents, influencing their thoughts and beliefs. In Taiwan, the internet penetration rate reached an impressive 92% as of 2022, and approximately 89.4% of the population actively used social media platforms (Greenwood, 2020). Among these platforms, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram were particularly prevalent, with 84.2%, 68.5%, and 44.2% of the total Taiwanese population engaging with these platforms, respectively (Greenwood, 2020). Internet news consumption played a vital role in shaping public discourse in Taiwan, with platforms such as Yahoo! News and Line News being prominent sources of information. Approximately 39% of Taiwanese citizens used Yahoo! News on a weekly basis, while Line News garnered 34% of weekly usage (Greenwood, 2020). The easy accessibility of digital news sources allowed Taiwanese citizens to stay informed and participate actively in the democratic process. Furthermore, cable television had a significant presence in Taiwan due to its affordability and the paucity of free-to-air television channels. Over 80% of Taiwanese citizens relied on cable TV for their viewing needs (Greenwood, 2020), making it a dominant medium for entertainment and news dissemination.

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Taiwan



The motivation behind this research stems from a noteworthy increase in negative perceptions among Taiwanese citizens regarding Mainland China's reunification goal in contemporary times. This paper aims to provide a holistic understanding of this phenomenon by examining the role played by digital media and political propaganda in shaping Taiwanese citizens' attitudes, particularly in light of the DPP's efforts to promote autonomy. The study posits that human activities, including media disinformation tactics and government-induced political propaganda, have contributed to the growing cross-Strait tensions, leading to regional stagnation and heightened instability (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Lin, 2019).

This paper will probe two principal issues. Firstly, it will investigate the role of Taiwan's polarized media landscape, which is heavily influenced by government funding, in reinforcing pro-DPP news coverage while limiting the dissemination of anti-DPP and pro-PRC news. This analysis will illuminate how media biases influence public perceptions and attitudes toward Mainland China and Taiwan's political trajectory. Secondly, the paper will explore the push-pull factors between Taiwan and the US in strategically promoting autonomy for the island. It will examine how US engagement with Taiwan impacts public opinion and steers Taiwanese citizens towards endorsing stronger political ties with the US while criticizing Mainland China (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Lin, 2019). By delving into these crucial aspects, the research aims to provide insights into the interplay of digital media, political propaganda, and geopolitical influences on Taiwanese citizens' perceptions of cross-Strait relations. Understanding these dynamics is vital for comprehending the evolving political landscape in the region and may contribute to fostering more constructive and stable pathways for cross-Strait interactions.

#### **4. MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN TAIWAN: TRUST, CONTROVERSIES, AND THE DEMOCRATIC FACADE**

The media landscape in Taiwan has been characterized by controversies and concerns regarding the level of trust citizens place in mainstream information outlets (Lo et al., 1996). At first glance, Taiwan's media environment appears democratic, seemingly allowing for a free flow of information without overt censorship (Östman, 2014). However, underlying complexities related to information availability and market competition have posed challenges for media outlets in generating revenue through individual contributions. Some notable challenges in this regard include:

- **Media Ownership and Political Influence:** Several major media outlets in Taiwan are owned by corporations with strong political affiliations. These media conglomerates may have vested interests in promoting certain political ideologies or supporting specific parties, leading to biases in news coverage. For example, outlets with ties to the DPP, such as Liberty Times (自由時報) and Formosa TV (民視), are more inclined to highlight favorable news about their respective party while downplaying or omitting critical stories.
- **Advertising Revenue and Content Prioritization:** Taiwanese media heavily relies on advertising revenue to sustain operations. This financial reliance can influence content prioritization, as media outlets may prioritize stories that appeal to advertisers or sponsors. For instance, controversial or critical topics of influential advertisers might be underreported or suppressed to maintain financial support.
- **Digital Media Disruption:** With the rise of online news platforms and social media, news consumption habits have changed dramatically. Traditional media outlets now directly compete with digital-native news sources, leading to challenges in monetizing digital content and adapting to rapidly evolving consumer preferences.
- **Sensationalism and Clickbait:** To attract larger audiences and generate more ad revenue, media outlets have begun to resort to sensationalism and clickbait-style headlines. As a result, news articles may prioritize sensational or emotionally charged content over balanced and in-depth reporting, potentially impacting the public's understanding of complex political issues.
- **Self-Censorship and Political Pressure:** Despite the appearance of a democratic media environment, there have been instances of self-censorship among media outlets due to political pressure or fear of backlash. Journalists may avoid covering sensitive topics or critical stories that could lead to confrontations with influential individuals or entities.
- **Media Consolidation and Diversity:** Media ownership concentration can limit the diversity of voices and perspectives in the media landscape. When a few entities dominate the media market, alternative viewpoints and critical journalism might be marginalized, hindering the public's access to diverse and independent news sources. Consequently, Taiwan's media landscape heavily relies on financial support from sponsors, private investors, and government funding. The absence of comprehensive media policies and regulations has resulted in a lack of incentives for unbiased news coverage, creating an environment where the ruling DPP could reward media outlets that provide favorable coverage of its policies and actions (Keng & Schubert, 2010). This financial dependency has raised concerns about the objectivity and independence of the media. Furthermore, the DPP has employed algorithms to curate and present information, acknowledging the prevalence of news consumption through various social media platforms among Taiwanese citizens (Keng & Schubert, 2010). These algorithms can potentially influence the visibility and exposure of specific news articles, thereby shaping public discourse on particular subjects. The utilization of such algorithms introduces questions about the potential impact on the diversity of information sources and the plurality of perspectives available to the public.

