

The Question of Taiwan

Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China, is an island separated from China by the Taiwan Strait. It has been governed independently of mainland China, the People's Republic of China, since 1949. China sees Taiwan as a breakaway province. Beijing has vowed to eventually "unify" Taiwan with the mainland, using force if necessary. But Taiwan has its own constitution and democratically elected leaders and sees itself as distinct from the Chinese mainland. In recent years tensions between them have escalated and are now the worst they've been in 40 years.

History of Taiwan

Taiwan first came under full Chinese control in the 17th Century during the Qing dynasty. In 1895, they gave up the island to Japan after losing the first Sino-Japanese war. China took the island again in 1945 after Japan lost World War Two. Then a civil war broke out in mainland China, between Mao Zedong's Communist Party (the CCP), and nationalist government forces led by Chiang Kai-shek. The CCP won and took control in Beijing in 1949. Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalist party (known as the Kuomintang or KMT), fled to Taiwan. The Kuomintang has been one of Taiwan's most prominent political parties ever since and has ruled the island for a significant part of its history. China uses this to say that Taiwan was originally a Chinese province. However, the Taiwanese argue that they were never part of the modern Chinese state that was first formed after the civil war - the People's Republic of China, established under Mao in 1949.

Rising Tensions

Tensions began to ease in the 1980s, at best in 2015 during a historic meeting between the heads of the CCP and KMT in Singapore. But relations deteriorated quickly in 2016, after the election of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). While China became increasingly assertive in foreign policy and grew more authoritarian, Taiwanese voters were concerned that Taiwan was moving too close to Beijing under the KMT government.

Possibility of Conflict

After ramp-up of aggressive military displays from Beijing in 2021, Taiwan's Defence Minister warned that China would be able to launch a "full-scale" invasion of Taiwan by 2025. 64% of Taiwanese people do not think this will happen, and analysts agree that is unlikely, but President Tsai says the threat from Beijing is growing "every day". Relations worsened further after the US House Speaker of the time, Nancy Pelosi, visited Taiwan in August 2022.

International Relations

China rejects Taiwan's participation as a member of UN agencies and other international organizations. Only thirteen states maintain official diplomatic ties with Taiwan and recognise it as a sovereign country. China puts considerable diplomatic pressure on other countries to not recognise Taiwan or to do anything which implies recognition. No government has ever maintained formal diplomatic ties with China and Taiwan at the same time.

U.S involvement

Taiwan sits in the "first island chain", which includes a list of US-friendly territories that are crucial to US foreign policy. If Taiwan did need help against China they would probably go to the US, who already sells arms to Taiwan. Diplomatically, the U.S. currently sticks to the "One-China" policy, which recognises only one Chinese government, in Beijing. They have formal ties with China rather than Taiwan. Washington has had a policy of "strategic ambiguity", meaning the US had been deliberately unclear about whether or how it would defend Taiwan in the event of an attack. However, US President Joe Biden replied "Yes" when asked whether the US would defend Taiwan militarily in May 2022.

Taiwan's economy

A lot of the world's electronic equipment is powered by computer chips made in Taiwan. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) has over half the world's market. TSMC makes chips designed by consumer and military customers. It is a huge industry that was worth around 90 billion euro in 2021. A Chinese takeover in Taiwan could give Beijing more control over one of the world's most important industries.