

What Does Taiwan Think About Trump 2.0?

Tuesday 19 November 2024, by [HIOE Brian](#) (Date first published: 15 November 2024).

Taiwan hopes to keep ties with the U.S. stable, and Trump's slate of appointees is a mixed bag in that regard.

As was to be expected, the U.S. presidential election cast a large shadow over Taiwan.

[Polling two days ahead](#) of the election conducted by political scientists Lev Nachman, Yen Weiting, and Hannah Kim showed that Taiwanese seemed to prefer Vice President Kamala Harris, with 56 percent of respondents showing a preference for her over former President Donald Trump. Although some deep Greens remain convinced that Trump would act to benefit Taiwan by taking a strong stance against China, the result seems to indicate that Taiwanese may have come to view him as a potentially destabilizing force.

In 2016, before the start of Trump's first term, the U.S. president-elect took [an unprecedented phone call](#) from Taiwan's then-President Tsai Ing-wen, raising hopes for stronger Taiwan-U.S. ties. The start of the China-U.S. trade war also buoyed expectations that a tougher U.S. stance on China would entail stronger support for Taiwan. Though Taiwan-U.S. bilateral ties did strengthen during the first Trump term, Trump also came to be viewed as potentially dangerous, as his comments have repeatedly suggested a transactional view of global politics.

In particular, during the 2024 campaign, [Trump lashed out at Taiwan](#) with the accusation that it had "stolen" the United States' semiconductor industry, as well as suggesting that Taiwan [should pay the U.S. for defense](#). The apparent preference among Taiwanese for Harris, as indicated by polling, seems to confirm that the Biden administration came to be seen as taking the increased pressure on China that began under the Trump administration to more stable ground.

Consequently, in the wake of the U.S. elections, the administration of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te has largely sought to reassure that it expects Taiwan-U.S. ties to be stable. In a post [congratulating Trump on X](#) (formerly Twitter), Lai said, "I'm confident that the longstanding #Taiwan-#US partnership, built on shared values & interests, will continue to serve as a cornerstone for regional stability & lead to greater prosperity for us all."

Though Premier Cho Jung-tai stated ahead of the U.S. election that he [disagreed](#) with Trump's view of Taiwan stealing the U.S. semiconductor industry, Cho [has said](#) that Taiwan would seek new means of cooperation with the United States under Trump. There have been [some warnings](#) from Taiwan's central bank as to the potential impact on exports from proposed tariffs by Trump.

Reports by the Financial Times indicate that Taiwan [has approached](#) the incoming Trump administration about purchasing \$15 billion worth of arms, including an Aegis destroyer. Su Tzu-yun, a fellow at Taiwan's top military think tank, the Institute for National Defense and Security Research, suggested that Taiwan may also aim to purchase F-35 aircraft.

This has occurred even as Taiwan has [denied having a shopping list](#) for the United States, per se.

The first Trump administration [sold](#) Taiwan \$21 billion of arms in the form of 11 packages, while \$7 billion was [sold](#) under the Biden administration. As such, the Lai administration may be hoping to set the tone for its relationship with the Trump administration through a large weapons purchase. Taiwan may also hope that there are opportunities to purchase weapons systems it previously did not have access to under the Biden administration from the new Trump administration.

Apart from Trump's comments calling for Taiwan to pay the United States for defense, individuals expected to be in the future Trump administration have sometimes criticized Taiwan for not doing enough for its own defense. This too may explain the desire to make a high-profile purchase of U.S. arms early in Trump's term.

It is unclear, however, in what direction the debate between [asymmetric and symmetric defense](#) for Taiwan will go under the second Trump administration. Under the Biden administration, Washington sought to pressure Taiwan into more purchases of asymmetric arms (which, Biden supporters argue, explains the lower dollar value of arms sales, as these systems tend to be cheaper). Notably, an Aegis destroyer or F-35s would be "big ticket" symmetric items, of the sort that proponents of asymmetric defense have argued to be flashy but of less utility for Taiwan in contending with a much larger enemy.