An interview conducted by the International Journalists' Network with a professional magazine reporter from Taiwan raised concerns regarding media bias and its impact on news visibility. The reporter expressed apprehensions that when media organizations "publish an article that promotes a government policy, it will get more visibility without us [the media] doing anything. Similarly, content that opposed the government would receive less exposure." The interviewee lamented that "the only valid opinion is the one that says, 'Taiwan is an independent country, and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is great.'" The DPP has lauded its popularity among Taiwanese young adults, exploiting talk of "disinformation from China" to sway their opinions against the Mainland (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018; Tsai & Tsai, 2022).

In recent years, a recurring trend observed within the DPP has been its labeling of certain information originating from Mainland China as "fake news" (Yu, 2020). The DPP's approach to combating what they perceive as misinformation includes the implementation of a strategic initiative codenamed the "1450", or "online army" plan, allocating NT\$14.5 million to recruit editors tasked with "correcting" online content (Yu, 2020; Fan, 2021). This approach has sparked public concerns and criticism as taxpayers' funds are utilized to support an "internet army" to eradicate digital information deemed unfavorable to the DPP's interests. Taiwanese citizens have questioned whether any news unfavorably portraying the DPP would be unjustly labeled false information (Fan, 2021). Hou Han-ting, a Taiwan political pundit and New Party Taipei city counselor, highlighted the capabilities of the DPP's online army in collaborating with various social media platforms, such as PTT and Facebook, as well as traditional

print and electronic media outlets and TV programs (Fan, 2021). This level of coordination has allowed the online army to exert influence and control over digital narratives that align with the DPP's objectives and messaging. The DPP's establishment of the Center for Online Communities in 2020 further expanded its capabilities in managing and shaping online discourse (Fan, 2021). This move, coupled with the DPP's persistent emphasis on Taiwan's information warfare capacities, has provided additional opportunities and resources for the online army to act as control hubs in countering narratives from Mainland China and opposing viewpoints, particularly from the pro-reunification KMT party.

The DPP's proactive approach to addressing digital media and online information has severely impacted media freedom, government transparency, and the balance of power in Taiwan's political landscape. Such measures might stifle dissenting voices and limit open discussions, potentially affecting the overall information environment and public discourse on critical political issues. Meanwhile, the DPP's concerted efforts have had unintended consequences, including the suppression of local journalists striving to deliver objective and high-quality information. This has led to a recurring cycle reminiscent of Sisyphus spinning the wheels of a perpetual-motion peloton, where movements toward media bias and distortion against the PRC render difficulty to reverse. In its quest to address perceived misinformation from the Mainland and control narratives, the DPP's actions have created an environment where local journalists feel pressured to align their reporting with the party's agenda. Fear of being labeled as purveyors of false information or facing repercussions for producing content critical of the DPP or supportive of the Mainland has influenced media outlets' editorial decisions.

As a result, the pursuit of unbiased and independent journalism in Taiwan has faced challenges, with the risk of self-censorship becoming more prevalent. Journalists may opt to avoid contentious topics or narratives that could be perceived as contradicting the DPP's stance on cross-Straits relations. This situation raised concerns about the erosion of media freedom and the potential impact on public access to diverse and reliable information. Furthermore, the escalating movements toward media bias and distortion against the PRC have led to a growing sense of polarized media narratives, where the portrayal of Mainland China is often lopsided and unfavorable. This perpetuates a cycle where the suppression of viewpoints and the promotion of others reinforces pre-existing biases, creating an information ecosystem that lacks nuance and comprehensive coverage of political issues critical to cross-Straits relations.

