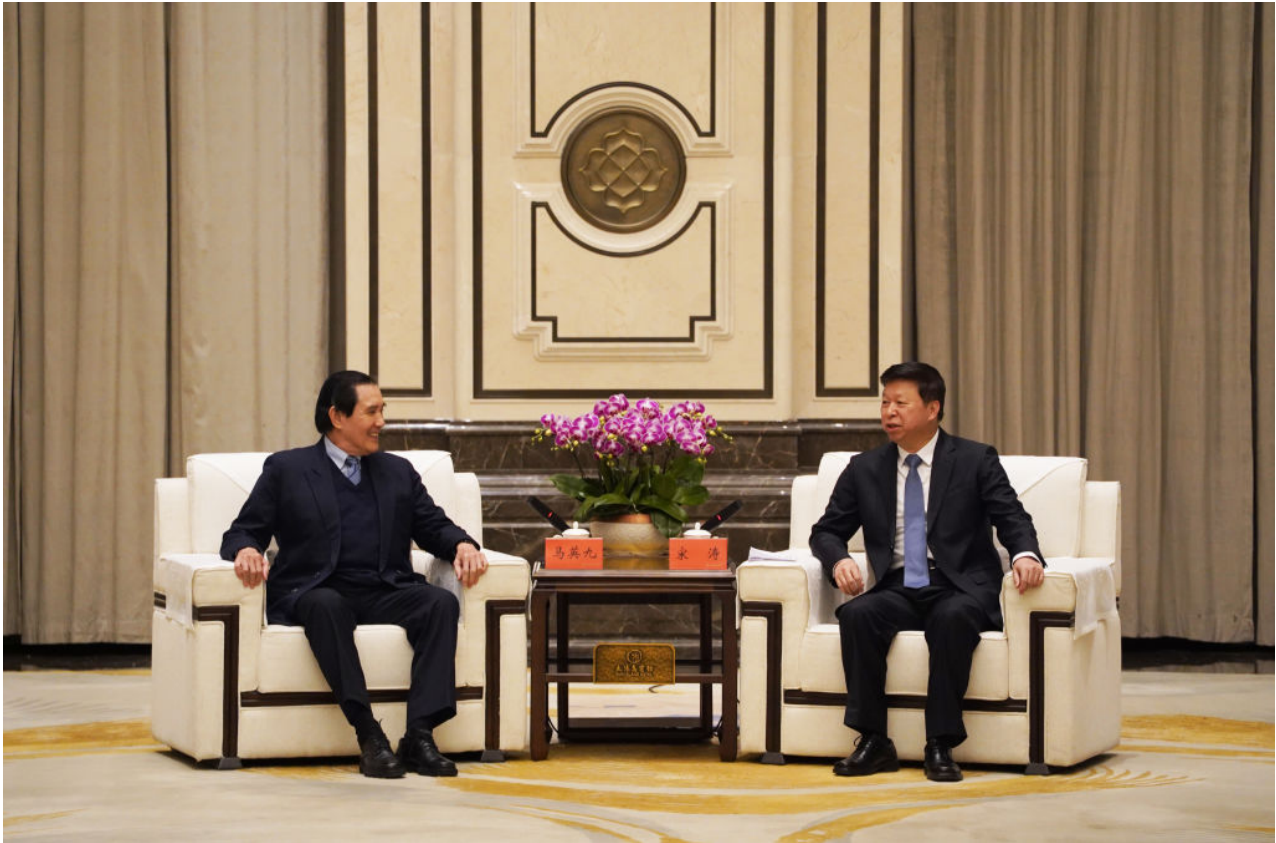


Will China-Taiwan Relations Change the Indo-Pacific Dynamics?

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Dr. Manoj Kumar Panigrahi January 27 2025

U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur referred to Taiwan as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier.” That statement remains true, as Taiwan is considered a key to the United States’ “First Island Chain” defense. However, relations between China and Taiwan have evolved from a domestic issue to a regional and a significant international problem. Mired with politics, power projections, and changes within China and Taiwan, cross-strait relations have become a potential flashpoint posing possible concerns for Indo-Pacific countries (among others). The continuity of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait – where Taiwanese leaders do not declare independence and China does not use force to take control over Taiwan – is crucial to the peace in the region.

However, since 2016, China has taken a multipronged approach to disrupting the status quo through military activities. Diplomatically, the number of countries recognizing Taiwan as a country has reduced from 23 in 2016 to 12 in 2024. Militarily, a “new normal” has been attempted in the region, including increasing military maneuvers around Taiwan. Per Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense, China violated Taiwan’s air defense zone 1,085 times between May and November 2024. The flights also included maneuvers by its naval and coast guard around the outlying islands in the Taiwan Strait that are under Taiwan’s administrative control.

The Ripple Effect of Chinese Control of Taiwan

If Taiwan comes under China’s territorial sovereignty, the immediate fallout would drastically affect the United States and its regional allies. Taiwan has been a crucial voice for democracy and human rights and an important supporter of the United States’ engagement in the region. The loss of a democratic Taiwan would undermine the trust between the United States and its treaty allies and other countries in the region. Such a loss would also compromise the security of other neighboring countries that are treaty allies of the United States, such as the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea. The United States has stationed troops in Japan and South Korea, but the loss of Taiwan force could lead to a U.S. withdrawal and/or feelings of insecurity in South Korea and Japan.

Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian has warned the country’s leaders regarding the safety of about 150,000 Filipino workers in Taiwan. The remarks were followed by increased aggressive moves by China’s coast guard around the Philippines. Japan and China both claim the islands of Senkaku (known as Diaoyu in China). China engages in regular air and water incursions around the islands. Similarly, China threatens South Korea through its support for North Korea, which has repeatedly threatened regional peace by testing its nuclear-armed missiles.

Addressing the cross-strait situation and its fallout needs a multipronged approach. The first measure is to support and find ways for Taiwan’s engagement in international forums beyond politics, such as the World Health Assembly and the International Civil Aviation Organization. The second is to counter the narrative from China that the United States and its allies are responsible for the heightened tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Such accusations can be used as an excuse for military action. The third is to strengthen Taiwan’s defenses with updated military hardware, which can deter military actions by China. Additionally, the importance of cyberwarfare cooperation should be strengthened among the like-minded countries in the region, which play a vital role in public perception.

Song Tao (R), head of both the Taiwan Work Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, meets with Ma Ying-jeou, former chairman of the Chinese Kuomintang, on Dec. 18, 2024, in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province of China. (Photo by Zhang Yangbin/China News Service/VCG via Getty Images)

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