The early appointments of the Trump administration have also been watched closely in Taiwan. Trump's picks of [Marco Rubio](#) for the position of secretary of state and [Mike Waltz](#) for national security adviser will be seen as reassuring, given that both have a history of pro-Taiwan statements.

That being said, the appointment of Tulsi Gabbard as director of national intelligence may be regarded with concern, given her [numerous past statements](#) attacking Ukraine. Among Taiwanese, perceptions of the United States' reliability as a wartime ally for Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion [are linked](#) to perceptions of U.S. support for Ukraine. Thus Taiwan has regarded the rising tide of Ukraine-skeptic views in the Republican Party with caution, calling on the United States to maintain its support of Ukraine.

For the same reason, Taiwan will be watching closely to see if former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby takes up a position in the Trump administration. Colby had [suggested in the past](#) that the United States should bomb semiconductor manufacturing giant TSMC in wartime to keep it out of Chinese hands, justifying this on the basis that Taiwan does not do enough for its defense.

There is also cause for concern over Elon Musk taking up a position in the Trump administration. Musk has suggested in interviews that Taiwan [should acquiesce](#) to a political status similar to Hong Kong, which has seen its freedoms dramatically stripped down since 2020. Musk's SpaceX has also requested that Taiwanese suppliers [relocate outside](#) of Taiwan, citing the geopolitical risk, and [previously denied](#) Taiwan Starlink coverage, though the company claims this was over licensing issues.

Political narratives have yet to fully settle in Taiwan about the U.S. election result. But in domestic politics, partisan contentions continue between the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of President Lai and the Kuomintang (KMT), which holds sway in the legislature. It is possible that the incoming Trump administration will eventually come to frame conflicts between the DPP and KMT that have been underway since earlier this year.

The KMT has continued its offensive on the Lai administration with a slew of legislation aimed at maximizing its current power, as founded upon a slim majority in the legislature in coordination with its ally, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP). After new legislative powers sought by the party

sparked [significant protest earlier this year](#), these changes [were struck down](#) by the Constitutional Court last month on the basis of violating the separation of powers in the constitution. Indeed, the legislative powers were seen by critics as attempting to wrest powers from the executive and judiciary branches of government to the legislature, which is KMT-controlled.

To counter the ability of the Constitutional Court to block legislative actions by the KMT, [a legislative proposal by legislator Weng Hsiao-ling](#) aims to ban the court from making rulings without a full slate of 15 justices. As seven justices retired this month, if the proposal passes and the KMT blocks Lai's proposed nominees, this would freeze the ability of the Constitutional Court to make judgments.

With the KMT maintaining a foothold in the legislature and in local politics, it has also proposed removing some budgetary powers from the central government to local governments, [cutting funds available](#) to the central government by 50 percent. The proposal came after the KMT sought to block the national budget (including the defense budget) [six times](#). Although the KMT centered its objections on concerns over compensation for logging on Indigenous lands, the underlying issue was whether the executive branch or the legislative branches had authority over the budget. The KMT can be understood as trying to frame such authority as belonging to the legislature as part of its continued moves to expand legislative powers.

Other legislative moves by the KMT at present pertain to cross-strait issues. A second proposal by Weng [would remove](#) current penalties for treason on members of the Taiwanese military singing the Chinese national anthem, saluting the Chinese flag, or otherwise making a public display of allegiance to the People's Republic of China. Weng claims the aim is to defend freedom of expression, though critics have suggested that this is intended to make it easier for China to conduct United Front activity among members of Taiwan's military.

A different proposal by fellow KMT lawmaker Hsu Chiao-hsin aimed to [undercut civil defense legislation](#) by excluding military action from the provisions of the bill, which was framed by Hsu as intended to prevent children from being sent to the battlefield.

It is still unclear how the discourse about the outcome of the U.S. elections will become incorporated into ongoing contentions in Taiwanese politics. But the first Trump administration saw the rise of ["U.S.-skeptical discourse"](#) (聞聞聞) as a distinct political tendency in Taiwanese politics, given questions about the stability of U.S. power globally and whether the United States could be counted on as an ally for Taiwan. It can generally be expected that this will occur during the second Trump administration as well.

Brian Hioe

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