## 5. POLITICAL ALLIANCE AND THE PUSH-PULL FOR AUTONOMY

Taiwan's decades-long unofficial but substantive ties with the US have laid the groundwork for significant American influence over the Taiwanese public, particularly among the younger generation, playing a pivotal role in shaping their perceptions of both the US and Mainland China (Yarchi & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020). The influence of US political values on Taiwanese public opinion has been especially pronounced among young adults who have grown up in an era of increased interactions between the two parties. These interactions have facilitated greater awareness of American values, culture, and political systems, shaping how Taiwanese youth perceive the US and, in turn, influencing their perspectives on Mainland China. This bond between Taiwan and the US traces back to 1979, when the US enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), signifying its commitment to safeguarding Taiwan's security and stability. The TRA treated Taiwan as a separate foreign state and obligated the US to provide defense-related arms to Taiwan (H.R.2479 – 96th Congress, 1979). Despite the PRC viewing the TRA as an unwarranted interference in its internal affairs, successive US presidential administrations have consistently upheld and reinforced this legislative act. The escalating geopolitical tensions between Mainland China and the US, especially given their status as the major global economic powers, have further thrust Taiwan as a focal point of the Sino-US political rivalry (Yu, 2020). Concurrently, the de facto relations between Taiwan and the US have witnessed deepening cooperation in trade, technology, and security domains. The US's substantial support for Taiwan's defense capabilities, diplomatic engagement, and advocacy for Taiwan's international participation has further strengthened the relationship. As a result, Taiwan's position in the cross-strait dynamics and its role as a strategic partner to the US have become central themes in the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region.

In 2022, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee adopted the Taiwan Policy Act, marking a significant shift in US policy towards Taiwan (Ruwitch, 2021). This move reflects the most substantial adjustment in decades and signifies the US's commitment to supporting Taiwan. As part of this new policy, the US pledged to provide up to US\$6.5 billion in aid to Taiwan through 2027 (Stimson Center, 2022). Amid increasing tensions with Mainland China's reunification goal, the DPP, led by Tsai Ing-wen, pursued measures aligned with the US's objective of strengthening ties with Taiwan (Ruwitch, 2021). Tsai's approach involved direct engagements emphasizing Taiwan's autonomy; notably, she delivered speeches on pro-autonomy themes, such as "Protecting Taiwan as a



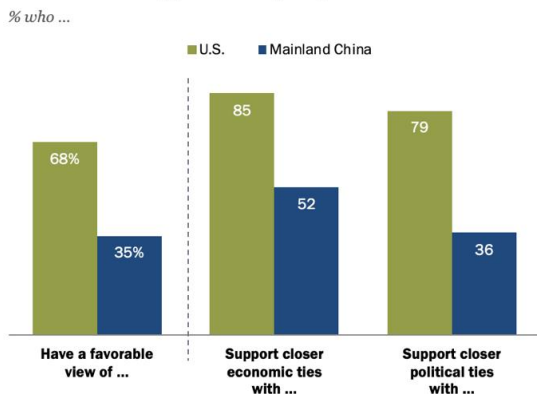
bastion of freedom in the Indo-Pacific," co-hosted by US-based think tanks the Hudson Institute and the Center for American Progress. In addition, Tsai's 2021 National Day Celebration speech titled "Forging a stronger consensus: Standing united to protect Taiwan" further reinforced the DPP's commitment to its autonomous status (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). During these speeches, Tsai unambiguously articulated the DPP's will to cultivate a free and democratic constitutional system, asserting that Taiwan and the Mainland should not be subordinate to each other. She emphasized that Taiwan's future should be determined by the will of the Taiwanese people (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). Tsai's pro-independence iterations underscored Taiwan's self-rule autonomy, and she made it clear that there would be "no room for compromise" on Taiwan's sovereignty, particularly in her National Day speech 2022 (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). Moreover, Tsai linked her speeches to democratic principles, aiming to garner US and international community support. She highlighted the importance of defending Taiwan's security to safeguard regional stability and democratic values. According to Tsai, the international community recognizes that protecting Taiwan's security is synonymous with protecting democratic principles in the region (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018).

The DPP's lobbying for US support has also manifested in other contexts. One notable instance was Tsai's handling of US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's high-profile visit to Taipei in August 2022. During Pelosi's visit, Tsai accorded her a state honor, emphasizing the visit's significance as a reinforcement of Taiwan's determination to defend itself (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). Pelosi's arrival marked the first time a US House Speaker had set foot on the island since 1997 (Newt Gingrich). The visit elicited strong condemnation from the Mainland, which viewed Pelosi's presence in Taiwan as a challenge to its "One China" policy and an infringement on its sovereignty claims over the island. In response to Pelosi's visit, the PRC conducted a series of military drills near Taiwan. Despite the geopolitical implications, Tsai remained steadfast in her call for greater integration into the US Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, among other regional economic cooperation initiatives (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018).

Despite generating concerns among elderly Taiwanese citizens and political pundits, Tsai's steadfast efforts to strengthen ties with the US have accrued significant support from the younger generation. Notably, Taiwanese young adults aged 18-29 display a pro-autonomy posture and exhibit a greater openness to external democratic influences, particularly that of the US (Greenwood, 2020). This generational shift in attitude can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, while older Taiwanese citizens may harbor fears of non-peaceful retaliation from the PRC, many young Taiwanese adults hold confidence in US engagement and support for Taiwan's pro-independence stance (Greenwood, 2020). The younger generation appears receptive to US pronouncements, such as President Joe Biden's 2021 pledge that the US is committed to defending Taiwan in the event of aggressive military actions from China (Ruwitch, 2021). Secondly, Taiwanese young adults view themselves as "born independent," a perspective that diverges from older generations who may have shared past relations with their Mainland Chinese counterparts (Fifield, 2019). With Tsai's consistent assertion of Taiwan's independence calls, the divide between Taiwanese millennials advocating for independence and older generations who may lean more towards sympathy with the Mainland is expanding irreversibly. The new generation of Taiwanese, distinct from their grandparents who experienced deep ties with the Mainland seven decades ago and their parents who grew up under authoritarian and socialist values, have been raised in a democratic and pluralistic society (Greenwood, 2020). Democracy is a defining characteristic of their lives, shaping their cultural identity and values. Amid Mainland China's calls for reunification, Taiwanese young adults naturally feel a cultural affinity with democratic governments, with the US being a prominent example (Lin, 2022). The appeal of democratic principles and values resonates strongly with this generation, reinforcing their desire for autonomy and self-determination.

According to the Pew Research Center's 2020 findings, a significant majority of Taiwanese citizens expressed a preference for the US over Mainland China across various dimensions. Approximately 68% of Taiwanese respondents favored the US, while only 35% preferred Mainland China. The sentiment was even more pronounced regarding economic and political ties, with an overwhelming 85% of respondents desiring closer economic ties with the US, compared to 52% who preferred deeper economic ties with the Mainland. Similarly, 79% of respondents favored closer political ties with the US, starkly contrasting to 36% who sought closer political ties with Mainland China (Greenwood, 2020). These findings highlight the widespread support among Taiwanese citizens, especially those between 18 and 29, for robust economic and political engagements with the US, reflecting the success of the DPP's (DPP) political sway under Tsai Ing-wen. Tsai's efforts to strengthen Taiwan's ties with the US, emphasizing autonomy and democracy, have resonated with the Taiwanese population and garnered strong backing for closer relations with the US. The sentiment of young Taiwanese exhibits a significantly higher level of support for democracy, with over 60% of Taiwanese young adults expressing backing for complete independence (Greenwood, 2020).

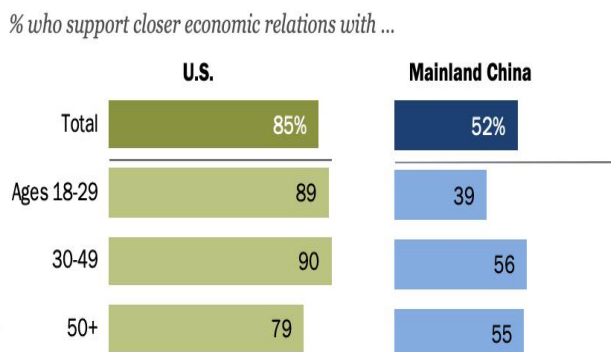
**In Taiwan, more positive attitudes toward U.S. than mainland China, particularly on political relations**



Source: Survey of adults in Taiwan conducted Oct. 16-Nov. 30, 2019. QT1a-b, QT2a-b & QT3a-b.  
 \*In Taiwan, Views of Mainland China Mostly Negative\*

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

**Younger people more keen on economic ties with U.S.**



Source: Survey of adults in Taiwan conducted Oct. 16-Nov. 30, 2019. QT2a-b. "In Taiwan, Views of Mainland China Mostly Negative"

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**6. DISCUSSION & IMPLICATION**

The escalating value discrepancies across the Strait have catalyzed regional geopolitical instability, cultivating a multifaceted dilemma with no signs of subsiding. In the years preceding the 2000s, there were intermittent glimpses of potential consensus between Mainland China and Taiwan, as the then-ruling party, the KMT, displayed a degree of acceptance towards the One China Principle. During this period, the KMT's pro-autonomy stance allowed for exploring possibilities for closer cross-strait ties. However, a metamorphosis transpired in Taiwan's political tableau with the advent of the DPP gaining power. The island's political orientation began to gravitate towards an increasingly assertive pro-independence posture. Under Chen Shui-bian's stewardship, the DPP maintained a self-governance policy, albeit with an openness for discourse predicated on the 1992 Consensus. Additionally, Chen allocated significant attention to repairing economic ties with Mainland China, striving to stimulate collaboration and reciprocal advantages. Nevertheless, the DPP's political dispositions underwent notable evolution over the last decade, prominently under Tsai Ing-wen. Tsai's incumbency marked a significant divergence from the DPP's earlier stance in favor of autonomy, as she embraced a more emphatic pro-independence discourse. Her approach transcended rhetoric; Tsai was vocally critical of the Mainland's influence and stressed Taiwan's dedication to democratic values and pluralism (Hsiao, 2017).

Divergences within Taiwan's populace concerning cross-Strait matters and the digital propaganda's impact on sculpting these distinctions have emerged as pivotal subjects within the scope of regional geopolitics and global governance. As Taiwan's democratization values advanced, substantial ideological transitions have come to the fore, and the media and political propaganda's role in magnifying these contrasts cannot be undervalued. Although acknowledged as a democratic press, the Taiwanese media environment is not immune to bias and extrinsic influences. Profit-driven media establishments have demonstrated a propensity to accept financial contributions from the DPP and its affiliated private entities, leading to a perceptible tilt towards pro-DPP content, and vice versa. This occurrence has provoked apprehensions about media impartiality and the potential for undue influence over public sentiment. Simultaneously, under Tsai's leadership, the DPP has tactically capitalized on the US's endeavors to counterbalance Mainland China's global influence. This strategy has involved inciting instability in cross-Strait relations and proactively seeking to bolster ties with the US through pro-autonomy initiatives.

The PRC has vehemently reproached Tsai and the DPP for their pro-independence aspirations, reacting strongly to any suspected separatist activities or foreign meddling. The growing support for independence from Mainland China, especially among younger demographics (specifically Generation Z, aged 18 to 29), can be attributed to several factors. The ascendancy of the DPP to power and a dwindling sense of identity tied to the Mainland among Taiwan's young generation have played a significant role in this trend. However, the diffusion of digital media and its ensuing disinformation campaigns, in conjunction with political propaganda, have surfaced as considerable accelerants propelling this trajectory of divergence and disparity. While Taiwan's progression towards more democratic practices and the natural proclivity of Taiwanese millennials toward democracy and pluralism are pivotal factors, the modernization of information technology has further exacerbated the rift between Mainland

China and Taiwan. The deliberate synergy of media propaganda and political messaging between the US and Taiwan has effectively transmitted pro-autonomy and anti-PRC narratives to the Taiwanese youth, thereby shaping their perspectives and attitudes. Additionally, the DPP online army's influence, the embargo on pro-PRC media information, and media correction of content critical of the DPP have contributed to a skewed digital information consumption landscape for the broader Taiwanese populace. Tsai and the DPP's command over digital information platforms and their endeavors to bolster US-Taiwan relations have subtly guided Taiwanese citizens towards opposition to Mainland China's reunification goal.

The impact of the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) media and political propaganda initiatives on Taiwanese youth aged 18 to 29 is of paramount significance for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, this youthful demographic comprises approximately 13% of Taiwan's current population, and by extension, represents the island's future (Statista, 2023). While their parental and grandparental generations, which harbor personal ties with Mainland China or socialist inclinations, still form the majority of the populace today, the ensuing decade or two are likely to witness a demographic turnover. Older generations with more substantial Mainland China affiliations will be progressively supplanted by the current youth and their prospective progenies, who consider themselves as 'born independents'. As the prospective standard-bearers of the future, the political attitudes, values, and perceptions of Taiwanese youth are pivotal in determining the island's trajectory. The DPP's capacity to connect with and win support from this population segment can have a significant bearing on electoral results and policy formulation, thereby influencing the course of Taiwan's domestic and international affairs.

Moreover, the digital competency and engagement of Taiwanese youth with contemporary information technology augment the impact of media and political propaganda on their convictions and attitudes. With the surge in digital media platforms and social networks, Taiwanese young adults encounter an array of political discourses and narratives. The DPP's deft exploitation of these digital avenues to propagate pro-autonomy and anti-PRC content enables them to strategically target and influence this digitally literate demographic. By harnessing social media and online platforms, the DPP has effectively sculpted and molded the perceptions and viewpoints of this population, engendering a lasting connection and loyalty to their political agenda. Furthermore, the long-term ramifications of the DPP's sway over the Taiwanese youth cannot be trivialized. The values and beliefs ingrained in today's younger generation will inevitably echo throughout the island's political terrain in the forthcoming years. The DPP's proficiency in fostering a sense of identity and consciousness that places a premium on Taiwan's autonomy and independence could influence the policy predilections and political leanings of the youth as they ascend to leadership positions in the future. Thus, the impact of the DPP's media and political propaganda campaigns on Taiwanese youth transcends the present moment, carrying the potential to mold Taiwan's political direction and relationships with Mainland China for generations to come. Consequently, a holistic comprehension of the DPP's impact on its youth demographic through digital means is critical for evaluating Taiwan's future stability, regional dynamics, and position within the broader geopolitical framework.

Going forward, deciphering the DPP's media and political propaganda initiatives aimed at its citizenry holds immense significance for scholars and researchers focusing on Sino-US and cross-Strait dynamics. Unraveling the complexities and operational mechanisms of such campaigns is fundamental to understanding the molding of public opinion and political attitudes within Taiwan. As the DPP's tactics continue to adapt, analyzing their influence on the populace's perceptions, values, and political decisions offers invaluable insights for those studying political communication and the media's role in swaying public sentiment. Moreover, investigating the DPP's media and political propaganda campaigns can illuminate broader implications for Taiwan's political stability, cross-strait relations, and regional geopolitics. As the DPP's sway over the younger generation bolsters calls for independence, it could steer Taiwan's future political course and its relationships with Mainland China. Grasping these dynamics is crucial for academics and policymakers to forecast potential developments and challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. The research on the DPP's campaigns further accentuates the importance of digital media and technology in contemporary political communication. In an era where social media and online platforms increasingly shape information propagation, exploring the DPP's utilization of these channels is central to understanding the evolving landscape of political messaging and propaganda. As digital technologies persist in advancing, the implications of media and propaganda on public sentiment will remain a critical field of investigation for academics and researchers alike.

The examination of the DPP's media and political propaganda strategies is not without limitations. Understanding the complexities of media influence and propaganda requires robust methodologies and access to exhaustive data sets. These present challenges in environments where information control and transparency are curtailed, such as Taiwan. Additionally, the influence of media and propaganda cannot be scrutinized in a vacuum, as it interweaves

with a myriad of other sociopolitical variables that shape public attitudes and conduct. Researchers must diligently accommodate these complexities to derive accurate and nuanced conclusions. The scarcity of research on this particular subject and the utilization of digital media tactics and political propaganda as tools of influence are novel phenomena in the Taiwanese political arena. Consequently, the academic community is still in the nascent stages of fully exploring their implications. This paper provides an initial outlook on DPP's digital media tactics and political propaganda to shape Taiwanese citizens' perspectives on Mainland China. It is crucial to acknowledge that this is an evolving and dynamic field of research and that the constraints in accessing comprehensive data, the complexity of gauging the impact of propaganda, and the lack of previous research in this specific domain underscore the necessity for careful interpretation. As such, this paper serves as a starting point for further inquiry, inviting scholars to undertake longitudinal studies to attain a deeper and more thorough understanding of this facet of Taiwan's political landscape and cross-Strait relations. As the political tableau evolves, continuous and rigorous research in this area remains indispensable for keeping abreast of Taiwan's prospects with Mainland China and how this shifting regional implication influences the broader Sino-US relationship.

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